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Edited by
Hillel Fradkin,
Husain Haqqani,
and Eric Brown

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Center on Islam, Democracy, and the Future of the Muslim World

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Erbakan, Kısakürek, and the Mainstreaming of Extremism in Turkey

By Svante E. Cornell

TURKEY CONTINUES TO FUNCTION AS A MEMBER OF NATO AND nominally aspires to European Union membership, but for all practical purposes, it is positioning itself in opposition to the West. The Turkish leadership's rhetoric is increasingly similar to that of America's adversaries and is only rarely that of a partner and ally. What accounts for the gap between Turkey and the West? How deep is it? Though there is a great deal of writing on Erdoğan and Turkish political Islam, we have only scratched the surface of the ideological baggage of Turkey's current elites. This article proposes to dig deeper to discern the key elements of this baggage and the extent to which Turkish policies today are a reflection of this. It links the rise of Tayyip Erdoğan to his predecessor as leader of Turkish Islamism, Necmettin Erbakan, and the more uncompromising Islamist ideologue, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek. The article concludes that a generation of Turkish Islamists and nationalists has been strongly influenced by a worldview that is deeply anti-Western and anti-Semitic, is based on a warped and highly conspiratorial approach to world affairs, and is increasingly widespread in Turkish society.

In December 2017, U.S. national security advisor General H. R. McMaster singled out Turkey and Qatar as prime sources of funding for extremist Islamist ideology globally.¹ Roughly at the time of McMaster's pronouncement, his point was unwittingly reinforced by a key mouthpiece of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the editor of the Islamist daily *Yeni Şafak*, Ibrahim Karagül: "Turkey is emerging as a new power center opposing the United States, the world's strongest power ... the matter is no longer about Jerusalem or about Turkey and Israel. It is a showdown between the United States and Turkey."² Karagül went on to claim that America's aim was to occupy Islam's holy sites, Mecca and Medina.

Either of these pronouncement would have been utterly unthinkable little more than a decade ago. Today, they only raise eyebrows. Indeed, there is a growing consensus that Turkey, aside from becoming increasingly authoritarian, is moving away from the Euro-Atlantic sphere mentally and ideologically. This, most observers realize, has important implications for the regional security of both Europe and the Middle East, not to speak of American interests.

But how deep is this shift, and what lies at its basis? There is more debate regarding these critical questions. A skeptic could observe that President Erdoğan appears to use ideology instrumentally. Indeed, over the past few years his rhetoric, and evolving regime constellation, have cultivated Turkish nationalism as much as Islamism. Further, optimists maintain that Turkish society has developed rapidly in the past two decades, and that its economic strides will counterbalance the danger of radicalization. A parallel argument would hold that the problem is largely the abrasive personality of the Turkish president. Post-Erdoğan, thus, Turkey may revert to the mean and return to its position as a reliable ally.

There is merit to these arguments. In particular, the excessive focus in the West on Erdoğan's person does hinder deeper analysis of the intricacies of behind-the-scenes Turkish regime politics and masks the very real weaknesses of his position. And there is no question that if Erdoğan is an ideologue, he is a very pragmatic one: His government at first relied on the followers of self-exiled preacher Fethullah Gülen to reduce Turkey's military and right-wing nationalist establishment to size. But when his relationship with the Gülenists turned sour, he promptly struck up an alliance with those very ultra-nationalist elements and turned against the Kurdish groups he had long cultivated while maximizing Turkish nationalist support.

Still, the ideological underpinnings of Turkish policies are undeniable. Education reforms implemented since 2012 strongly enhanced religious content in the public education system and were accompanied by a boom in religious schools, in many cases involving the forced conversion of secular public schools to religious

schools.³ A gigantic and activist state directorate for religious affairs has been built to promote Sunni Islam.⁴ Simultaneously, especially following the 2011 Arab uprisings, Turkey's foreign policy was increasingly motivated by a Sunni Islamist agenda.⁵ The Turkish leadership has also showed a worrisome penchant for conspiracy theories. Following the 2013 Gezi Park riots, government representatives famously blamed the "interest rate lobby" for orchestrating the unrest, and statements that clearly pass the threshold of anti-Semitism have become frequent.

This article will argue that Turkey's slide in the direction of Islamist ideology is real and goes beyond the personality of Tayyip Erdoğan. To illustrate this point, it will study the ideological worldview of the current Turkish political elite and focus on two key sources. One is the worldview of Necmettin Erbakan, Erdoğan's predecessor as leader of Turkey's Islamist movement, which was laid out in a posthumously published memoir. The second is the heritage of the Islamist poet Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, a reference point not just for Erdoğan but for a generation of both Islamist and nationalist elites in Turkey. Their once fringe ideas, far from being arcane, have increasingly become mainstream.

A Rare Window into the Worldview of Turkish Islamism

NECMETTIN ERBAKAN IS RECOGNIZED AS THE FOUNDER OF TURKISH POLITICAL Islam, and was the leader of the dominant Islamist movement, *Milli Görüş* (National View). His 2011 funeral was attended by a who's who of the global Islamist movement, including Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal and the Muslim Brotherhood's former spiritual guide, Mohamed Mahdi Akef.⁶ Tunisian Islamist leader Rashid al-Ghannouchi noted that "in the Arab world in my generation, when people talked about the Islamic movement, they talked about Erbakan ... it is comparable to the way they talked about Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb."⁷ Erbakan's political career spanned five decades; he became Turkey's first Islamist prime minister but was deposed within a year by the military in what has been termed the 1997 "post-modern" coup. Though he was banned from politics from 1998 onward, he continued to exert considerable influence on Turkish political Islam.

The title of Erbakan's posthumously published memoir, *Davam*, is Turkish for "my cause." The word *dava*, from the Arabic *dawa*, could mean either cause or

proselytism. This remarkable book begins with a chapter on “creation and humans,” followed by “our Islamic *dava*” and “the forces that run the world.” Subsequent chapters discuss Islamic union, Cyprus, industrialization, and culture. But it is the first three chapters that provide the most significant window into the nature of the Turkish Islamist movement. They show that Erbakan’s worldview differed strongly from traditional Turkish Islam and that it exhibits important influences from the modern Middle East, particularly from Muslim Brotherhood ideology. While Erbakan’s anti-Western thinking appears strongly inspired by Qutb’s ideas, he also exhibits an obsession with conspiracy theories and most notably, shares the Islamized anti-Semitism of European origin to which Qutb subscribed.

The Influence of Arab Islam

ERBAKAN’S OPENING CHAPTER CONSTITUTES A PASSIONATE ARGUMENT FOR ISLAM as an all-encompassing guide to individual and social conduct. Given that he was a card-carrying Islamist, this may not come as a surprise. But the book begins by asserting that “there is no source of justice or truth aside from Islam” and that “reason without Islam cannot, on its own, know the absolute truths, and cannot tell good from evil.” Erbakan goes on to explain that the clashes between philosophers and the battles between ideologies are all a result of the neglect of this fundamental truth, and asserts that nothing good can come from any science or technology that does not take its inspiration from the Qur’an. To any reader familiar with Islamic theology, this perspective indicates an understanding of Islam more reminiscent of Middle Eastern Islamic traditions than the Turkish mainstream: it derives from Ash’ari rather than Maturidi theology, and from Shafi’i and Hanbali rather than Hanafi jurisprudence.

A clarification may be in order. In the eighth to tenth centuries, a highly rationalist theology known as Mu’tazila flourished in Iraq, heavily influenced by Hellenistic philosophy. It was gradually reduced to obscurity by the three chief theological schools that exist today.⁸ The literalist Athari school, which gave rise to modern-day Salafi and Wahhabi doctrines and is prominent among the followers of the Hanbali school of jurisprudence, rejects the very notion of theology itself, finding it an unnecessary and harmful exercise. While it has received a boost in recent decades through Saudi and Gulf support, it has traditionally languished in the

shadows of the established Ash'ari and Maturidi schools of theology. These two ideologies both opposed the Mu'tazilite effort to relegate revelation to secondary status. They have many commonalities, and the main difference between them concerns the role of human reason. The Maturidi school accepts the notion that human reason can discern good from evil without the aid of divine revelation. The Ash'ari school, agreeing with the Athari and Hanbali literalists, vehemently rejects that notion.⁹ In subsequent centuries, the Ash'ari school became dominant in the largely Shafi'i and Maliki lands of the Middle East and is present in all four schools of jurisprudence. The Maturidi tradition grew strong in areas dominated by the Hanafi madhab. Thus, not every Hanafi is necessarily Maturidi, but in practice, every Maturidi is Hanafi.¹⁰

The Ottoman Empire was the center of the Hanafi-Maturidi tradition, which remains the dominant theological school in Turkish Islam, as it does in Central Asia and the Balkans. Against this background, Erbakan's assertions are significant because they suggest a fundamental departure from traditional Turkish Islam and an embrace of theological thinking from the Middle East. As we will see, this is not the only example. This complicates the oft-stated notion of Turkish Islamism as "neo-Ottoman." It certainly is built on Ottoman *nostalgia* and an urge to restore the greatness of the past, allegedly built on Islam. But ideologically, it constitutes a rupture with Ottoman tradition, and its roots lie elsewhere.

Two key ideological inspirations of Turkish Islamism are responsible for this deviation: the Naqshbandi-Khalidi order and the Muslim Brotherhood. As M. K. Kaya and I detailed in a study in *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, the Naqshbandiyya's Khalidi branch was the locus of Turkish political Islam's formation: it was only with the explicit permission of Erbakan's Naqshbandi shaykh that he launched a career in politics.¹¹ The nineteenth-century founder of the Khalidi branch, Khalid-i Baghdadi, stood out for his emphasis on sharia law. As his Turkish biographer summarizes, he was "itikaden Eş'ari, fıkhi yönden Şafii, meşrep açısından Nakşibendî-Müceddidi"—Ash'ari by creed, Shafi'i by jurisprudence, and Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi by spiritual way.¹² Thus, the shaykhs he empowered and who went on to establish the Khalidi branch as the most influential religious order in present-day Turkey were, from the outset, trained in the Ash'ari and Shafi'i tradition. They brought this with them to Turkey, where the Naqshbandi became increasingly influential in the nineteenth-century Ottoman bureaucracy, following the suppression of the Bektashi order. While the predominant Hanafi-Maturidi school did exert influence on many Khalidi disciples in the bureaucracy, their rise nevertheless opened Ottoman Islam to influences from the Middle East.

A second, subsequent source of influence that would confirm this worldview is

Muslim Brotherhood ideology. Erbakan writes that Islam is the salvation of all mankind and therefore, every human being, whether Muslim or not, must accept Muhammad's leadership.¹³ In this, one cannot ignore the inspiration Erbakan drew from Sayyid Qutb, the key ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood, who argued in his seminal work, *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* (Milestones), that "for human life, there is only one true system, and that is Islam."¹⁴ As we will see, this is far from the only area where Qutb influenced Erbakan.

Erbakan's View of the West

THE WAY ERBAKAN SAW THE WESTERN WORLD WAS, NEEDLESS TO SAY, TYPICAL of Islamist thinkers and highly negative. He allowed that in comparison to the socialist bloc, the West had managed to build a society with higher production and therefore greater material well-being. But in the end, the West is not so different from the East: both rely on materialistic principles, and human conscience has been lost. Worse, women are forced to work on the same level as men and thus, responsibilities are being forced upon women that conflict with their nature. As a result, Western women are by definition unhappy—unlike in Islamic society, where materialism and spirituality exist side by side. Muslims, in contrast to people in the materialist and selfish West, do not forget their modesty and charity once they acquire material wealth. Quite to the contrary, they constantly strive to help others. And most importantly, women are given tasks in accordance with their nature, to maintain the home and family while men earn the family's living. In this, Erbakan channels Qutb's veneration of the homemaker in *Al-'Adalah al-ijtima'yya fil-Islam* (*Social Justice in Islam*).¹⁵

Erbakan's disdain for the West goes deeper, and illustrates the question many Muslims ask: if Islam is so superior to other religions, why then is the Muslim world so backward?¹⁶ Erbakan's answer is simple: because all that the West has, it took from the Muslims. At least 60 to 70 percent of human knowledge, he alleges, was produced by Muslims, but "arrogant and imitator" Western scholars fail to admit that much of what they produced builds on what they took from Muslims. The European languages were so poor that it took Westerners until the seventeenth century to understand the knowledge taken from Muslims in the fourteenth century. As a result, Erbakan argues, Muslims are awed by the knowledge in Western books they read, unaware that "those principles were taken by reading

books written by Muslims.” In the process, Erbakan commits glaring errors: he claims “a Muslim” (Jamshid al-Kashi) rather than the Greeks first calculated the number pi accurately, but neglects to mention the many Asian and European scholars, before and after al-Kashi, had perfected this calculation. He claims Muslims discovered the decimal system, but omits reference to Chinese discoveries centuries earlier. And finally, he relates the apocryphal story of how Columbus calmed a near-mutiny on his ship by telling his crew that he knew from Muslim scholars’ books that there is land in the West, and “Muslim scholars never lie.”¹⁷

Two things stand out in Erbakan’s analysis of the West. First, he exhibits either ignorance or deception concerning the history of science and ideas and the role played by Western societies in their development. Second, it is notable that when discussing other civilizations, he defines them by their ethnic identity—Indians and Chinese, not Hindus, Buddhists, or Confucians—yet when speaking of Arab, Persian, or Turkish historical figures, he systematically defines them by their religious identity, as Muslims, rather than their ethnic or national origin. In other words, he applies different standards to different peoples.

The Central Role of Anti-Semitism

ERBAKAN’S CHAPTER ON “THE FORCES THAT GOVERN THE WORLD” IS MORE remarkable and chilling than his anti-Western diatribes. Events do not happen by chance, Erbakan argues: “It is necessary to see there is a force that wants to ensure its hegemony and enslave, subordinate, and exploit all humans.”¹⁸ That makes it imperative to understand the methods used by this force. Who is this force? The answer: the Jews. All Jews blindly follow the orders given in the Torah, Erbakan asserts. But what is the Torah? Only five of its thirty-nine books were given to Moses, and the others were written over subsequent centuries by men. Therefore, it is not the unadulterated word of God—it has been manipulated and has lost its religious nature. Zionism and the belief in a superior race, which Erbakan believes comes from the Torah, cannot be attributed to a prophet, nor can what he terms the “sexual perversity” found there. Therefore, it follows, Judaism is not really a religion. Jews do not worship God but themselves, and strive only to protect their race’s superiority. Judaism is an ideology created by rabbis based on racial arrogance,

and then decorated to look like a religion. The atheism of the Jews is shown by Genesis 32:28, which proves that the Jews see themselves above God, since Jacob “struggled with God and won.” Since Jacob was told his name would henceforth be Israel, the name of the State of Israel is a symbol of being against God.

In fact, Erbakan argues, the Jews have made control over the world a central element of their ideology. The Talmud broadened the Torah’s edicts on world hegemony and explained Jews’ racial superiority. The Torah announced that a Jewish land would be created in Canaan and would be the center of a world kingdom. The Jews harbor a deep hatred for all other peoples, which has led to their orchestrating countless massacres and instigating multiple wars. Over time, their wish to control the world became a belief in its own right: world hegemony became their religion. As a result, in the past 400 years, the Jews exploited the riches of America, Europe, and Asia. They created world capitalism, which made them astronomically wealthy. Gradually, they came to control the politics of all countries. To accomplish this, they took over all media and news agencies, as well as think tanks. In sum, Erbakan writes, they created a “secret world state” and now manage the world.

The secrets of the Jews are found in kabbalism—of which freemasonry is a product—and only three kabbalists in Jerusalem know all the secrets of the conspiracy. This group is selected from among the Sanhedrin, a seventy-member council of rabbis, under which a “sworn council” of seventy is tasked with implementing the requirements of those who rule the world. To control the world, Erbakan claims, the Zionists created a number of organizations. These include formal ones such as the United Nations, but equally important are the informal groupings, particularly the Bilderberg Group, “created by a group of Jews in 1954” to “plan world politics and economics for Zionist profit.”¹⁹ To advance the Zionist aim of a world union under Jewish control, the Bilderberg Group created the European Union, as well as the Trilateral Commission. To run America’s foreign policy, Zionists created the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), run by thirty-seven permanent members, of which ten are Jews and the remainder Freemasons. The CFR controls the “showpiece” State Department.

How do the Zionists control the world economy? Their means, asserts Erbakan, include driving countries into economic crises and then lending their governments money at exorbitant interest rates. Most of the decolonization movement in the third world was for show: colonies became independent states, but the new rulers were Freemasons who further entrenched the dependence and colonization of their countries. For Zionists, Erbakan argues, dividing and breaking up other countries and forcing them into war with one another is not just politics, “it

is a belief.” For, Erbakan says, the Torah and kabbalah both note that Jews are the superior race; other races developed from monkeys to serve the Bani Israel (children of Israel). Further, “those who control the world” take 9 percent of the value of all flight tickets through the International Air Transport Association, insure all world shipping through Lloyds of London, and charge 1 to 5 percent commissions on all banking transactions.

As proof of this conspiracy, Erbakan cites the great seal of the United States on the one-dollar bill: “Annuit coeptis” really declares the victory of the Zionist project, and “novus ordo seclorum” announces the Zionist world order. Lest anyone think the date 1776 has anything to do with the Declaration of Independence, Erbakan knows better: it refers to the creation that year, by Zionist leader Adam Weishaupt, of the first lodge of the Order of the Illuminati.

The first step in Jewish world domination is for Jews in the Diaspora to gather in Palestine, and then to form Greater Israel between the Nile and the Euphrates. Then, Zionists will rebuild the Temple of Solomon on the site of the Al-Aqsa mosque in the belief that the Messiah will arrive. For Israel’s security, therefore, there can be no independent Turkey. Erbakan relates Theodor Herzl’s approach to Sultan Abdülhamit to buy land in Palestine, a staple of Turkish Islamist—and extreme nationalist—conspiracy theories. When this request was rejected, Erbakan claims, the Zionists at the first Zionist Congress in 1897 decided to overthrow Abdülhamit, dissolve the Ottoman Empire, and within a hundred years, dissolve Islam itself. To implement the plan, the Zionists created the Committee for Union and Progress, which completed the first task in 1909, sending Abdülhamit into exile. Then, Zionists forced the empire into the First World War, bringing about its dissolution with the Treaty of Sèvres, which was “fundamentally a project of Greater Israel.” While the Turkish war of independence reversed their plans, the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne was introduced in order to create a state where the Turks would be alienated from their religion and all their institutions taken over by world Zionism. Thus, from that point onward, “collaborators” in Turkey have tried to join the EU to remove Turkey from its own identity. Every force Turkey confronts—nay, every force in the world—is controlled by world Zionism and bent on the destruction of Turkey as a state, nation, and community.

If this account of the “real” politics of the world were not so dangerous, one would credit Erbakan for managing to fit so many diverse conspiracy theories together in one seemingly coherent scheme. Erbakan manages to bring in traditional nineteenth-century conspiracy theories focusing on the purported role of Jews and secret societies, as well as modern conspiracies better known as the “New World Order.” Subsequently, he broadened his reach even further, naming

the Rotary and Lions Clubs as the lowest levels of the world conspiracy.²⁰ In other words, Erbakan hardly found a conspiracy theory he did not like—and gave them voice in the many television interviews he gave in the later years of his life.²¹ In these, he often appeared with his hands full of internet printouts, pictures of the great seal, or newspaper clippings that he claimed prove his points, while he methodically and calmly explained the elements of the “Secret World State.”

The Muse: Necip Fazıl Kısakürek

BORN IN 1903, NECIP FAZIL KISAKÜREK WAS THE IDEOLOGICAL INSPIRATION FOR a generation of Turkish Islamists and right-wing nationalists. Kısakürek was not primarily a politician but a prolific poet and writer, who built a coherent ideological structure for Turkish Islamism called *Büyük Doğu*, or “Great Orient.” As we will see, his intellectual legacy was broader and deeper than Erbakan’s.

Kısakürek was born into an upper-class Istanbul family in 1904 and attended several elite schools, which made him fluent in French and led him to spend a year at the Sorbonne in 1924–25. His Islamist and nationalist tendencies were already developing, but Kısakürek led a troubled personal life until 1934, when he met the Naqshbandi shaykh Abdulhakim Arvasi, who immediately exerted an enormous influence on him. Arvasi led him to be initiated into the Naqshbandi order, which remained a key guiding light for him until his death. Kısakürek was a prolific writer, publishing dozens of books as well as the influential *Büyük Doğu* periodical, which was published intermittently between 1943 and 1978. None of Kısakürek’s books has been translated into English, though Burhanettin Duran’s 2001 doctoral dissertation provides an excellent summary of his life and work.²²

Kısakürek’s ideology was based on a rejection of the modernizing revolutions—from the 1839 Tanzimat and the 1876 Meşrutiyet to the 1923 proclamation of the republic. Instead, he advocated an Islamic revolution, leading to a society based on sharia law. While the emphasis on sharia might seem odd for a Sufi, it is fully coherent from the point of view of the Naqshbandi order, which has always sought to remain in the Sunni Orthodox mainstream and views the mystical elements of Sufism as a second story on top of sharia. Indeed, as Thierry Zarcone has demonstrated, the twentieth-century Naqshbandi thinkers of Turkey accorded growing

attention to the eleventh-century theologian Al-Ghazali and sixteenth-century Naqshbandi shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi because of their efforts to reconcile Sufism and Orthodox Sunnism. Indeed, as Zarcone puts it, these theologians are “at the core of this movement, which tends to approximate as much as possible, to the point of conflating, Sufism and Sharia.”²³ However, Kısakürek was dismissive of modern Islamist thinkers, from Muhammad Abduh to Sayyid Qutb and Abul A’la Mawdudi, because they rejected the medieval ulema and were anti-Sufi, and thus they refused to appreciate the hidden, inner meaning of Islam.²⁴

Kısakürek, however, particularly admired the medieval theologian Al-Ghazali.²⁵ From Al-Ghazali, Kısakürek drew not only the marriage of Sufism and Orthodoxy, but an understanding of Islam that determined every aspect of political, social, and individual life, leading him to compose a manual of social and individual rules.²⁶ Indeed, just as Lenin concluded that there was no private life for a Communist, Kısakürek believed the same about Muslims.²⁷ The ideology he developed was clearly totalitarian in spirit.

Kısakürek, like most modern Turkish Islamists, was heavily influenced by Western, and particularly fascist, political thought, which he adapted to Islam. Thus, he saw the Islamic revolution—which would take place in Turkey and spread to the rest of the Muslim world—as the culmination of the French, Bolshevik, and fascist revolutions and believed that liberalism, socialism, and fascism would find a balance in the Islamic system, a “synthesis of their thesis and antithesis.”²⁸ The Islamic system would be a deliverance not just to Muslims, but to all of mankind. As a totality, Islam would correct all wrongs and answer all questions. Kısakürek, thus, was fundamentally anti-Western, as he aspired to have the Islamic revolution form a counterbalance to the West’s “material and spiritual imperialism.” But he was astute enough to understand the weak position of the Muslim world and therefore argued that Islam must take what is good from the West, such as technology, but not the bad, particularly its lack of spiritualism. Importantly, he argued in favor of maintaining good relations with the West until such time as the Islamic revolution had matured and the Muslim world was able to stand up to the West.²⁹

The Islamic revolution, in Kısakürek’s view, would enable the full reversal of Kemalism. When the state was guided by Islam, it would employ state institutions, law, and education as vehicles of revolution to create a new, pious youth.

Kısakürek developed a very detailed political ideology. As Tunç Aybak has summarized it, he advocated the “introduction of a totalitarian Islamist regime inspired by the Turkish-Islamist synthesis.”³⁰ This included a depiction of an ideal state, which he termed the *Başyücelik*, meaning the “rule of the most exalted.”

Kısakürek rejected the very principle of democracy, namely that the people were the source of government. To him, without doubt, God was the source. Thus, Kısakürek spoke of a government whose slogan would be *hakimiyet hakkındır*, power belongs to God, a clear statement of opposition to Atatürk's motto, *egemenlik kayıtsız şartsız milletindir*, meaning sovereignty belongs unconditionally to the people. In Kısakürek's system of government, the country would be led by the most exalted leader, the *Başyüce*, the most perfect man, who is elected by the members of the *Başyücelik Divanı*, the "Council of the most exalted." This leader would embody the will of the people—*milli irade*—and concentrate executive, legislative, and judicial power in himself. His decrees, as long as they were in accordance with sharia, would be considered the extension of divine law. Only if the 101 exalted members of the council were irreparably split would there be recourse to the people's will through elections. Of course, in this state, Turkey would have been homogenized into a religiously Sunni and ethnically Turkish nation, with minorities forced to assimilate or leave. In other words, the "people" as seen by Kısakürek was exclusively the Sunni Turkish majority.³¹

Kısakürek's only attempt at entering politics directly did not succeed. In 1951 he created the Büyük Doğu Party, which did not survive long. After a brief stint in jail, he struck up a relationship with Democrat Party (DP) leader Adnan Menderes, from whom he accepted covert payments.³² He urged Menderes to destroy the Republican People's Party (CHP), something Menderes resisted (though in the late 1950s, he did take steps to marginalize the opposition). Kısakürek was convinced this failure to destroy the CHP is what led Menderes to be hanged. He then supported the DP's successor, the Justice Party, in the 1960s, and shifted his allegiance to the first overtly Islamist party, the National Salvation Party, when Erbakan created it toward the end of the decade. But this did not last long: Kısakürek was a rigid ideologue, and Erbakan a shrewd politician. When Erbakan had the opportunity to form a coalition with the CHP under Bülent Ecevit's leadership in 1974, he jumped at it, and became deputy prime minister. Kısakürek, like many Turkish Islamists, was enraged that an Islamist party would even consider cooperating with the godless party of Atatürk. He denounced Erbakan as a traitor to the cause and shifted his support to Alparslan Türkeş's Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). In so doing, he was also able to extract concessions. Türkeş, in part in order to receive Kısakürek's endorsement, publicly declared in 1977 the MHP's commitment to a Turkish nationalism wedded to Islam.³³

Not surprisingly, Kısakürek's worldview was as warped as Erbakan's. If at all possible, it was colored by anti-Semitism to an even greater extent, though his conspiracy theories were not quite as lurid as Erbakan's. It was also considerably

more racist. As Gareth Jenkins observes, racist and virulently anti-Semitic ideas “were not peripheral to Kısakürek’s worldview but were at its core.”³⁴ Indeed, among the long list of “orders of the Başyüce” that Kısakürek helpfully proposed in his *Ideolojya Örgüsü*, the magnum opus which in rough translation is entitled “web of ideology,” there is a specific section on expulsion. It states very clearly that the first groups that need to be expelled from Turkey are the Jews and the Dönme—the latter being descendants of followers of the seventeenth-century false messiah Sabbatai Zvi, who converted to Islam in 1666. The Dönme, while nominally Muslim, have maintained a distinct community since then. While Kısakürek argued for the expulsion of other non-Muslim communities such as Greeks and Armenians, these groups were offered the chance to become assimilated to a Turkish and Muslim identity. Even if they did not, they would be compensated for expropriation of their assets when exiled. Not so the Jews and Dönme. According to Kısakürek, Jews had an innate identity that was unchangeable, and thus they could never become real Turks and Muslims. Proof of this fact was the Dönme community, which in spite of its conversion to Islam centuries ago, refused to assimilate. In Kısakürek’s words, they had “shown for centuries that they will not be of us.”³⁵ Therefore, all their assets were to be expropriated, and they would be handed only enough money to survive for a year upon their exile. When this ethnic cleansing was complete, Turkey would be clean and “shine like a diamond.”³⁶

Kısakürek’s hatred of Jews was conditioned by his conviction that the Jews and Dönme, together with Freemasons, had conspired to overthrow the Ottoman Empire. In a much more detailed way than Erbakan, Kısakürek explained that the *Meşrutiyet* reforms of 1877-1909 were the work of a cabal of Jews, Masons, and Dönme aiming to destroy Islam. The righteous sultan Abdülhamit worked diligently to defend the empire, Islam, and Turkishness against this cabal and the Western imperialism it represented, and that is why he became its victim. In other words, the Young Turk Revolution was a plot by Jewish-led forces against the empire. Especially after Abdülhamit rejected the Jews’ offer to pay all the empire’s foreign debt in exchange for a slice of Palestine, the Jews put in place the Committee for Union and Progress to overthrow him and realize their plan. Then, when the empire collapsed, the Jews orchestrated the “fake” liberation of Turkey from the Western powers on the condition that the nation and state be separated from Islam. Hence the revolution of Atatürk, and the Arab world’s division into dozens of states that the Jews could easily control and pit against each other.³⁷

This fixation with Jews is not limited to Kısakürek’s *Ideolojya Örgüsü*. The subject colors his treatment of Abdülhamit, *Ulu Hakan*, and occupies a chapter in his 1973 book *Türkiye Manzarası* and an entire volume symptomatically entitled

Yahudilik—Masonluk—Dönmelik, “Judaism, Freemasonry, and the Dönme.” In all these texts, two things are clear: Kısakürek, on one hand, has a very specific Turkish context for his hatred, namely the conspiracy theory concerning the Ottoman Empire’s collapse. Simultaneously, his anti-Semitism is inspired by European conspiracy theories. Thus, Kısakürek blames the Jews for the French Revolution, the emergence of capitalism, and the creation of Communism. On repeated occasions he published *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*—in appendices to his books, including *Yahudilik*, and through serialized commentary in *Büyük Doğu*. Similarly, he republished Henry Ford’s *The International Jew* with his commentary and praised both works effusively. As Sean Singer has remarked, “for all his claims about the absolute division between East and West, Necip Fazıl’s works, and his anti-Semitism, bear the imprint of European influence.”³⁸

Conspiracy Theories and Anti-Semitism in Turkish Islamism

THE WORLDVIEWS DESCRIBED ABOVE COULD BE EASILY DISMISSED AS DELUSIONAL rants by an aging politician and a marginal ideologue. But that would be a mistake, for two reasons. First, these theories are not marginal in Turkish society, and second, their premise is far from innocent. As Daniel Pipes showed in his study of conspiracy theories in the Middle East, *The Hidden Hand*, far from being relegated to the fringe, “conspiracism constitutes one of the region’s most distinctive political features.”³⁹ As Pipes put it, “however wrong-headed they may be, these views have great consequence ... analyzing the region without taking the hidden hand into account is comparable to studying the American economy without Wall Street or Soviet Politics without Marxism-Leninism.”⁴⁰ Writing in 1996, Pipes argued that “conspiracism has little real impact on the mainstream of public life in Turkey,” but he did include examples from Turkey in his appendix, “with an eye to the future.”⁴¹ While his analysis was correct at the time, that future has arrived with a vengeance and contributed to making Turkey increasingly Middle Eastern.

The conspiratorial worldview of Erbakan and Kısakürek was marginal as late as the mid-1990s, but it has now become mainstream and enjoys state support.

Turkey's Islamist circles are deeply permeated by conspiracy thinking, but variations of such conspiracy theories are not limited to the Islamists. On the left and on the right, among nationalists and Kemalists, similar conspiracy theories abound, whether or not they include the Jews in a prominent role. Many Kemalists believe that the West, particularly America, seeks to destroy Turkey—and that Western and U.S. support for Erdoğan and “moderate Islam” in Turkey is a vehicle to achieve that goal.⁴² As they found themselves out of power, they began to spin even more lurid tales, even accusing Erdoğan and Gül of being crypto-Jews in the service of the same Zionist world conspiracy. Yet as Marc Baer has shown, these secularists have merely borrowed conspiracy theories created by the Turkish Islamists and extreme right—sometimes acknowledging earlier Islamists as their source—and reversed the roles.⁴³

Some of these books have become huge bestsellers, which is worrying in its own right. But what is different about Erbakan's worldview is that his work is not the rant of a conspiracist journalist, but a political leader—a leader who created and inspired the movement that led to creation of Turkey's dominant party, in which Turkey's current leaders got their political education. In Kısakürek's case it is, as we will see, the worldview of a person still seen as an intellectual reference point for Turkey's entire ruling elite. Importantly, delusional conspiracy theories focusing on anti-Semitic tales are not an occasional feature of their ideology. They are a central tenet, a pillar of both *Milli Görüş* and *Büyük Doğu* thought, from which their social, political, and economic agendas and perspectives on the West cannot be separated.

Furthermore, this central tenet leads all domestic enemies of political Islam to be defined as collaborators with Zionism, and therefore as traitors to the nation. Thus, the works of Erbakan and Kısakürek provide a window into exactly how radical and extreme the environment of Turkish political Islam is—and how its followers' worldview is distorted by wild conspiracy theories.⁴⁴

As both Bassam Tibi and Marc Baer have shown, this form of anti-Semitism is not based on traditional Islamic antipathy to Jews, but draws distinctly on European nineteenth-century racist thought: the Jews are immutable and evil, and “carry essential biological traits that can never be altered.”⁴⁵ Indeed, these ideas were introduced into Turkey in the late Ottoman period in part by British diplomats, who had theorized that the Young Turk Revolution was the work of Jewish Freemasons from Salonika.⁴⁶

Tibi defines this as genocidal anti-Semitism, distinct from the traditional Jew-hatred in the Muslim world.⁴⁷ As he argues, European anti-Semitism was exported to the Muslim world in the early twentieth century, with Nazi propaganda

during the Second World War playing a crucial role—a fact decisively demonstrated by Mattias Küntzel.⁴⁸ While it was taken up eagerly by Arab nationalists, it was internalized by Islamists, who in turn give “antisemitism a religious imprint and aim to make it look like an authentic part of traditional Islam, not an import from the West.”⁴⁹

From Mas-Kom-Ya to the “Interest Lobby”

THE DISCUSSION ABOVE HAS ILLUSTRATED THE WORLDVIEW OF ARGUABLY THE TWO most influential figures of Turkish political Islam in the past fifty years. Yet this does not, in and of itself, say much about the Justice and Development Party (AKP), or the political thought of Turkey’s dominant political figure, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Indeed, the AKP was formed very much as a break with the past, with the political tradition that Erbakan represented. Yet while the AKP’s founders broke with Erbakan, they never repudiated his vile conspiracist worldview, and even more symptomatically, they never broke with Kısakürek, whom Erdoğan and virtually the entire AKP leadership continue to glorify to this day.

Erbakan was a controversial leader of Turkish political Islam. Already in the mid-1970s his harsh leadership style led non-Naqshbandi orders to leave the party, and by 1977 he was challenged for the party leadership by Korkut Özal, brother of future president Turgut Özal. (Incidentally, Erdoğan sided with Korkut Özal in this struggle.)⁵⁰ As a result, Turkish Islamism was divided: large sections of Islamist circles supported other parties of the right rather than Erbakan’s, which prevented political Islam from reaching its true potential. Further, the tensions between Erbakan and Erdoğan are well-known: Erbakan was suspicious of Erdoğan, and may even have prevented him from gaining a seat in parliament in 1991.⁵¹ Thus, while Erbakan’s ideology was representative of the Turkish Islamist movement as a whole, there was no direct mentorship relationship between the two men. There is no indication that Erbakan was particularly fond of Erdoğan; if anything, he considered him a threat to his control over the party. Erdoğan, of course, went out of his way to placate Erbakan, going so far as to name his son Necmettin Bilal after Erbakan.⁵²

Erdoğan’s main inspiration is not Erbakan, but Kısakürek. He confirmed this

in a 2002 interview with the *Economist's* Turkey correspondent, who asked which world figure had influenced and inspired him. The response was unequivocal: "Necip Fazıl Kısakürek."⁵³ Nor was he alone: former president Abdullah Gül similarly identified Kısakürek as "the most important intellectual who had a major impact on my worldview."⁵⁴ In fact, the nineteen-year-old Gül wrote an admiring letter to Kısakürek, explaining that he was at his service "under any conditions."⁵⁵ Much later, Gül told a friendly British biographer that later in life, he was "somewhat embarrassed by some of Fazıl's ideas."⁵⁶

Erdoğan, however, appears to feel no such embarrassment. In fact, he frequently appears at events in Kısakürek's honor. In 2013, at an event organized by the Union of Commodity Exchanges of Turkey, Erdoğan related how he "had read [Kısakürek's] works, got to know him, and found the opportunity to walk in his footsteps."⁵⁷ In 2014, Erdoğan gave the keynote speech introducing an award given in Kısakürek's honor by the pro-government newspaper *Star*. He recounted that during his university years, an event involving recital of the "Master's" poetry was going to be held. There were two finalists, Erdoğan and another youth. Kısakürek rapidly dismissed the first youth but approved of Erdoğan's reading. "This was a beginning," added Erdoğan; "we went to many places with the Master. And in this context I got to know him closely."⁵⁸ Indeed, at a 1975 "National Youth Evening" organized by the Islamist student organization Millî Türk Talebe Birliği (National Turkish Student Organization, MTTB), Kısakürek recited his poem to Turkish Youth, "*Gençliğe Hitabe*," then reportedly called Erdoğan to the stage.⁵⁹ Speaking at an event in Konya in 2013, Deputy Prime Minister Beşir Atalay emphasized that "starting with President Abdullah Gül and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the entire cadre that runs the country, including a large majority of the cabinet, were influenced by Master Necip Fazıl."⁶⁰ And when Erdoğan in late 2017 warned that relocating the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem would lead to Muslims losing Mecca and Medina, the occasion was yet another event honoring the memory of the Master.⁶¹

Indeed, the career of the young Erdoğan illustrates the degree to which he had internalized Erbakan and Kısakürek's worldview. In 1974, Erdoğan helped direct, and also starred in, a play called *Mas-Kom-Ya*—short for "Mason, Komünist, Yahudi," or "Freemason, Communist, Jew." The young Islamist's interest in theater stems from the chaos in 1970s Turkey, which was plagued by violence between leftist and rightist groups. The Islamists of Erbakan's National Salvation Party decided not to get involved in the street fights, instead focusing on developing the Islamist presence on Turkey's cultural scene. As French journalist Pierre Boisson's fascinating research shows, a small team in the party's Istanbul youth wing

found an older play called *Kırmızı Pençe*, written by Mustafa Bayburtlu in 1969. They began to adapt the play to Turkey's contemporary situation, which included strengthening its anti-Zionist narrative.⁶²

The action takes place in a factory somewhere in Turkey, where Ayhan bey, the factory boss, is warned by pious Muslims of the growing Communist threat. As an enlightened person who sent his son to Europe to study, he ignores their pleas. When his son Orhan—played by Erdoğan—returns from Europe, he ridicules Islam and tradition, complains of the smell in the streets and the backwardness of the people, and boasts of his debauchery in Europe. His grandmother points an accusatory finger at Ayhan bey, saying she had urged him to send Orhan to study the Qur'an in childhood, but he had not listened. In the final scene, the workers occupy the factory in the name of the Socialist revolution. Ayhan bey finds out that the instigator of the revolt is a young Jew who had adopted a Muslim name, Memed, and tries in vain to berate the workers for being tricked by this degenerate. His friends lament how the Jews are behind every evil in the world, and would "burn the world to cook an egg." In a final turn of events, the workers are themselves arrested by Communist, presumably Soviet, soldiers who break into the room led by Memed the Jew. Memed cruelly announces that he has fooled everyone, that the Communist revolution has been completed. Everyone is now a slave of the Communist regime, will be forced to work, and will be given just enough food to survive. Before being taken away, the workers turn on Memed, asking, "Do you not have a shred of Turkishness or faith in your body?"⁶³

This play was no marginal affair. When it was screened by the MTTB in Istanbul in 1976, over two thousand people attended the premiere. It was staged twenty to thirty times in Istanbul and kept drawing full houses in cities and towns across the country for the next two years, as Erdoğan and his friends toured by bus on weekends. In 1977, the play was staged in the Ankara Palace, with Deputy Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan in the audience, along with other Islamist dignitaries. Erdoğan's co-actor Atila Aydın, presently mayor of the Istanbul municipality of Bayrampaşa, reported that Erdoğan was even more brilliant than usual that night—and that Erbakan took note of the young man.⁶⁴

That Erdoğan and his friends were young firebrands is, at least to Turkey watchers, no surprise. But many have assumed that as they grew older, they changed or evolved. Indeed, this "evolution" is the key foundational myth that made the AKP acceptable to centrist domestic audiences and to Europeans and Americans.⁶⁵ But there is much more evidence to suggest that the core worldview and values of Turkey's leaders have remained the same, even though they have proven able to repress them when needed. Indeed, their more controversial statements and

actions of late are indicative of the extent to which they continue to be inspired by the Islamist ideology of their youth, and in particular by Kısakürek's ideas.

First and foremost, as some Turkish commentators have concluded, Kısakürek appears to be the main inspiration for the presidential system Erdoğan won approval for in the 2017 referendum.⁶⁶ It is easy to see the parallels between the exalted position of Erdoğan and Kısakürek's utopian *Başyüce*. Like the *Başyüce*, Erdoğan rules without checks and balances, initiates legislation, and seeks to dispense justice unilaterally. Of course, Turkey today is not a full *Başyücelik*—there is a parliament, though it is increasingly reduced to rubber-stamping Erdoğan's initiatives. There are courts, though increasingly, they, too, are solidly under the executive's control. Moreover, just like the *Başyüce*, Erdoğan finds it appropriate to take an interest in the private affairs of his subjects, dispensing advice on the role of women in society, how many children they should have, and the appropriateness of various cultural genres. While still prime minister, Erdoğan famously stated that "I am the prime minister of this country. Everything is my business."⁶⁷

When faced with corruption allegations against his government and family in late 2013 as a result of the raids by prosecutors aligned with Fethullah Gülen, Erdoğan responded by mobilizing his followers through large demonstrations under the banner *Millî İrade*, or "national will." Not coincidentally, this was the very same term used by Kısakürek for the popular consultation mechanism envisaged in the *Başyücelik* form of government.⁶⁸ Another inspiration lies in Kısakürek's notion of sovereignty: *hakimiyet hakkındır*, or "sovereignty belongs to God." In a notorious 1994 speech that can still be viewed online, a young Erdoğan can be seen telling a large crowd that Atatürk's notion that sovereignty belongs to the people is a "huge lie." Erdoğan purposefully uses Atatürk's concept of *egemenlik kayıtsız şartsız milletindir* (sovereignty belongs unconditionally to the people), changing it to *egemenlik kayıtsız şartsız Allah'ındır* (sovereignty belongs unconditionally to Allah).⁶⁹

The list could go on. As Fatih Yaşlı has observed, during deliberations for the 2012 reforms that began to re-Islamize the education system, Erdoğan spoke about "raising pious generations," using language that borrowed heavily from *Gençliğe Hitabe*, Kısakürek's poem to Turkey's youth, mentioned above.⁷⁰ Some have drawn a parallel between Kısakürek's hatred for the CHP and Erdoğan's frequently voiced grievances against the single-party regime's deeds—noting his focus on the same matters that most preoccupied Kısakürek.⁷¹ Finally, a trace of Kısakürek's thinking can be seen even in Erdoğan's approach toward minorities. On one hand, Erdoğan strongly emphasizes his ethnic Turkish heritage, disregarding the well-known fact that much of his family hails from Georgia. He has

reacted viscerally to allegations that he is anything except Turkish by heritage, channeling Kısakürek's racism, which is less visible in Erbakan's more pan-Islamic thinking.⁷² Even in Erdoğan's much-lauded approach to the Kurdish issue, Kısakürek's inspiration does not seem too far-fetched: while Kısakürek advocated the ethnic cleansing of Armenians and other smaller minorities, he was more conciliatory toward the Kurds. Because they are Sunni Muslims, Kısakürek envisaged them remaining in the country, on condition that they assimilated under the Muslim and Turkish umbrella. Indeed, Erdoğan's own Kurdish "opening" similarly appeared to assume that he could focus on the Kurds' Sunni Muslim identity, and that given the greater emphasis on this religious identity under his rule, the ethnic question would somehow go away.

The negative attitude of Turkey's rulers toward Israel and Jews is by now well established. At times, Erdoğan has toned down his vitriol for reasons of political expedience. This was the case in the early years of the AKP, when Erdoğan needed American and European support; it has been the case again following what can best be termed a cease-fire with Israel after the 2016 coup attempt.

The AKP's hostility to Israel was visible early on, not least in its opening to Hamas at the expense of relations with Fatah. Erdoğan's reaction to the 2008 Gaza war and sponsorship of the 2010 "Ship to Gaza" flotilla were part and parcel of this attitude. In January 2009, Erdoğan stated that "there is a world media under the control of Israel," a statement he repeated when the *Economist* endorsed the opposition in the 2011 elections.⁷³ The anti-Semitic conspiracy mentality went into overdrive following the 2013 Gezi protests, when Erdoğan blamed an unspecified "interest rate lobby" for instigating the riots. His close associates, Ankara mayor Melih Gökçek and Deputy Prime Minister Beşir Atalay, did not bother with coded language, openly blaming the Jewish Diaspora.⁷⁴ In 2014, following the mining accident in Soma, Erdoğan screamed an anti-Semitic slur at a protestor, calling him an "Israeli sperm."⁷⁵

In a December 2014 speech, he spoke of a "higher intellect," a "mastermind" behind events that had afflicted Turkey in the past eighteen months, urging his audience to research the nature of this mastermind for themselves, but adding, "you know who it is."⁷⁶ Three months later, a pro-government television station broadcast a feature-length documentary that began with Erdoğan's words, filling in the blanks: for 3,500 years, it alleged, the Jews had sought to gain hegemony over the world.⁷⁷ In February 2015, he told a crowd that Judaism is demeaning to women and that the Torah had been doctored.⁷⁸ The list could go on. In May 2017, after winning the constitutional referendum and after the tenuous mending of Turkey-Israel relations, Erdoğan gave a speech that decried Israel's "racist"

policies and urged hundreds of thousands of Muslims to visit Jerusalem and “support our brothers there.”⁷⁹ When President Trump announced America’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, Erdoğan furiously declared Israel a terrorist state—at a ceremony commemorating Kısakürek. Outdoing himself, Erdoğan then declared that “if Jerusalem goes, we will lose Medina. If Medina goes, we will lose Mecca. If Mecca goes, we will lose the Kaaba!”⁸⁰

This should come as no surprise: there is a straight line linking Erdoğan’s 1976 role in *Mas-Kom-Ya* with the thinly veiled allegations of Jewish responsibility for the Gezi riots in 2013 and frequent outbursts against Jews and Israel. As the prime expert on Turkish anti-Semitism, Rifat Bali, concludes:

President Erdoğan claims to have given up the ideology of *Milli Görüş* and to have changed. But the fact that he continues to use anti-Semitism stereotypes shows that reality is entirely different, and shows that the negative stereotypes that he learnt during years reading and listening to them have decisively marked his mentality.⁸¹

Looking Ahead: Implications for Turkey and America

THIS ARTICLE HAS AIMED TO PROVIDE A MORE DETAILED ANALYSIS OF THE formative elements in the worldview of Turkey’s current leadership. It has shown that Erdoğan and his entourage are deeply immersed in the mindset of Turkish Islamism, as exemplified by Necmettin Erbakan and Necip Fazıl Kısakürek. Crucially, the problem is not limited to Erdoğan: conspiracy theories that used to be relegated to the margins of Turkish political debate have now become mainstream, encompassing groups from secularist Kemalists to nationalists and Islamists.⁸²

What does this mean for Turkey’s future? The answer depends on the degree to which the Islamist movement is able to impose its worldview on the rest of society. Stated differently, it depends on the degree to which Turkish society accepts or rejects this worldview, now backed by the institutions of the state and pliant media.

On one hand, we can expect a gradual acceleration of existing tendencies toward the Islamization of society. In other words, Erdoğan is unlikely to be satisfied

by the results of the referendum that strengthened his presidential powers. His further ambitions may not be visible yet and are likely to remain in the background until he is presumably re-elected president in June 2018 and the presidential system is implemented. Then, it is likely that he will seek to further monopolize executive control over the legislative and judiciary branches and to marginalize the parliament and courts.

A key battleground will be the Islamization of education. In coming years, if Erdoğan gets his way, the government will continue to expand Imam-Hatip schools—religious schools originally intended to provide trained imams for mosques, but which grew into an alternative school track—and to Islamize the curriculum in secular schools.⁸³ If the AKP stays in power for another decade, it may well preside over a major shift in the worldview of the next generation of Turks. Thus, even if Erdoğan's presidency is cut short, considerable damage has been done. The thinking that inspired Erbakan and Kısakürek is spreading to significant portions of Turkey's new elites. Practically all political forces advance conspiracy theories with abandon to tar their enemies, without considering the damage done to the Turkish public's worldview. This is a reality that all future Turkish leaders will have to deal with—as will Turkey's partners abroad. In foreign policy, the situation described in this article complicates the already stretched notion of Turkey as a reliable ally of the United States, simply because its leadership's worldview and interests differ so markedly from those of America. Most obviously, it has already become clear that Turkey's leadership viewed Sunni jihadism as a minor threat in Syria and Iraq, far less harmful than either Kurdish nationalism or the Assad regime.

But on the other hand, there are signs that the enthusiasm of Islamization's proponents may be declining and resistance against it mounting. The last several years have seen both a stagnation of Turkish economic growth and a civil war within the Islamist movement, pitting supporters of President Erdoğan and the Pennsylvania-based preacher Fethullah Gülen against each other. This confrontation, in which the traditional state establishment sided roundly with Erdoğan, culminated in the failed military coup of July 2016 and continues to traumatize Turkey. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Islamists have lost some of their swagger as a result of these developments, while traditional establishment forces have been able to reassert themselves, especially within state institutions. Indeed, over time, Erdoğan himself has shifted his rhetoric in a nationalist direction, speaking of defending Turkey against foreign threats real or imagined, to broaden his base to supporters of the nationalist MHP.

Furthermore, Erdoğan's emphasis on one-man rule, along with the growth of

corruption within the government, has led to unease within the broader Islamic movement itself. Ahead of the June 2018 early election, it is significant that the Saadet Party, representing Orthodox Islamists, joined the broad opposition coalition led by the secularist CHP.

There is no question that Kısakürek's and Erbakan's ideas have now entered the mainstream. It is, however, far from certain that they will become hegemonic. Turkey is therefore at a turning point, and the policies adopted by the United States and its European allies will play an important role in determining the outcome. So far, these policies have remained primarily in the realm of economic and security relations. But as this article has shown, the realm of ideas is of crucial importance and is one where the West's track record is poor indeed. Going forward, it will be crucial to remedy this lacuna if the battle for Turkey's soul is not to be lost.

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The Milli Muslim League: The Domestic Politics of Pakistan's Lashkar-e-Taiba

By C. Christine Fair

LASHKAR-E-TAIBA (LET) IS THE PAKISTANI ARMY'S MOST SUBSERVIENT proxy. Founded in Afghanistan during the fag end of the anti-Soviet jihad, LeT has never conducted a terrorist attack within Pakistan nor has it set its sights on any Pakistani target at home or abroad. For these reasons, the LeT enjoys the unstinting support of the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment. In 2002, the United States designated LeT a Foreign Terrorist Organization along with Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) after the latter conducted a suicide attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001. That attack precipitated the largest Indian mobilization of forces since the 1971 war. The Pakistanis responded by moving their own forces from the west, where they were ostensibly supporting U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, to the east to counter a potential Indian attack. Washington, which was dependent upon Pakistan's cooperation on its western border, sought to alleviate India's concerns. In an effort to get Pakistani forces to swing back towards the west, Washington pressured India to de-escalate while insisting that then-President Pervez Musharraf ban both JeM and LeT, which provided India with the requisite diplomatic victory to justify softening its rhetoric.

The bans were a feint: Pakistani intelligence notified both JeM and LeT of the pending bans, which allowed them to regroup under different names and move their funds to new bank accounts. In the case of LeT, the group's leader, Hafiz Saeed, announced the formation of a new organization, Jamaat ud Dawa (JuD). As one American official observed, "LeT's old offices merely changed the name on the door."¹ Pressure again mounted on Pakistan to ban JuD after it perpetrated the spectacular attack—launched over several days and which took the lives of 166 people—on multiple high-profile targets in India's massive port city of Mumbai in November 2008.² Pakistan has continued to defy international calls to ban its pliant proxy and, under the watchful eye of the state, LeT has continued to proliferate other front organizations including the ostensibly humanitarian organization, Falah Insaniat Foundation (Foundation for Welfare of Humanity, FIF). Most recently, in August 2007, LeT audaciously floated a political party, Milli Muslim League (the National Muslim League, MML), for the purposes of contesting Pakistan's upcoming 2018 general elections.

Little has been written about this new organization and what has been written has been misleading. Some authors have suggested that the MML reflects Pakistan's sincere desire to defang its nastiest militant group by shunting its stalwarts and cadres into a useful political role, whereby it can counter the army's civilian enemies within Pakistan. Below, I argue that Pakistan's move is much more profound than a quest to find an alternative to demilitarizing the LeT/JuD or even manipulating electoral outcomes. I contend that the formation of the MML is part of a more serious effort to use the pro-state organization against the myriad militant groups tearing the state apart, while also investing in another political alternative to the current political parties that will pay dividends over the longer time horizon. Based upon available information about the MML, its ties to the JuD and its mentorship by Pakistan's security organizations, I reject the claim that the MML's formation signals a new effort on the part of the Pakistani state to redirect JuD's external militarism towards a new domesticated political role, and thus serves as a state-directed "de-radicalization" or "demobilization" effort to mainstream Islamist militants.³ I argue, instead, that the MML will be a complement to JuD's efforts to stabilize Pakistan internally and enhance LeT's external activities in the service of the deep state.

The Emergence of the Milli Muslim League

IN EARLY AUGUST 2017, HAFEZSAEED ANNOUNCED THE FORMATION OF THE MILLI Muslim League (MML), with the aim of rendering Pakistan a “real Islamic and welfare state.”⁴ While Saeed initially claimed that the MML would be an entirely distinct entity from the JuD, in December 2017 he declared that JuD could participate in the 2018 general elections under the banner of the MML.⁵ It is very unlikely that Saeed could have launched the MML without the explicit approval and active assistance of the army and the ISI given that Saeed made this announcement a mere few weeks after he was released from house arrest. Equally noteworthy, Saeed’s release and his announcement of the MML’s formation was coincident with the U.S. Congress’ decision, under Pentagon pressure, to remove the requirement that Pakistan retard the activities of LeT/JuD as a precondition for American security assistance.⁶ This Congressional decision may reflect a bilateral understanding that Pakistan will not turn against the LeT. Oddly, despite Trump’s bluster about getting tough on Pakistan,⁷ Washington has been silent about these developments.⁸

The MML, which is headed by Saifullah Khalid, a close aide of Saeed and a foundational member of JuD, intends to field candidates in the 2018 general election. The organization wasted no time entering the political fray: after Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was forced to resign on 16 August 2017 and thus vacate his seat in the National Assembly for the NA 120 constituency,⁹ JuD quickly fielded a candidate under the MML banner for the 17 September 2017 by-election to fill that vacancy. Because the MML had not yet been registered as a political party, the candidate, Muhammad Yaqoob Sheikh, filed his nomination papers with the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) as an independent candidate.¹⁰ Remarkably, although the MML had only been in existence for a mere four weeks by the time of the by-election, it garnered four times as many votes as did the Pakistan Peoples’ Party (PPP). This success is most certainly due to the fact that it enjoyed the explicit backing and support of the Pakistani security establishment.¹¹ It then fielded Alhaj Liaqat Ali Khan, in an October 2017 by-election for the N-A4 constituency in Peshawar, however, that candidate did not fare as well.¹²

In early March 2018 the Islamabad High Court invalidated the ECP’s objections to registering the MML as a political party.¹³ While Saeed initially said that

this party was separate from JuD, like many of his pronouncements, this too, ultimately proved to be rank fiction. Campaign posters for the NA-120 and NA-4 by-elections clearly featured the pictures of the candidates as well as that of Saeed. Furthermore, upon Saeed's release from "house arrest" in late November 2017, MML leadership asserted that "Mr. Hafiz Saeed will soon start planning out our membership strategy and getting others on board through networking."¹⁴ Saeed dropped the façade in early December when he announced that JuD is "planning to contest the 2018 general elections under the banner of Milli Muslim League."¹⁵ It is not inconceivable that Saeed himself will contest those elections. Moreover, former President and Army Chief, General Pervez Musharraf declared his unstinting support for Saeed, LeT/JuD, and the MML upon hearing that Saeed had been released from house arrest. Musharraf even suggested absurdly that he would like to contest the 2018 elections in alliance with the MML.¹⁶

Rumors about a possible LeT/JuD-tied political party have been floating around for at least the past two years, and two pieces of information clearly indicate its ties to Pakistan's army and the Interservices Intelligence Directorate (ISI). First, one of its founding members and current information secretary, Tabish Qayyum, has long been associated with the deep state.¹⁷ In 2016, Qayyum earned his M.A. degree at Pakistan's National Defense University in the Department of International Relations, Faculty of Contemporary Studies. He wrote his thesis on the presence of the Islamic State (IS) in Pakistan and available means to defeat the organization. In this thesis, he highlighted the current effort of JuD in combatting the Islamic State (IS) and argued for a larger role for the organization in these efforts. He correctly noted in this thesis that the Islamic State has even declared JuD to be an apostate organization for its staunch opposition to IS and its deep ties to Pakistan's security establishment.¹⁸ Qayyum's writings and digital footprint provide the clearest evidence of the support that the MML has enjoyed from Pakistan's security establishment as well as its inherent ties to JuD.

Second, the MML has aggressively marketed its manifesto and Pakistan's English and Urdu media has obliged. The clearest exposition of its aims and goals are articulated in the October 2017 issue of *Invite*, JuD's newest English-language publication. In this issue, the party clearly states that its aims include, *inter alia*: to ensure that both Pakistani society and the state conform to the injunctions of the Quran and *Sunnat* ("habitual practice," body of social and legal custom and practice); promote domestic security; protect Pakistan's ideological, moral, and cultural ethos; inculcate that ethos into the country's citizens; rendering Pakistan a modern Islamic welfare state; foster a "political environment in which all members of the society, especially the lower and the middle class, get complete rights

and prepare them for leadership roles”; restore Pakistan’s honor and place in the international system; safeguard the rights of women and minorities; morally and diplomatically support the struggle in Kashmir; promote a foreign policy that furthers the interests of the global *ummat* (Muslim community); and “counter the Takfeeri extremist ideology of the *Kharijites*, educate the people in battling it, and to work towards curbing sectarianism.”¹⁹

What is puzzling about the MML’s emergence is that even though Saeed has abjured politics since its founding, he has not bothered to offer even a modest explanation for the *volte face*. (Notably, no one has asked Saeed to justify this reversal.) Instead, Saeed and the JuD are behaving as if the MML is a natural progression for the organization. Ironically, in many ways, it would have been a natural growth of the group’s activities had it not been for LeT’s long-standing principled opposition to electoral politics. After all, the state has given every kind of support to JuD and the FIF, which has enabled the LeT to rebrand itself as a domestic provider of public goods as early as the 2004-05 Asian tsunami and the 2005 Kashmir earthquake.²⁰

The Political and Ideological Aims of the Milli Muslim League

THE JUD HAS PROFFERED THE CLEAREST STATEMENT OF THE MML’S OBJECTIVES in the October 2017 issue of *Invite*, its newly launched publication. What is immediately evident is that the MML’s stated positions completely align with the interests of Pakistan’s deep state. For example, the MML is unstinting in its promotion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).²¹ The MML is also committed to persuading those in Balochistan who are opposed (often violently) to the CPEC, that they should accept Chinese projects in the country because the MML believes, as does the army, that they are necessary to secure Pakistan’s financial independence.²² (It should be noted that CPEC will likely have the obverse effect.²³)

The MML also embraces several contentions of the deep state: India is an existential threat; the Pakistani army’s role in the Saudi-Arabia-led Islamic Military Alliance in Yemen is a legitimate extension of Pakistan’s interests; the army’s internal security operations in the country are legitimate despite their enormous

human and other costs; and the scourge of terrorism perpetrated by *Khawarij* (alternatively neo-*Khawarij*). This conception of the *Khawarij* is rooted in deeply divided opinion about the proper course of action against those Muslim leaders who fail to impose *shariat* and the apposite practice of *takfir*, and subsequent capital punishment.

Salafis use the labels of *Khawarij* or neo-*Khawarij* pejoratively to denounce groups such as IS and, in the case of Pakistan, Deobandi groups who attack Shia and Bareilvi for their cavalier and inappropriate use of *takfir*, drawing upon the name of a long-defunct sect in Islamic history which embraced violent rebellion against disreputable leaders. In turn, Salafi jihadists denounce such critics for their use of *takfir* as *Murji'i* or neo-*Murji'i*, referring to another defunct group of early Muslims. This group asserted both that rebellion is impermissible irrespective of how contemptible a Muslim leader may be unless he commits *kufir* (act of unbelief), and that this judgment is reached using a juridical process that satisfies their rigorous evidentiary standards for declaring someone a *kafir* (unbeliever).²⁴

The MML (and JuD) believes that *Kharijite*-terrorism must be fought on both the military and ideological fronts. For example, the JuD/MML contends that while the “Pakistani armed forces have been working tirelessly on the military front and have laid great sacrifices to protect Pakistan from the scourge of terrorism. JuD on the other hand has taken up the ideological front.”²⁵ Furthermore, and in complete alignment with the internal security interests of the deep state, the MML pledges to uphold and secure the rights of religious minorities and women. It even boasts religious minorities in its ranks.²⁶

The one group about which JuD and the MML alike are very cautious is the Ahmadis.²⁷ When Pakistan’s Law Minister, Zahid Hamid, amended the *khatam-e-nabuwat* clause (declaration of faith in the finality of the prophet) in the Election Act of 2017 to require merely an affirmation, the MML viewed the move as a disturbing effort to dilute the standard oath taking practices for politicians assuming office. For Ahmadis, who do not recognize the ordinal finality of the prophet, the oath as previously written effectively barred them from contesting elections. In response to Hamid’s amendment, Barelvis mobilized and formed the *Tehreek Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah* (Movement for the Prophet, TLYR),²⁸ and in November 2017, organized a sit-in that lasted several weeks until Hamid reversed his action as a “clerical error.” Unlike the Barelvis, which launched a threatening street mobilization to shut down the government, the MML took a legalistic approach to defend the original requirement of taking an oath. Tabish Qayum, writing in the Urdu-language *Daily Khabrain*, focused on the subtle differences between an oath and a declaration or affirmation:

Before the amendment people reaffirmed their faith in the finality of the prophethood by saying “I take an oath truthfully” and after the change it was “I affirm truthfully,” meaning the difference is between oath and affirm. If both these words have the same meaning then why was there a need to bring in a change? Where the person has to sign on the form, there too the change has been made from “Statement of Oath” to “Solemn Affirmation.” What is the difference between the meaning of oath and affirmation?²⁹

To answer his rhetorical question, he cited similar developments in European history to accommodate, for example, the concerns of Quakers who refused to take an oath because, according to them “everyone had a bit of God in them” and instead, offered an affirmation of their belief rather than an oath. He also cited the example of Scottish atheists who opposed taking an oath citing their disbelief in a god. Qayyum also asks why there is a need to facilitate the separation of church and state in Pakistan, where the population is 99 percent Muslims?³⁰

Here and elsewhere, Qayyum fastidiously avoids mentioning the Ahmadis even though this is perhaps the most important community affected by this issue of an oath or an affirmation. Noting this studied silence in his writings, I asked him to articulate the MML’s views of Ahmadiyya. Qayyum responded, “There is a consensus on Ahmadis being a non-Muslim minority.” After all, the Constitution of Pakistan says as much. However, he continued, “They, like any other minority should have right to practice their faith without posing as Muslims or representatives of Islam, which would stand in violation of Pakistan’s constitution.”³¹

The Army has a New Partner

IN ADDITION TO FOSTERING THE INTERNAL SECURITY CONCERNS OF THE DEEP state, there is little doubt that the army anticipates that the MML, over the longer term, will be a future partner in curtailing Pakistan’s beleaguered democracy. Presently, the army lacks a political partner, which will reliably do the army’s bidding. The army views the two mainstream political parties (the Pakistan Peoples’ Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League of Nawaz Sharif (PML-N)) as nemeses while Imran Khan, for his part, has repeatedly demonstrated that his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) can be a tool for disruptive politics, but not a party

able to form a government. Deprived of its traditional political quislings, the army needs to cultivate new political partners if it has any hope of continuing to keep Pakistan's democracy on a short leash.³² While the MML will not likely fare well in the upcoming 2018 general elections (as no religious party ever polls more than 10 percent in a free and fair election),³³ it can make itself useful as a member of an army-groomed coalition. Notably, the MML's leadership has carefully avoided articulating any strategy publicly.³⁴ It is "too early to comment on this," Qayyum explained to me and added, "We welcome and appreciate all such alliances and parties that are working for a stable, progressive and peaceful Pakistan."³⁵

A Risky Gambit

THE DEEP STATE HAS GONE TO TREMENDOUS LENGTHS TO HELP ENSCONCE JUD firmly and formally within Pakistan's domestic politics and it has successfully fended off international pressure to clamp down on the organization. The MML's formal entry into electoral politics will likely further normalize the deep state's reliance upon JuD at home while protecting the group's Kashmir-based arm, the LeT, for operations in Kashmir and elsewhere.

This move on the part of the deep state is risky for several reasons. First, what if the MML—despite the deep state's most concerted effort—fails to become a viable party with national standing? Given that the MML is the *de facto* political wing of the JUD, will an MML political electoral catastrophe adversely affect the legitimacy of JuD's militant activities abroad or its efforts to fight *takfiri* foes at home? Second, will the MML simply join the crowd of religious parties or could the MML be a competitor to or collaborator with the Jamaat-e-Islami, the Islamist political party that has long been the political handmaiden of the army and the ISI at home and abroad? When confronted with the demands of winning votes, how will the MML's staunch opposition to *takfir* as practiced by the myriad Deobandi militant groups manifest itself in political competition with various factions of the Jamiat Ulema-e Islam (JUI), the Deobandi political party? The JUI has provided political cover to a broad swath of Deobandi militants such as the Afghan Taliban, factions of the Pakistani Taliban, the anti-India Jaish-e-Mohammad, and the sectarian Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.³⁶ Alternatively, what happens if the MML manages to establish a robust grassroots presence throughout Pakistan as transpired when General Zia-ul-Haq helped Nawaz Sharif and his Pakistan Muslim

League-N become a party with a national presence and political legitimacy? Will the MML and the JuD be able to maneuver itself into a position of greater financial and policy independence from the ISI and the army, which has patronized the organization for so long? Presumably the army anticipates that it will be able to enjoy many years of acquiescent partnership with the MML before it has to consider a serious divergence of interests.

NOTES

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The Sunni Religious Leadership in Iraq

By Nathaniel Rabkin

IRAQ'S SUNNI RELIGIOUS LEADERS GET LESS ATTENTION FROM POLITICAL observers than their Shia counterparts, but they have also played a role in the country's difficult path over the last twenty years, through totalitarianism, civic strife, and the ISIS reign of terror. The Sunni religious leadership's political fragmentation has reflected—and in some cases even helped shape—the Sunni community's internal conflicts and disputes as it tried to come to terms with its place in post-Saddam Iraq. Iraqi Sunni clerics have repeatedly tried and failed to develop the kind of religious leadership that would allow them to function as a cohesive force on the political scene, parallel to the Shia community's religious leadership based in the *Hawza* of Najaf.

Iraq's Sunni religious leaders occupy a strange position. Sunni Islam has always been a state-established religion in modern Iraq, in the sense that its institutions are funded and administered by the government. But unlike “State Islam” in Egypt or some other Arab countries,¹ Iraqi Sunnism does not have any single leader or traditional decision-making body. Instead, there is a broad group of Sunni religious leaders, united by a strong sense of common professional identity, like members of a guild or a caste. These men also share for the most part a common educational background and certain beliefs about the nature of society and politics in Iraq. But they have never been able to ever reach a consensus on the relationship of Sunnis in Iraq to the post-Saddam state, and this failure has at times had disastrous consequences for the Sunni community at large, or at least the Sunni

community of Iraq's Arab provinces—the role of Sunni clerics in the autonomous Kurdistan Region being a separate topic, beyond the scope of this article.

The rise and fall of ISIS has done nothing to end the Sunni religious leadership's political fragmentation. While ISIS itself has been ejected from all the major Sunni cities, there is still no common vision for the Sunni community's place in Shia-led, post-Baath Iraq. Studying the Sunni religious leadership's failed efforts to come to terms with Iraq's post-Saddam political realities can give us some hints about the challenges that lie ahead. More globally, Iraq's experience suggests that formal, state-sponsored religious establishments are not always helpful allies in combating radical Islamist militancy.

Before ISIS: Establishment Sunnism in Iraq

DISTINCTIVE HISTORICAL STRUCTURES MAKE IRAQ'S SUNNI RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP especially prone to intervening in politics, although also poorly suited to doing so effectively. Sunni religious functionaries in Iraq, from Friday preachers to muezzins and even mosque janitors, are salaried government officials subject to civil service regulations. Historically, going back to the Ottoman era, Sunnism has always enjoyed at least nominal state sponsorship in Iraq. After the founding of modern Iraq in 1921, government sponsorship became increasingly formalized and even bureaucratized. Monarchy-era Iraq introduced tighter state regulation of waqf charitable trusts, including a requirement that they conduct transparent bidding for contracts to build or repair mosques.² In the late 1950s, the government of Abd al-Karim Qasim formally recognized mosque preachers and other religious functionaries as civil servants and awarded them pension rights.³ Shia religious leaders, who operated outside state channels and relied mostly on private donations for funding, avoided this process of bureaucratization, and were generally not much affected by government legislation, which in practice applied only to Sunni mosques.

During the Baath era, state control of the Sunni clergy was tightened still further as the state sought to co-opt religious leaders as cheerleaders for the regime. The 1976 Ordinance on Service in Religious and Charitable Institutions ordered preachers to include Baathist themes in their sermons, including “the

achievements of the July 17th Revolution and its grand works on behalf of the Iraqi people.”⁴ Islamic secondary schools, which trained aspiring young preachers, were tasked by law in 1980 with “giving the students a patriotic, nationalist, spiritual, revolutionary education.”⁵ Religious education was also brought under centralized state control: Baghdad’s Imam Aadam College, renamed in 1985 “The High Islamic Academy for Training Imams and Preachers,” replaced traditional teacher-disciple relationships with a formal, university-style curriculum.⁶

The Sunni religious leaders’ acquiescence to state control makes for a sharp contrast with their Shia counterparts. This difference is only partly explained by the fact that the Baath’s leaders were, at least nominally, Sunni Muslims. Probably more important is the difference in the social position of the clergy: while Shia ayatollahs were venerated and revered by the masses, Sunni religious leaders lacked the same kind of mass popular support.⁷ They had nothing like the Shia *khums* system of donor financing and no counterpart to the Shia pilgrimage rituals, which did so much to build popular religious sentiment among uneducated people in the Shia south of Iraq. In the Sunni provinces of early and even mid twentieth century Iraq, uneducated people in rural communities were largely indifferent to religious issues, and mosque attendance was low.⁸ State support for mosque building and training of preachers in republican Iraq, especially under the Baath, was therefore probably seen by most Sunni religious leaders as more of a welcome sponsorship than a takeover.⁹

Saddam’s “faith campaign,” launched in 1993, strengthened the patron-client relationship between the state and Sunni religious leaders. The state gave additional resources and attention to mosques and religious education. However, the campaign’s themes were the product of Saddam’s idiosyncratic personal whims, and Iraq’s political and social system remained secular: alcohol was legal, and the court system remained based on Western civil law, not the Sharia. Religious activists suspected of undermining the existing order or of organizing political Islamist groups faced continued repression by the security services.¹⁰

Religious Sunni responses to the faith campaign separated into two general camps. On the one hand, many preachers welcomed, and even internalized, this late-Baathist mix of Islamic revivalism and Arab nationalism, with rhetorical tropes dictated by Iraq’s 1990s political climate. Anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism became important themes for sermons, and at the same time, state media began using Sunni religious arguments to denigrate Shia Islam as a way of justifying Saddam’s repressive tactics after the 1991 Shia uprising in the south.¹¹ A second group of Sunni religious leaders and activists, influenced by Muslim Brotherhood ideology, believed that social reforms and the Islamization of society

were more important than supporting the regime's geopolitical orientation. Unable to organize politically, they took advantage of the faith campaign to build charitable and religious associations. Their particular focus was promoting hair-covering for women. They received special permission to import women's "Islamic clothing" from abroad, and sympathizers in the Iraqi Sunni diaspora raised money for this and other charitable purposes.¹² These two approaches were not in direct conflict in the 1990s, but the division between them probably contributed to the subsequent cleavage between supporters and opponents of the post-2003 political process.

Invasion and Insurgency: The Sunni Religious Leaders' Dilemma

THE U.S.-LED INVASION OF IRAQ IN 2003 CREATED AN ALMOST INSURMOUNTABLE dilemma for Sunni religious leaders. The Iraqi state, which paid their salaries, was now under American tutelage, and many Sunnis consequently distrusted the new political process, which was dominated by an axis of Shia Islamists and Kurdish nationalists. Iraqi Sunni religious leaders had always preached patriotism, but did patriotism mean supporting the Iraqi government or embracing the anti-U.S. "resistance" ideology, which Sunni clerics had been preaching for years and which aligned closely with Sunni religious sentiments throughout the region?

Two approaches to this dilemma emerged among Sunni religious leaders. The most prominent in the media, and for a time seemingly the winning approach, was a militant anti-American line, led by an Azhar-trained scholar named Hareth al-Dhari, who had taught religious pupils at the imam academies of the faith-campaign era. Dhari began organizing clerics shortly after the U.S. invasion, at first with a primarily humanitarian focus,¹³ but his group soon took on a political character. Known as the Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq (AMSI), it operated on the assumption that insurgents would ultimately push out the U.S. and be celebrated as heroes. AMSI praised the insurgents, while also carefully avoiding any outright calls for violence that might have led to its members' arrest and prosecution.¹⁴ It also advocated for a boycott of elections, arguing that the U.S. would dominate their outcome.¹⁵

Dhari envisioned AMSI as a Sunni equivalent of the *marjaiya*, the Najaf-based leadership of Shia ayatollahs, whose foremost member, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, emerged in 2003 as the Shia community's decisive voice on the structuring of post-2003 Iraq.¹⁶ The analogy was a hollow one, however, because AMSI was a new political creation, with no historical or theological basis for its authority. It was in essence an ad hoc committee of clerics united by little more than a common belief that Iraq was in the midst of a great liberation struggle against foreign occupation. Within just a few months of its founding, AMSI began issuing a newspaper called *al-Basair* (The Vision).¹⁷ It seems likely that this title was an intentional allusion to a newspaper of the same name, published in Algeria in the 1930s by a clerical association opposed to French rule.¹⁸

AMSI nominally had a collective leadership, but in practice, Dhari dominated its decision making. His perspective was influenced in part by his own background: his grandfather, Dhari al-Mahmud, had been a sheikh of the Shamar tribe and a celebrated figure in the 1920 revolution against British rule in Iraq, an event celebrated ever since by Iraqi nationalists.¹⁹

But while Dhari's AMSI claimed to speak for Sunni clerics on political issues, it did not have actual administrative authority over the clerical class. That role still belonged to the state-sponsored waqf bureaucracy. In the summer of 2003, disputes over control of a handful of mosques in Baghdad convinced the Shia-led, U.S.-backed Iraqi Governing Council to split the Saddam-era Ministry of Endowments (*Wizarat al-Awqaf*) into three separate waqfs, for Shia, Sunni, and minority affairs.²⁰ Since most Shia mosques had never been under government control, the new Sunni Waqf retained most of the mosques and other resources of its Saddam-era predecessor. It also maintained a similar understanding of its mission: to fund, manage, and supervise mosques in a manner consistent with state policy.

The Sunni Waqf never embraced Dhari's rejectionist position towards the post-2003 political process. Since the waqf was a state institution, the right to choose its leader belonged to the Iraqi Government Council. This gave a leading say to the Iraqi Islamic Party (IP). Officially founded in April 2003, the IP served as the vehicle for the proto-Islamist and Brotherhood-inspired networks that developed in 1990s Iraq. The IP's main leaders were older men who had been Muslim Brotherhood activists in pre-Baath Iraq. However, the party self-consciously defined itself as independent of the Muslim Brotherhood's Egypt-based leadership.²¹ In particular, its leaders were convinced that cooperation with the U.S.-led political process—or, as they sometimes called it, “peaceful resistance”—was a better path for Sunnis to follow than violent insurgency.²²

The IP helped install as head of the Sunni Waqf a 69-year-old university Arabic

professor named Adnan al-Dulaymi, whom they had good reason to believe would be sympathetic to their approach.²³ Although he had no credentials as a religious scholar, Dulaymi's history of Muslim Brotherhood activism went back to the 1950s, and he was well known in Sunni religious circles. He fled Iraq in the 1990s after hearing he was wanted by the security services, probably for involvement with the Brotherhood. Seeking refuge in Jordan, he traveled frequently through the Arab world to raise money for Iraq's proto-Islamist, faith campaign-era charitable networks, gaining access to donors in part through a letter of endorsement (*tazkiya*) written by the famous Brotherhood preacher Yusuf al-Qardhawi.²⁴

AMSI and the Sunni Waqf quickly found themselves working at cross purposes. Dhari and Dulaymi, who had been on friendly terms before 2003, were now advocating opposite strategies. While AMSI called for election boycotts and praised "the resistance," Sunni Waqf president Dulaymi was attending public conferences on Sunni election participation.²⁵ He also helped organize a fatwa by religious scholars opposed to Dhari's line, in which they declared it a religious obligation to join the army and police.²⁶ Dulaymi was eventually removed from his position, in July 2005, after his political activism—organizing Sunnis to oppose the incumbent government in elections—irked the Maliki government. He was replaced by his deputy, Ahmad Abd al-Ghafur al-Samarrai, in a relatively smooth transition.²⁷ Samarrai backed off on direct electioneering but continued Dulaymi's line of treating the Iraqi state as legitimate, despite its reliance on U.S. military support.

As fighting escalated, AMSI's line grew more militant. It refused to condemn the growing excesses of Salafi-Jihadi insurgents, generally blaming mass-casualty bombings on American or Zionist agents.²⁸ Over time, this put it increasingly at odds with the mainstream Sunni community. An arrest warrant was issued against Dhari in 2006, forcing him into exile in Amman.²⁹ AMSI's headquarters at Baghdad's Umm al-Qura mosque was confiscated by the waqf in 2007.³⁰ AMSI continued issuing statements from abroad but its influence inside Iraq waned, as did that of its leader, Hareth al-Dhari, who passed away in Amman in March 2015.³¹

The full history of Sunni clerical politics during the post-Saddam transition is beyond the scope of this article, but three important observations are in order:

- 1) There was no purge or replacement of Saddam-era imams and preachers (although Dulaymi did get to appoint some new employees to the waqf payroll).³²

- 2) Even when AMSI and the waqf were in disagreement, they conducted their disputes with the greatest possible rhetorical restraint, without ever resorting to public insult.

- 3) At no point were Sunni religious leaders able to agree on a common political strategy.

After the U.S. Withdrawal: Towards a Sunni Marjaiya?

THE WITHDRAWAL OF U.S. MILITARY FORCES FROM IRAQ IN DECEMBER 2011 SHOULD have been a chance for a new start for the Sunni religious leadership. With no more foreign troops in the country, the legitimacy of the Iraqi state was widely accepted by Sunnis, even critics of then- prime minister Nuri al-Maliki. Only a few of the most hardcore Baathists and the Salafi-Jihadis of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI, later to become ISIS), insisted that the country was still under some kind of clandestine American or Iranian control. Despite many reservations about Maliki's leadership, Sunni religious leaders were, for the most part, looking for ways to integrate into the new Iraqi political order, not to challenge its existence.

The state and the Sunni religious leadership enshrined their mutual desire for cooperation, or at least for respectful coexistence, in the Sunni Waqf Law No. 56 of 2012, passed in October of that year by the Iraqi parliament. The law mandated continued state support for Sunni mosques via the Sunni Waqf bureaucracy and created a mechanism for ensuring the waqf's independence from political authority. It also restricted the prime minister's power to choose the Sunni Waqf's president to selecting a candidate accepted by the Fiqh Council of Senior Scholars for Preaching and Fatwas (*al-Mujamma' al-Fiqhi li-Kibar 'Ulama al-'Iraq li-l-Da'wa wa-l-Ifta'*).³³

The Fiqh Council was a more serious attempt to implement the idea, advocated by Dhari as far back as 2003, of creating a Sunni equivalent to the Shia *marjaiya*. Sunni religious leaders had talked of the idea of creating a kind of council of leading religious scholars in 2007,³⁴ but it was only in 2012 that they actually agreed on a list of names and announced its formation. The aspiration for the Fiqh Council to serve as a Sunni equivalent to the Shia religious leadership in Najaf was embedded in the council's own internal charter, which insisted that

the council is an independent Sharia authority [*marja'aiya shar'iya mustaqilla*] for the Sunnis, and like the other religious authorities [*al-marja'iyat al-diniya*] in Iraq, it is neither a government body nor a civil society group, and it has no need for any law or legislation to establish it.³⁵

In fact, the Fiqh Council had no historic basis for its authority, and the main rationale for its creation was political—the need for a Sunni *marjaiya*. Passage of this law reflected a certain degree of trust by Iraqi politicians that Sunni religious leaders would no longer undermine the state and therefore could be trusted to manage their own affairs. But ironically, it may also have been in part designed to assuage concerns from Shia religious leaders about their own independence from state control. The Sunni Waqf Law No. 56 of 2012 was passed alongside the Shia Waqf Law No. 57 of 2012, which dictated that the head of the Shia Waqf should be appointed “by the cabinet after receiving the approval of the supreme religious authority [marja’], who is the legal scholar from among the scholars of Najaf accepted by the majority of Shi’ites in Iraq for purposes of taqlid.”³⁶ The Shia Waqf in Iraq is actually a much smaller institution than its Sunni counterpart³⁷ because most Shia mosques and educational institutions in Iraq are and have always been organized and financed outside of state channels. However, the need to respect the Shia *marjaiya*’s independence from state control may have necessitated legislative recognition of a parallel independence for the Sunnis, even though this lacked a corresponding historical precedent. In fact, the Fiqh Council soon proved unable to fulfill the leadership role it claimed and for which it had won state recognition.

The Return to Violence and the Failure of the Sunni Marjaiya

THE ATTEMPT TO PUT THE IRAQI STATE’S TIES TO SUNNI ISLAM ON FIRM GROUND quickly proved a failure. The primary reason was, once again, Sunni religious leaders’ inability to agree on a common political strategy and their tendency to overestimate the Sunni community’s strength—or, seen less charitably, their demagogic embrace of unrealistic proposals.

Protests against the Maliki government broke out across the Sunni provinces of Iraq in December 2012. The proximate cause was an arrest warrant for Minister of Finance Rafi al-Isawi, one of the more prominent IP-aligned Sunni politicians. More deeply, the protests derived their energy from a mix of the Sunni elites’ response to arrests of Sunni politicians, and more general popular Sunni anger at Iraqi security forces’ tactics. These tactics included mass roundups and torture of Sunni men, sometimes in the course of counter-terrorism operations, but often

simply as a kind of kidnapping-for-ransom by corrupt security forces officers, who demanded bribes in return for release of innocent detainees.³⁸

The protest movement, while peaceful, served to increase tensions between the Sunni community and the Iraqi government to a dangerous level, and it paved the way for Fallujah's fall to ISIS-led militants in January 2014 and Mosul's in June of that year. The Sunni protest movement's trajectory towards insurgency has been discussed extensively in these pages,³⁹ but a few observations should be made about the specific role of Sunni religious leaders in these developments.

Nearly from the beginning, Sunni religious leaders jumped to the forefront of the protest movement, putting their stamp on both its tactics and its demands. Fridays became the major day for demonstrations. Large Friday prayer services, held as city- or province-wide rallies in open spaces and featuring politically themed sermons, became the standard form of protest.⁴⁰ The idea of a Friday prayer rally as a form of political demonstration was probably borrowed from Sunni revolutionaries in neighboring Syria, along with the practice of attaching an appropriate political slogan to each Friday, such as "Maliki or Iraq Friday," which was followed by "Iraq Is Our Choice Friday." The Fiqh Council, and the clerical establishment in general, cooperated enthusiastically by closing local neighborhood mosques on certain Fridays to encourage worshippers to attend prayers at the central rally sites.⁴¹

Sunni religious leaders, as prominent boosters of the protests, must bear much of the fault for the movement's inability to agree on a common set of demands. One wing of the protest movement, led mostly by younger, IP-aligned religious leaders, demanded a Sunni autonomous region.⁴² The creation of new autonomous regions (beside the pre-existing Kurdistan Region) is theoretically possible under Iraq's 2005 constitution. It was probably never realistic to expect a Shia-led government to acquiesce to Sunni autonomy. However, the idea was popular with some elements of the Sunni community, and it seems to have been useful for building support for the protest movement and putting its leaders at the forefront of the political scene.

A second wing of the Sunni protest movement, also led by clerics, absolutely rejected the idea of an autonomous region, holding fast to an ideal of Iraqi unity, and perhaps also to a widely shared (although false) belief that Sunnis constituted a majority of Iraq's population and could therefore eventually take back control of the state itself through democratic means. As will be seen, their rhetoric was even more divisive than that of the Sunni autonomy advocates.

The main religious opponent of the Sunni autonomy movement was Abd al-Malik al-Saadi, an Anbari-born scholar who had moved to Jordan a few years

before the fall of the Baath.⁴³ He sat out most of the first post-Saddam decade in Amman, issuing fatwas that called on Iraqis not to participate in the elections because they were rigged by the Americans.⁴⁴ In December 2012, al-Saadi returned to Iraq for the first time since 2003. He was quickly welcomed by many Sunni protesters, especially those in Anbar, and put himself forward as their spiritual leader.⁴⁵ Al-Saadi's rhetoric focused on uprooting the post-2003 political process, restoring the old Iraqi army,⁴⁶ and, perhaps most offensively, taking a census that would record (for the first time in Iraqi history) whether residents were Sunni or Shia. Al-Saadi was convinced, of course, that the results would show that Sunnis were Iraq's largest community.⁴⁷

During 2013, Al-Saadi and the Fiqh Council issued competing religious rulings on the federalism question. Al-Saadi ruled that forming new autonomous regions was religiously forbidden because it would "weaken and divide" the country.⁴⁸ The Fiqh Council nonetheless went ahead with a clerical conference on federalism. This produced not exactly a fatwa, but a declaration that Islam permits creation of a federal autonomous region and that respectful discussions must continue on its suitability for contemporary Iraq.⁴⁹ Advocates of a Sunni Region treated this as a victory for them and a rebuke to al-Saadi.⁵⁰ Al-Saadi, enraged, issued a statement reiterating that a Sunni autonomous region was forbidden by Islam. Moreover, he politely but firmly called into question the Fiqh Council's claims to be a Sunni *marjaiya*:

The claim that the statement comes from the Senior Scholars of Iraq ... is inaccurate, as many senior scholars did not participate ... furthermore, the majority of those present [at the Sunni Region conference], despite my respect for them all, cannot properly be described by this term.⁵¹

The Sunni community's lack of a common political agenda ultimately doomed the protest movement. Sunni religious leaders, instead of being a source of unity, actively took part in the divisions, betraying the idea that a common Sunni religious leadership could guide the community. While one wing of the Sunni religious leadership was calling for autonomy, another was denouncing the idea as heresy. Saadi at one point proposed that he or his representatives lead negotiations with the government at the Imam Askari shrine in Samarra (revered by the Shia and by many Iraqi Sunnis). However, both the government and the shrine's Shia administrators rejected this suggestion, and the lack of Sunni clerical unity was probably a factor in their decision.⁵²

Eventually, the Maliki government worked with the minority of Sunni politicians opposed to the protest movement to shut it down. In November the cabinet, at the request of Sunni MP Ahmad al-Jiburi, who was aligned with Maliki, ordered the “suspension” of Sunni Waqf president Ahmad Abd al-Ghafur al-Samarrai and his replacement by his deputy, Mahmud al-Sumaydai.⁵³ This was presented as an emergency response to allegations of corruption against Samarrai, although its real purpose was almost certainly to suppress the role of waqf-funded mosques and imams in the protest movement.⁵⁴ By this time, however, the protests were too popular in the Sunni community—and too widely supported in clerical circles—to be easily repressed.

The Fiqh Council was no doubt upset to see its authority under the Sunni Waqf Law ignored, but without real historical roots in the Sunni community, it lacked the political leverage to do anything about it. The day Samarrai was removed, the council ordered all Baghdad mosques shut for two days. In a statement that did not mention Samarrai or the waqf leadership, it framed this decision as being part of the broader Sunni protest struggle.⁵⁵ Most likely, the council members realized that a majority of Sunnis, even those active in the protest movement, did not see the right of the newly founded Fiqh Council to appoint the Sunni Waqf president as the hill they wanted to die on. Two days later, the Fiqh Council, perhaps realizing that an open-ended closure of Sunni mosques in Baghdad was not a viable strategy, reversed course and ordered them re-opened, “in response to calls” from politicians and public figures. This second statement also made no reference to the Sunni Waqf leadership dispute.⁵⁶

The Sunni protest movement came to its bloody end in January 2014, when federal security forces tried to clear out the protest sites in Anbar and militants took over the city of Fallujah. Abd al-Malik al-Saadi endorsed the uprising, issuing a statement in which he called on Anbaris to “defend your faith, your honor, and your land” from Iraqi army soldiers, whom he now referred to as “occupiers.” His statement also accused Maliki of trying to “wipe out” Sunnis.⁵⁷ The Fiqh Council issued an ambiguous and somewhat confusing statement calling for continued Friday protests and asking the people of Anbar “to defend themselves, as this is a legal and religious obligation.”⁵⁸ Thus, while al-Saadi and the Fiqh Council had not fully set aside their differences on Sunni political goals, they were now united in giving religious justification for violence against the army and other security forces in Anbar—effectively a return to insurgency. For the time being, other Sunni provinces saw continued ISIS bombings and ambushes but no mass uprisings of their own.

Not all Anbari Sunnis rushed to take up arms in response to these fatwas. Many

in the province still had bad memories of how the insurgency had descended into nihilistic violence in 2004–2005 and feared that a new round of fighting would end equally badly. Even Sunni politicians sympathetic to the protest movement understood that religious leaders were unleashing violence they would not, in fact, be able to control. Anbar’s governor, Ahmad al-Dhiyabi, himself a pious man and IP member, no doubt spoke for many when he declared in a television address that he would be siding with the government and not with the religious leaders calling for insurgent violence in the name of “self-defense”:

Salutes and prayers to our honorable ulema! ... we cannot pay our respects to you at the expense of the blood of the people of this province.... if we are following you into a dead end, and you want us to obey, no! One may not obey a human being in disobedience to God. Our God-given task is to preserve the lives of the people.⁵⁹

The Sunni Religious Leaders Respond to ISIS

THE VIOLENCE OF 2014, LAUNCHED WITH ENTHUSIASTIC APPROVAL FROM MANY Sunni religious leaders, proved disastrous for the Sunni community. ISIS began as one faction among several in a broad Sunni insurgency in Anbar, but it used Stalinist-style salami tactics to absorb or destroy other factions in Fallujah, the main insurgent stronghold. By the time Mosul fell in June 2014, it took only a few weeks for ISIS to establish its control over that city and other areas from which government forces had fled in north-central Iraq.⁶⁰

Sunni religious leaders were slow to adapt. Two weeks after the fall of Mosul, and just days before the famous June 30, 2014, ISIS “caliphate” announcement, Saadi was still insisting in public that a “revolution” was taking place and that ISIS was a small and marginal faction.⁶¹ The Fiqh Council’s first response to the fall of Mosul was to call for “disciplined resistance factions and tribal revolutionaries” to be placed in control of security in Sunni provinces.⁶² All this soon proved to be nonsense, as ISIS announced its “caliphate” and executed members of rival Sunni factions. Al-Saadi left Iraq for Jordan, from where he continued issuing occasional

political statements filled with moral equivalencies between ISIS and the mostly Shia militias arrayed to fight it.⁶³ The Fiqh Council remained in Baghdad, and it did issue a condemnation of attacks on Christians in Mosul later in 2014, although without mentioning ISIS.⁶⁴ It then returned to its main business of repeated public condemnations of supposed government and militia assaults on Sunnis, with hardly a mention of the ongoing war or ISIS.⁶⁵

ISIS had no use for the traditional, waqf-supervised, and often Sufi-oriented preachers; it sent them fleeing or had them killed and replaced with its own imams.⁶⁶ The Fiqh Council's silence on this matter probably reflects its members' sense that the war itself was the result of government policies and therefore not their responsibility to address. Some Sunni religious leaders may even have suspected that ISIS was not a real group but rather some kind of foreign conspiracy, as hinted in the Fiqh Council's condemnation of attacks on Christians: "Such measures ... are not in our interest, because there are those who are waiting in ambush for Islam and Muslims, to use claims of violence and intolerance to attack and destroy Iraq and displace its people under the pretext of terrorism."⁶⁷

Faced with Sunni clerical intransigence, the Iraqi government again resorted to appointing a new president of the Sunni Waqf, known in clerical circles but politically pliant. This time, the government's choice was Abd al-Latif al-Humaym. Humaym had previously been one of the most obsequious stalwarts of the faith campaign, always full of praise for Saddam and his supposed embodiment of Arab-Islamic values.⁶⁸ His pro-government stance survived even after Saddam's regime perished. In June 2015, Humaym was appointed "acting Sunni Waqf president" by Prime Minister Hayder al-Abadi, acting in flagrant violation of the Sunni Waqf Law's requirement that the Fiqh Council approve the waqf president. The council issued a statement saying that the appointment was illegal, but it did not condemn Humaym or call for any kind of protest or disobedience by waqf employees.⁶⁹ Despite this dispute, the council continued meeting with Prime Minister Abadi from time to time.⁷⁰

Humaym's appointment exposed the weakness of the Fiqh Council and the absence of a real consensus among Sunni clerics. A crafty and ambitious man, but also rather a maverick, Humaym is independently wealthy. For months he had been lobbying in both clerical and political circles to win the job.⁷¹ He was able to defy the Fiqh Council in part because he had public support from dozens of Sunni MP.⁷² His supporters argued that he would advance a more moderate tone in Sunni mosque sermons and pull back from the angry "Sunni protest" rhetoric that had accompanied the rise of ISIS.⁷³ Other MPs criticized his appointment, siding with the Fiqh Council.

Humaym viewed the Sunni Waqf presidency as much more than an administrative position. He met with military commanders to offer his encouragement in the fight against ISIS⁷⁴ and briefly won himself a special position as director of reconstruction in Ramadi, the capital of his home province of Anbar, after its liberation from ISIS in early 2016.⁷⁵ Controlling Ramadi's reconstruction could have given Humaym a strong political base from which to challenge Anbar's IP-dominated provincial government, but Humaym executed the task poorly, rushing the return of refugees in early 2016 to a city that was not even fully demined.⁷⁶ As of this writing, he no longer seems to exercise any role in Anbar reconstruction work.

Humaym's prestige and authority were further harmed in 2017 by allegations of corruption and mismanagement, particularly claims by some Sunni MPs that he had used waqf funds to pay off journalists for favorable coverage.⁷⁷ He was eventually convicted and given a suspended prison sentence for misuse of funds.⁷⁸ Humaym remains in office as waqf president, and although his political prominence has somewhat receded, he continues to pursue his agenda. One of his more successful recent initiatives has been the imposition of a "unified sermon" policy in post-ISIS Mosul, which requires the newly restored waqf imams to deliver a single, pre-approved message at Friday prayers.⁷⁹ The Fiqh Council, which has never formally acknowledged Humay's legitimacy, is still able to coexist with him, and in early 2017 the council and Humaym held a joint meeting with a visiting Azhar delegation.⁸⁰

Humaym, true to his Baathist roots, has actually deepened the politicization of the Sunni Waqf, even as he has moved it in a more pro-government direction. As for the future, it is impossible to rule out another round of religiously inspired Sunni militancy further down the road, especially if continued politicization and infighting among clerics serves to discredit the Sunni Waqf. But for now, what is remarkable is how readily Sunni religious leaders—and their followers—accept a situation in which Sunni mosques across Iraq are accountable to a venal man of meager clerical credentials who has been convicted of corruption. Humaym's recognition by the Iraqi state—even under a Shia-led government—conveys legitimacy on him even in the absence of any real clerical supporting. This would seem to confirm the view of one Iraqi politician, who remarked in the summer of 2016 that "for us Sunnis, historically, our *marjaiya* has been the state itself."⁸¹

Yet confusion about what loyalty to Iraq means still prevents statism from being a unifying ideology for the Sunni religious leadership. Sunni Arab clerics who have fled to Kurdistan or to foreign countries—perhaps most prominently the Sufi leader and self-styled "mufti" Rafia al-Rifai—continue calling for a Sunni autonomous region, although this is no longer a popular demand among Sunni politicians.⁸²

On the other end of the spectrum, Mahdi al-Sumaydai, a Salafist who was imprisoned by U.S. forces for his role in the insurgency, is now politically allied with pro-Iran Shia groups, a move he justifies with rhetoric of Islamic unity. Sumaydai even runs his own militia, the *Ahrar al-Iraq*, as part of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). He claims it has many thousands of fighters, though the true number is probably lower. While Sumaydai's brand of pro-Iran Salafism is unlikely to attract a large following among Iraqi Sunnis, its political utility for the Shia-led government is obvious.⁸³

The ISIS experience has made Sunni religious leaders more cautious about insurgent adventurism, but it has not led them to close ranks behind any common leader or set of principles. This leaves them unable to fulfill the *marjaiya*-like role of communal representatives that they have long aspired to. In the years to come, the fractured and state-dependent Sunni religious leadership will probably do more to stir up strife than to calm it down. The political opportunism exhibited by Sunni religious leaders in the past makes it hard to predict just what form this will take. But the Iraqi state's troubles with the Sunni religious leaders are probably not over. More broadly speaking, the Iraqi Sunni experience demonstrates that nurturing "moderate" religious leaders is a difficult process and can easily fail if it does not enjoy the right political and social conditions—including inside the religious leadership itself.

NOTES

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11. Kanan Makiya, *Cruelty and Silence: War, Tyranny, Uprising and the Arab World* (London: WW. Norton & Company, 1993), 101-102.
12. 'Adnan al-Dulaymi, *Safahat Min Ta'rikh al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin fi al-'Iraq* (Amman: Dar al-Mamun, 2013), 264.
13. *Bi-la Hudud*, Al Jazeera TV, February 10, 2004, <http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/withoutbounds/2004/10/3/معرض-احو-قار-علا-ي-ف-قن-س-ل-ل-التح-ال-است-حت>.
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22. *Liqa al-Yawm*, Al Jazeera TV, September 12, 2003, <http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/today-interview/2004/6/4/>
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How Al-Qaeda Works: The Jihadist Group's Evolving Organizational Design

*By Daveed Gartenstein-Ross
& Nathaniel Barr*

THE YEARS FOLLOWING THE 9/11 ATTACKS AND PRECEDING THE ARAB Spring marked a period of tumult for al-Qaeda. The jihadist organization lost a number of key commanders after the United States invaded Afghanistan, including several involved in planning operations outside the region. Though al-Qaeda did prepare a credible large-scale plot against commercial aviation in August 2006 and nearly brought down an international flight over Detroit in December 2009,¹ the organization went multiple years without a *successfully* executed terrorist attack in the West. For an organization that had to a certain extent staked its credibility on its ability to sustain an armed struggle against the “far enemy,” this hiatus damaged its reputation. Compounding these problems was al-Qaeda’s Iraq affiliate, which had

stubbornly ignored the al-Qaeda leadership's guidance to tone down what they deemed to be excessively violent methods. After overplaying its hand, which provoked an organized backlash from Iraqi Sunni communities, al-Qaeda in Iraq collapsed. In turn, its collapse was a blow to the al-Qaeda organization as a whole.

In his 2008 book *Leaderless Jihad*, psychiatrist and former C.I.A. case officer Marc Sageman reflected on the al-Qaeda of the 2000s.² Sageman argued that the capabilities of al-Qaeda's senior leadership had declined sharply, and to such an extent that the organization no longer exercised command and control over either its nominal affiliates or over like-minded jihadists operating outside Afghanistan and Pakistan. With al-Qaeda now a marginalized organization, Sageman argued, the most potent jihadist threat to the West now emanated from "bunches of guys." These were small groups of radicalized individuals inspired by salafi jihadist ideology, who planned attacks without coordinating with or receiving guidance from a broader organization like al-Qaeda.

While *Leaderless Jihad* both reflected and influenced the thoughts of a growing number of terrorism analysts and journalists,³ it also provoked a blistering rebuttal from Georgetown University terrorism scholar Bruce Hoffman. Hoffman objected to Sageman's central claim that al-Qaeda's senior leadership had become "neutralized operationally."⁴ Instead, he argued that al-Qaeda was a "remarkably agile and flexible organization," and that its leadership had rebounded from personnel losses, retained operational control over affiliates, and sustained its ability to plan external operations against the West. While Hoffman acknowledged the threat posed by local and regional terrorist networks, he argued that al-Qaeda continued to pose a greater challenge to American and European security.

The Hoffman-Sageman debate remains largely unresolved a decade after the publication of *Leaderless Jihad*, as analysts continue to debate fundamental questions about the relevance of al-Qaeda's senior leadership and the structure of the organization. Is al-Qaeda a top-down, centralized organization or a collection of flat, information-age networks? Do its leaders remain linked with and provide strategic direction to the organization's affiliates or have they been reduced to a symbolic role? Is al-Qaeda even a single, coherent organization or is it more akin to a social movement, devoid of hierarchy and without a concrete structure?

The lack of consensus on these questions within the analytic community impedes our ability to anticipate the behavior of al-Qaeda and its affiliates, and to counter their future operations. If we do not accurately understand fundamental aspects of al-Qaeda's structure, we will be unable to either identify and target the organization's center of gravity or predict how strategic directives from its leadership will affect the behavior of affiliates. As documents recovered from Abbottabad

become accessible and first-hand accounts from jihadist movement insiders proliferate, we now have enough information to more definitively answer pressing questions about al-Qaeda's organizational design.

Close analysis of these primary source materials, which include a vast trove of documents produced by al-Qaeda's top officials, has yielded two important findings that we present at length in this article. First, al-Qaeda remains a coherent and centralized organization, albeit one that is not perfectly centralized. Second, al-Qaeda's leadership continues to be essential in determining both the trajectory of the organization as well as its strategic direction. While al-Qaeda sometimes fails to resolve its internal disputes before they boil over into the public eye—a phenomenon seen in earlier years as well (there were highly public disputes in the 1990s in both Sudan and Afghanistan over the state and trajectory of the global jihadist movement)—its affiliates generally continue to adhere to the goals, objectives and strategies outlined by the organization's senior leadership.⁵ At the same time, al-Qaeda's flexible organizational model allows affiliates to adapt their tactical approach to local dynamics.

Though al-Qaeda's organizational structure has undergone several significant changes since its inception, the current structure continues to reflect the strategic vision of its founders. From the outset, al-Qaeda adopted a unique organizational design, whereby its senior leadership outlined a strategic course for the organization a whole, but empowered mid-level commanders to execute this strategy as they saw fit. "Centralization of decision and decentralization of execution," as this organizational principle has been described, remains operative today.⁶ Indeed, in adhering to this principle, al-Qaeda has been able to maintain both organizational and strategic coherence even in the face of considerable internal and external challenges.

This article charts al-Qaeda's development over its nearly thirty-year existence, placing special emphasis on its early history. The organization's initial structure, we argue, would have an enduring influence on how the organization functioned and developed as time passed. This article begins with an exploration of the strategic and ideological rationale behind the establishment of al-Qaeda. We consider, in particular, how this rationale informed the organization's early emphasis on "centralization of decision and decentralization of execution." Next, we examine how al-Qaeda's organizational structure was transformed both by new challenges, like its loss of Afghanistan as a safe haven after the 9/11 attacks, and by its expansion to include new affiliates. Finally, we explain the important ways in which our explanation of al-Qaeda's organizational structure should shape future assessments of the challenges that al-Qaeda faces, and of the challenges that it poses.

Creating the Vanguard

AL-QAEDA'S *RAISON D'ÊTRE* IS ROOTED IN THE CONCEPT OF AN INTERNATIONAL vanguard charged with taking the first steps necessary to sweep an un-Islamic world order from power (including the secular governments of the Middle East and the influence of Western powers that support them), and usher in Islamic governance across the globe. The international jihadist army that al-Qaeda seeks to build bears close resemblance to the vanguards of early Islamic history, and also closely resembles the vanguard concept that features prominently in the writings of two prominent jihadist theorists of the twentieth century, Sayyid Qutb and Abdullah Azzam.

Qutb, an Egyptian scholar who is often considered the ideological forefather of the modern jihadist movement, believed that the Muslim world had descended into a state of *jahiliyya*, or ignorance, a pejorative term that Muslims identify with life in the Arabian Peninsula prior to the advent of Islam. Qutb argued that only a vanguard, composed of a small number of pious Muslims, could awaken the Ummah and rescue it from this state of darkness. In Qutb's words: "It is necessary that there should be a vanguard which sets out and then keeps walking on the path, marching through the vast ocean of *jahiliyya* which has encompassed the entire world."⁷

Qutb likely borrowed the term *vanguard* from Marxism, which averred that a small core of committed individuals was necessary to mobilize the masses to communist revolution. But in his estimation, as well as that of other influential Islamist thinkers, the concept of a vanguard can actually be traced back to the early years of Islamic history, when the Prophet Muhammad and a small coterie of followers overcame the opposition of Arab tribes, and spread Islam across the Arabian Peninsula. Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna drew an explicit comparison between the Prophet's earliest followers and the movement he sought to build, explaining: "We try to make of this modern proselytizing a real echo to the early proselytizing."⁸

Qutb's discussion of how this vanguard would form and operate was, like much of his writing, heavy on theory, tending toward diagnosis rather than prescription. It was left to later figures, like Abdullah Azzam, to determine how to put the idea of a vanguard into practice.

Azzam—who was once bin Laden's mentor, before running afoul of the young Saudi in the late 1980s⁹—emerged as the most influential jihadist theoretician

and strategist of the 1980s. His writings touched on a wide array of subjects, but his most extensive discussion of the purpose and function of a vanguard appeared in an article titled “al-Qaeda al-Sulbah” (The Solid Base), which was published in 1988 in *al-Jihad* magazine, a publication Azzam founded to report on the mujahedin’s anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan. In the article, Azzam explained the need to have a vanguard to bring about revolution in the Islamic world:

For every invention there must be a vanguard to carry it forward and, while forcing its way into society, endure enormous expenses and costly sacrifices. There is no ideology, neither earthly nor heavenly, that does not require such a vanguard that gives everything it possesses in order to achieve victory for this ideology. It carries the flag all along the sheer endless and difficult path until it reaches its destination in the reality of life, since Allah has destined that it should make it and manifest itself. This vanguard constitutes the solid base (*al-qaeda al-subah*) for the expected society.¹⁰

This vanguard, Azzam wrote, would first galvanize the people, serving as the “spark that ignites the energies of the Ummah.”¹¹ The vanguard’s job, according to Azzam, would not end there. As he explained in *Join the Caravan*, a short book published in 1987, once the Muslim community had been spurred to action, the vanguard would serve as the “beating heart and deliberating mind,” providing strategic and ideological guidance to the Ummah.¹²

Al-Qaeda sees itself as a manifestation of this vanguard. The organization’s goal, according to its founders and strategists, is to galvanize the Muslim masses to revolt against the existing international system, which is corrupt and impious, and to inspire the Ummah to replace this system with an Islamic caliphate. Al-Qaeda is to be the vanguard of this revolution, the “organization and leadership leading change,” as Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda’s current emir, explained in *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*, his treatise on the history and future of the jihadist movement.¹³

Al-Qaeda’s perception of itself as a vanguard has clear implications for the group’s organizational structure. Al-Qaeda’s leaders agreed with Qutb and Azzam that the Islamic revolution could not be leaderless: A revolution that lacked both ideological and strategic guidance would exhaust itself. As Azzam explained in “al-Qaeda al-Sulbah,” an ideology without a vanguard to promote and propagate it would be “stillborn, perishing before it sees light and life.”¹⁴ Al-Qaeda viewed, and continues to view, the leaderless jihad model as strategically infeasible.

Instead, al-Qaeda sought to build a robust organizational structure that would enable it to fulfill its self-proclaimed role as the revolution's vanguard. Three principles shaped the creation of this structure. First, al-Qaeda needed to establish a propaganda apparatus that would allow the group to convey its messages throughout the globe, and inspire the Ummah to join its revolution. Zawahiri articulated the importance of propaganda in a 2005 letter to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, explaining that "we are in a battle, and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media."¹⁵ Second, al-Qaeda needed command-and-control mechanisms to direct the activities of its subordinates, and to provide strategic guidance to those involved in its revolution, regardless of where they were operating. Third and finally, the organization would need to be resilient. Azzam recognized that the path to an Islamic revolution would be "endless and difficult."¹⁶ If its ultimate objectives were to be achieved, al-Qaeda would need to be able to endure repeated challenges and great losses.

While al-Qaeda has undergone numerous transformations since its inception, the organization has held steadfastly to its overarching goal: to serve as the vanguard of an Islamic revolution. Further, the three core organizational principles that first shaped al-Qaeda continue to guide the group. Al-Qaeda's propaganda efforts, though they remain essential, are largely beyond the scope of this paper. This paper focuses, instead, on how al-Qaeda has maintained its command-and-control mechanisms and continued to implement reforms aimed at improving its resilience, even as the group has expanded its geographic reach, suffered the loss of key leaders, and adapted its strategic approach in response to shifting geopolitical dynamics.

Building a Durable Organization

AL-QAEDA'S FOUNDING DOCUMENTS MAKE CLEAR THAT AL-QAEDA LEADERS prioritized building a coherent and resilient organization. In contrast, the minutes from al-Qaeda's first meetings in August 1988 are somewhat ambiguous about the group's specific objectives. Though these minutes record that al-Qaeda's overarching goal is to make Islam "victorious," they lack any explanation of what victory means or how it might be achieved. The minutes reveal, however, that considerable attention was devoted to the organizational structure that al-Qaeda

would adopt, attesting to the importance its founders placed on developing standard bureaucratic practices and procedures.

Al-Qaeda's first meeting began with a discussion of the limitations of the Maktab al-Khidamat al-Mujahedin, an organization created and run by Abdullah Azzam that coordinated both international fundraising for the Afghan jihad and recruitment of Arab fighters. For al-Qaeda's founders, the Maktab al-Khidamat's history served as a cautionary tale. Bin Laden and other Arabs in Afghanistan were frustrated with the "mismanagement and bad treatment" that occurred within the Maktab al-Khidamat, which by 1988, had become mired in infighting.¹⁷ At their first meeting, therefore, al-Qaeda's founders emphasized the need to establish a formal organization to avoid these kinds of deficiencies. Bin Laden and his colleagues sought to design an organization equipped to overcome the challenges that had plagued the Maktab al-Khidamat.

Al-Qaeda's founders envisioned a hierarchical, rules-based organization. The minutes from al-Qaeda's first meetings reveal that all members would have to obey the group's "statutes and instructions." They also show al-Qaeda's early efforts to facilitate specialization through the establishment of committees, including an advisory council and a mobilization committee, each of which would be responsible for different tasks. A subsequent undated document, believed to have been written in the late 1980s or early 1990s, provides a more extensive description of the roles and responsibilities of each of al-Qaeda's committees and sections.¹⁸ It explains, for example, that al-Qaeda's military committee would consist of four sections: general combat, special operations, nuclear weapons, and the library and research section. It also stipulates that the commander of the military committee would be required to have a minimum of five years of military experience, be at least 30 years old, and hold a university degree.¹⁹

Another founding document, labeled by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point as al-Qaeda's structure and bylaws, goes into greater depth about al-Qaeda's decision-making processes and command structure.²⁰ It makes clear that al-Qaeda's emir is the ultimate authority on strategic decisions and the appointment of leaders. One of the emir's additional responsibilities is to "discuss and implement" al-Qaeda's annual plan, budget, and internal structure. Additionally, the emir is given the authority to appoint all members of the leadership council, al-Qaeda's most senior decision-making body. Though the leadership council is ostensibly authorized to replace the emir if he "deviates from *sharia*," the emir's ability to unilaterally hire or fire members of the council significantly blunts any potential curb on his power. Similarly, the emir wields full control over his deputy, whose duties, the document states, are "delegated by the emir." These two

clauses ensure that there are few checks on the emir's power. Fazul Abdullah Mohammed (a.k.a. Fadil Harun), a high-ranking al-Qaeda official who helped orchestrate the 1998 Embassy bombings in East Africa, later confirmed that the emir's authority was unrivaled, and that bin Laden was not bound by the decisions made by al-Qaeda's leadership council.²¹

While the structure and bylaws make clear that the emir's word on strategic matters is essentially irrefutable, it also limits the emir's involvement in day-to-day operations. The emir should, according to the document, take a largely hands-off approach at the operational and tactical level. His involvement, furthermore, should be limited to participation in "periodic meetings" and to reviewing the performance of subordinates and committees. Responsibility for day-to-day operations fell to the chairmen of the various committees (e.g., military, security, political, economic) and to their deputies, who are generally referred to as supervisors. The chairman and chief of staff of the military committee are responsible for developing al-Qaeda's military policy. Then, the leadership council is supposed to approve and oversee the implementation of this policy. Finally, the training and combat supervisors are tasked with developing operational plans through which to achieve the goals and policies articulated by the chairman and chief of staff.

Putting Doctrine into Practice

RELATIVELY LITTLE IS KNOWN ABOUT AL-QAEDA'S INTERNAL DYNAMICS DURING ITS early years in Afghanistan.²² However, an account of the organization's first attempted international operation provides some insight into how its earliest external operations were arranged. In November 1991, Paulo Jose de Almeida Santos, a Portuguese al-Qaeda recruit, was arrested in Rome after he tried to assassinate Mohammed Zahir Shah, the former Afghan king. In an interview with the Portuguese magazine *Expresso*, Santos, who wanted to kill the king to prevent his return to Afghanistan, explained that he had proposed the plot to his commanders in al-Qaeda. He was then brought to Peshawar to meet Abu Hafs al-Masri and bin Laden, who asked about the rationale for the assassination, as well as Santos's plans for carrying out the attack.²³

Santos interpreted the fact that he was able to propose a plot directly to bin Laden as a sign that al-Qaeda, in 1991, was "disorganized" and lacked a "well-defined hierarchy." There is undoubtedly some truth to Santos's assessment. In 1991,

al-Qaeda was in a state of flux as it tried to navigate the increasingly fissiparous and violent Afghan mujahedin landscape. Just months after Santos's failed assassination attempt, al-Qaeda pulled a significant portion of its assets out of Afghanistan and Pakistan.²⁴

There are, however, other possible interpretations of the facts that Santos describes. For one, the ease with which Santos, a largely insignificant foot soldier, was able to interact with bin Laden may have represented an *intentional feature* of al-Qaeda's organizational design. Indeed, before 9/11, bin Laden sought to foster a culture of entrepreneurship, encouraging al-Qaeda's rank and file, and even individuals who had not officially joined, to present him with ideas for plots and operations.²⁵ Nasser al-Bahri, who served as bin Laden's bodyguard prior to the 9/11 attacks, explained that individuals who developed attack plans could bypass al-Qaeda's bureaucracy and present their proposals directly to bin Laden and his senior commanders.²⁶ Bin Laden or one of his trusted deputies would then judge whether the proposed attack fit within the contours of al-Qaeda's military strategy, and if the attack was approved, responsibility was delegated to a subordinate to plan and execute the operation.²⁷

Bin Laden's willingness to defer to subordinates on issues of operational planning is also consistent with Santos's experience. In his interview with *Expresso*, Santos explained that bin Laden "did not give any orders," and said that when it came to planning operations, Abu Hafs al-Masri "was the real chief of al-Qaeda."²⁸ On the basis of his interactions with these two men, Santos concluded that "whether bin Laden gave the green light or not is not important." Santos's interpretation of al-Qaeda's power dynamics based on his limited interactions with its upper echelons, however, was inaccurate. While bin Laden rarely involved himself in the minutiae of operational planning, in 1991, while he was al-Qaeda's supreme authority, his approval was required for all operations carried out in the organization's name. This was certainly true for Santos's plot as well, which marked the first time that al-Qaeda attempted an attack outside of Afghanistan. Again, there certainly was a degree of disorganization within al-Qaeda at the time. But the fact that Abu Hafs, rather than bin Laden, served as Santos's primary point of contact may well have been an intended aspect of al-Qaeda's design, rather than an indication of bin Laden's insignificance.

Indeed, Santos's narrative fits with al-Qaeda's model of "centralization of decision and decentralization of execution," as described by bin Laden's former bodyguard Nasser al-Bahri.²⁹ This phrase accurately explains al-Qaeda's unique management structure, whereby bin Laden would assess the feasibility and strategic value of proposed missions and offer funding as well as institutional

support for plots he approved, but would then allow his deputies to execute the mission as they saw fit.

The experiences of several other al-Qaeda operatives over the years closely mirror the model that Bahri described and Santos unknowingly echoed. Mohammed al-Owhali, one of the plotters involved in the 1998 attacks on United States embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, explained that mid-level commanders in al-Qaeda planned the attacks. He also reported that it would have been unusual for bin Laden to give instructions directly to low-level operatives like himself.³⁰ Owhali conceded that he “was never specifically told that [the embassy attack] was bin Laden’s mission,” indicating the degree to which bin Laden removed himself from operational planning. The 9/11 Commission report, meanwhile, dedicated an entire section to “terrorist entrepreneurs,” who, according to the Commission, “enjoyed considerable autonomy” in their operational planning.³¹

The “centralization of decision and decentralization of execution” operational management model endures to this day. Indeed, it is a key source of al-Qaeda’s resilience and capacity for innovation. For one, the devolution of responsibility for day-to-day operations to mid-level commanders allows al-Qaeda to remain adaptive, enabling operatives to modify tactics and operational plans in response to shifting ground conditions. This management model also has a profound impact on al-Qaeda’s overall capacity for learning. It encourages what Assaf Moghadam describes as bottom-up innovation, wherein al-Qaeda’s foot soldiers and mid-level commanders are able to “experiment locally” without bureaucratic constraints.³² Experimentation at the local level increases the rate at which al-Qaeda can develop new tactics and strategies to overcome obstacles introduced by counterterrorism actors. It also prevents the group from falling into fixed patterns of behavior that can be identified and then disrupted by local security services.

Relatedly, al-Qaeda’s decentralized management model has positioned the organization to recover efficiently after leadership decapitation. Al-Qaeda empowers junior officials to take risks, bestowing responsibilities on commanders that may far exceed their experience and knowledge. This baptism by fire involves some risk, as some young commanders are ill equipped to handle these duties or may prove too zealous in executing them. Nevertheless, this approach also produces experienced young officials capable of filling a leadership vacuum should their superiors be removed from the battlefield. The oft-cited assessment that al-Qaeda has a “deep bench” should, therefore, be understood in the context of al-Qaeda’s management style.³³ Al-Qaeda’s success in replacing key leaders is to a considerable extent a product of its focus on professional development of junior commanders.

Within the analytic community, Al-Qaeda's decentralized operational model has created confusion about the relative influence of its senior leadership. The hands-off role played by bin Laden and other senior al-Qaeda commanders in operational planning has often been interpreted, especially in the post-9/11 era, as a sign of a growing disconnect between al-Qaeda's leadership and regional affiliates.³⁴ This interpretation, however, fundamentally misconstrues the nature of al-Qaeda's decision-making processes. By design, Al-Qaeda's senior leadership is not intimately involved in the day-to-day operations of affiliates and cells across the globe. Measuring the leadership's involvement in operational planning is thus an inaccurate means of assessing the leadership's overall role in the global network. The extent to which the operations and actions implemented by al-Qaeda's various affiliates align with and advance broader strategic aims is a more meaningful metric. As al-Qaeda's founding documents make clear, the primary role of the emir—and, by extension, deputy emir and leadership council—is to craft a strategic vision through the development of annual plans, budgets and structures. Once this vision has been articulated, the emir is expected to serve in an oversight capacity, “following up on the work of supervisors in the leadership, executive and regional councils in implementing the plans and resolutions.”³⁵ Here, a distinction can be drawn between the individual who *reigns* and the individual who *rules*. The emir *reigns* by serving as the supreme authority, while designated subordinates *rule* by setting and executing policy.

Bin Laden and his successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, have put this operational model into practice. They outline strategic priorities and guidelines, and give regional commanders broad leeway to adapt these priorities to local conditions. Many analysts, both in and outside government, have long argued that this management style has caused al-Qaeda to become increasingly decentralized and diffuse.³⁶ But Fazul Abdullah Mohammed, one of the planners of the 1998 embassy bombings, presents a compelling counterargument. In his memoirs, Fazul claimed that al-Qaeda did possess a centralized organizational structure, but he distinguished al-Qaeda's structure from “a dull form of centralization.” Fazul explained that “each person in al-Qaeda is responsible for his own work and has complete authority to carry out his tasks.”³⁷ Assaf Moghadam has similarly argued that al-Qaeda's management style is top down, in the sense that the top requires the bottom to execute missions. In other words, authority to carry forth a plan is delegated to subordinates.³⁸ (You might recall that Moghadam was quoted earlier in this article explaining that al-Qaeda's management model encourages bottom-up innovation. Far from contradicting himself, his point is that, for al-Qaeda, “innovation was a multi-directional process,” with both bottom-up and top-down elements.)³⁹

Al-Qaeda operates more efficiently by empowering middle managers and junior commanders. On the one hand, this arrangement certainly creates opportunities for rogue subordinates to disobey the leadership's dictates, a risk that has materialized in the occasional heated dispute between senior leadership and affiliates. In the case of the Islamic State (ISIS), there was a complete break between the leadership and an affiliate. But on the other hand, this structure can also—perhaps counterintuitively—amplify the influence of al-Qaeda's leadership. When commanders responsible for implementation adhere to the strategic guidelines articulated by the leadership, al-Qaeda's power projection capabilities are enhanced beyond what the leadership, on its own would, have been able to achieve.

To assess al-Qaeda Central's command and control capabilities within its existing organizational framework, two factors are relevant. The first factor concerns al-Qaeda's capacity for vertical communication, the organization's ability to disseminate information between different levels of its hierarchy. Al-Qaeda's senior leaders need to be able to communicate effectively with subordinates to ensure that decisions made at the operational level align with and support overarching objectives. Communication from subordinates to leadership is also essential. Though al-Qaeda's battlefield commanders are given broad flexibility in adapting strategic plans, they still need to be able to engage with their superiors to convey changes in the operating environment and to discuss future plans. If vertical communication is disrupted or too sporadic, command and control capabilities will be compromised, opening up greater possibilities for operational commanders to deviate from al-Qaeda's strategic priorities.

The second factor relates to al-Qaeda's ability to ensure that subordinates act in a manner consistent with the group's strategic interests. Al-Qaeda's organizational model makes it susceptible to preference divergence. That is, the interests of actors tasked with implementing al-Qaeda's strategic plan may be incongruent with those of the leadership, which designed the plan.⁴⁰ Some degree of preference divergence is inevitable, as actors in different operating environments will have different priorities and concerns. Problems emerge when operational commanders undercut al-Qaeda's broader objectives by consistently making decisions that further their own interests and contradict the leadership's guidelines. In most organizations, this conflict between principal (al-Qaeda's leadership) and agent (battlefield commanders) exists, but in al-Qaeda's case, it is particularly pronounced. This is because the leadership delegates considerable responsibility to subordinates, and has constraints on its enforcement power outside its small geographic stronghold.

In order to contain and effectively manage preference divergence, Al-Qaeda

leadership must carefully adhere to its organizational procedures while also retaining the loyalty of its subordinates. Before 9/11, al-Qaeda's leadership systematically criticized and sanctioned operational commanders who strayed from strategic guidelines.⁴¹ Over time, however, al-Qaeda Central has become less able to effectively discipline its affiliates. The task of disciplining has grown more difficult as the organization continues to expand geographically to include more affiliates. Al-Qaeda Central's reduced financial leverage also limits its *direct* coercive power over subordinates. Furthermore, since 9/11, al-Qaeda's senior leadership has had to dedicate attention to protecting itself, as it is a major target of counterterrorism efforts. Notwithstanding these challenges, a public reprimand from a senior al-Qaeda leader still carries considerable weight in the organization.

Al-Qaeda cultivates loyalty and allegiance amongst its affiliates in order to manage the risk of preference divergence. Over the course of several decades, al-Qaeda's leaders have built enduring relationships with jihadists across the globe. These personal relationships, which are often solidified on the battlefield or through marriage and extended family networks, serve as a binding force and a buffer against disobedience in al-Qaeda's ranks. Al-Qaeda has been effective in building a brand and mission to which its affiliates are generally strongly committed. This allegiance has been a powerful source of organizational cohesion and one that analysts have underestimated. For example, analysts massively overestimated the draw of ISIS during its competition with al-Qaeda, which led them to overstate the likelihood of al-Qaeda branches defecting to their jihadist rival in between 2014 and 2016.⁴²

In cultivating loyalty and allegiance amongst its affiliates, al-Qaeda Central gains *indirect* coercive power. A jihadist group that defects from al-Qaeda or clashes with its leadership may be unable to establish new relationships with regional jihadist groups that remain aligned with al-Qaeda. Both al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and al-Shabaab, for example, helped to bolster Boko Haram organizationally when the Nigerian government cracked down on it in 2009. Boko Haram subsequently defected to ISIS in 2015, a decision that may have impeded its ability to be succeeded by al-Qaeda-aligned jihadist organizations, particularly when the group confronted a four-country offensive against it.⁴³

The history of al-Qaeda's organizational structure is one of a struggle to maintain robust networks of communication, effectively discipline affiliates, and encourage unity in the face of significant internal and external challenges. As state actors improved their electronic surveillance capabilities, al-Qaeda's ability to communicate across its network was noticeably impeded. Repeated physical displacement took its toll on the organization's cohesion. Internal dissent has, at

times, threatened to tear the organization apart. Despite these disruptions, however, the foundational organizational structure upon which al-Qaeda was built has remained intact. Indeed, al-Qaeda has frequently defied analysts' predictions, and demonstrated the effectiveness of the "centralization of decision and decentralization of execution" model.

The First Test

IT IS OFTEN ASSUMED THAT AL-QAEDA'S ORGANIZATIONAL COHESION WAS FIRST threatened following the United States invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, but the first real test of al-Qaeda's resilience actually occurred about a decade earlier. In 1989, bin Laden became *persona non grata* in Pakistan after he allegedly bribed parliamentarians to support a no-confidence vote against the government of Benazir Bhutto.⁴⁴ Following bin Laden's return to Saudi Arabia, al-Qaeda's infrastructure in Afghanistan and Pakistan remained largely intact only for a short time. Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri and Abu Hafs al-Masri, both skilled Egyptian military commanders, ran the organization's training camps after bin Laden left.⁴⁵ But as tensions between mujahedin factions escalated into violence in 1992, after Mohammad Najibullah's Communist government collapsed, Arab militants began leaving Afghanistan (though quite a few remained and thrived there). Another significant blow to al-Qaeda's Afghanistan-Pakistan network came in 1993, when the Pakistani government, in response to accusations that it was harboring terrorists, began expelling Arabs from the country.⁴⁶ These two events significantly diminished al-Qaeda's Afghanistan-Pakistan safe haven.

Al-Qaeda adapted to this setback relatively quickly, largely by shifting its operational hub to Sudan, where bin Laden had been living since 1992. From Sudan, bin Laden and other al-Qaeda commanders strengthened the organization through three lines of effort. First, bin Laden increased al-Qaeda's involvement in Sudan's licit economy through investments in the agricultural and construction industries.⁴⁷ Second, al-Qaeda attempted to solidify relationships with other jihadist groups harbored in Sudan, including the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), two groups that had had previous contact with al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. These efforts to build bridges with other jihad-ist groups had mixed success during this period. The third and most important effort to strengthen the organization involved its international outreach

efforts. Working through small reconnaissance teams and front organizations like those provided by the Benevolence International Foundation, al-Qaeda developed relations with like-minded militant groups, and assisted jihadists fighting military campaigns across the globe. As the 9/11 Commission Report explains, bin Laden accomplished this through the creation of what he dubbed the Islamic Army Shura:

In Sudan, he established an “Islamic Army Shura” that was to serve as the coordinating body for the consortium of terrorist groups with which he was forging alliances. It was composed of his own al-Qaeda Shura together with leaders or representatives of terrorist organizations that were still independent. In building this Islamic army, he enlisted groups from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Oman, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Somalia, and Eritrea. Al-Qaeda also established cooperative but less formal relationships with other extremist groups from these same countries; from the African states of Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Uganda; and from the Southeast Asian states of Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Bin Laden maintained connections in the Bosnian conflict as well. The groundwork for a true global terrorist network was being laid.⁴⁸

These nascent engagements laid the groundwork for al-Qaeda’s later efforts to further expand through affiliations with jihadist groups across the globe.

One of al-Qaeda’s more robust international outreach efforts during this period took place in the Horn of Africa. In late 1992, bin Laden deployed a team of operatives, led by the Egyptian Abu Ubaidah al-Banshiri, to develop a new safe haven for al-Qaeda in the region. The Horn of Africa was to be used as a staging ground for operations in the Arabian Peninsula.⁴⁹ Over the next few years, al-Qaeda sought to embed itself within the Somali militant landscape, and build operational and support networks in the region.⁵⁰ The networks and relationships that al-Qaeda developed in East Africa in the early 1990s would prove useful several years later, when al-Qaeda deployed a new team to plan attacks against United States interests in the region. Their efforts ultimately led to the bombing of the United States embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and also created the basis for the emergence of Somalia-based militant groups. Among these groups were the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) and al-Qaeda’s powerful Somali affiliate al-Shabaab, which itself grew out of the ICU’s youth wing.⁵¹ Despite the

early challenges, al-Qaeda's efforts in the Horn of Africa were overwhelmingly successful over the long term.

Contemporary analysts took a dim view of al-Qaeda's organizational structure during the group's time in Sudan, and of the jihadist movement's cohesion during this period. A 1995 National Intelligence Estimate concluded that the jihadist movement was composed of "transient groupings of individuals" that lacked "strong organization but rather are loose affiliations."⁵² Some United States officials also viewed bin Laden as a bit player on the jihadist scene, an ambitious and wealthy individual who gained little by throwing around his money. In 1998, Vince Cannistraro, who held a senior position at the CIA's Counterterrorism Center until 1991, claimed that "a group can con someone like bin Laden for funds to carry out an operation on an individual basis... And [bin Laden] will do it as long as it fits with his religious objectives."⁵³ These dismissive assessments of al-Qaeda and bin Laden both during and just after his time in Sudan mark the first, but not the last occasion on which the analytic community underestimated the al-Qaeda organization. It should be noted that al-Qaeda's organizational structure was, indeed, less robust, and its membership roll smaller, than would be the case after it moved back to Afghanistan. Even so, al-Qaeda proved capable of organizing international operations, fundraising for jihadist campaigns across the globe, and facilitating military training.

Court testimony given by Jamal al-Fadl, an al-Qaeda member who became an informant for the United States government after embezzling over \$100,000 from the jihadist organization, provides insight into al-Qaeda's reach and capabilities during its time in Sudan. Al-Fadl's testimony indicates that the group was intimately involved in moving recruits, weapons, and materiel to battlefields across the globe. For instance, al-Fadl explained that al-Qaeda operated an office in Baku that purchased weapons and supplies, and smuggled materiel and recruits into Chechnya.⁵⁴ To avoid drawing attention to its activities in Chechnya, al-Qaeda worked through the Benevolence International Foundation (BIF), which functioned as one of its front organizations in Baku. BIF also played a major role in supporting jihadist actors in Bosnia. The organization produced propaganda materials aimed at attracting donors to the Bosnia conflict; purchased weapons and other military material; provided financial support to the families of militants fighting in Bosnia; and organized training camps for local and foreign fighters.⁵⁵

The strengths of al-Qaeda's organizational capabilities in Sudan are further evidenced by its ability to adapt to different contexts, and sustain military training under difficult circumstances. According to al-Fadl, the Sudanese government grew leery of allowing al-Qaeda to conduct robust training programs in Sudan.

This was likely due to the political fallout with the Egyptian government following the unsuccessful assassination attempt on Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak in June 1995, which was linked to Sudan-based Egyptian militants.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, al-Qaeda, in tandem with other militant groups that sought refuge in Sudan, was able to establish several training facilities there. Al-Fadl noted that these facilities primarily provided refresher courses to militants who already had battlefield experience. Al-Qaeda also used its camps in Sudan to test chemical weapons, which, if developed, were to be provided to the Sudanese government to support its fight against rebels in southern Sudan.⁵⁷ Along with their work in Sudan, al-Qaeda operatives maintained a training presence in eastern Afghanistan despite the group's aforementioned reduction in presence in the country, provided assistance to Islamist militant groups in Somalia, and received training from Hizballah operatives in southern Lebanon.⁵⁸ Thus, while it was based in Sudan, al-Qaeda conducted training in multiple countries, tailoring its activities to the demands and challenges of the local environments in which it operated.

Al-Qaeda's international operations and growing profile ultimately drew unwanted attention to its presence in Sudan. As a result, in 1996, the Sudanese government, facing pressure from the United States and other countries, demanded—that al-Qaeda leave the country. Losing its Sudanese safe haven was a setback, but the organizational infrastructure and global network that al-Qaeda had cultivated served as a foundation, which the jihadist group would continue to build upon its return to Afghanistan.

The Jihadist Behemoth

IN AFGHANISTAN FROM 1996 TO 2001, AL-QAEDA REACHED ITS HIGH POINT AS A hierarchical and bureaucratic organization. Operating from safe havens in southern and eastern Afghanistan, al-Qaeda further professionalized its bureaucratic structure and established a comprehensive, multi-phased training process for members and recruits. The infrastructure that al-Qaeda developed in Afghanistan allowed it to absorb hundreds of new recruits, improve the capabilities of current members, and orchestrate a series of complex operations, most prominently the 9/11 attacks. As al-Qaeda's bureaucratic structure expanded, it retained the "centralization of decision and decentralization of execution" management model, and remained agile and innovative.

While the move to Afghanistan would eventually be a boon to al-Qaeda, the transition from Sudan was fraught with challenges. Al-Qaeda had to invest significant resources in rebuilding training camps in Afghanistan, while simultaneously navigating the country's volatile political landscape. The power of some mujahedin commanders with whom al-Qaeda had developed a close rapport had waned, while the Taliban rapidly gained territory. Al-Qaeda also encountered financial difficulties as it relocated. Some of bin Laden's assets in Sudan—over \$30 million, according to one estimate⁵⁹—were frozen when he left for Afghanistan, which offered few new economic opportunities.

Al-Qaeda's successful expansion in the face of these obstacles is testament to its resilience. Within four years of moving to Afghanistan, al-Qaeda had established an extensive network of training camps that offered courses in explosives-making, guerilla warfare, and document forgery, among other specialties. Al-Qaeda also offered train-the-trainer courses aimed at enhancing its own capabilities, as well as those of other militant groups.⁶⁰ As al-Qaeda's network of training camps grew, senior leaders considered how they could improve management of the organization's expanding activities. In a letter written in November 1998, Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi, a senior al-Qaeda member and a trainer at several camps, urged prominent Egyptian military commander Saif al-Adel to establish a personnel management system to document incoming recruits and current members.⁶¹ Al-Iraqi noted that each member's personnel file should include information on training and battlefield experience, as well as performance assessments from supervisors. This system, al-Iraqi hoped, would prevent an arbitrary promotion process, and streamline the handling of new recruits.

Numerous documents discovered after 9/11 demonstrate that al-Qaeda implemented al-Iraqi's recommendations and also sought to further professionalize its personnel system. One document that provides insight into al-Qaeda's bureaucratic practices is an application filled out by José Padilla, an American-born convert, in July 2000.⁶² This document, which was issued by the personnel branch of al-Qaeda's military wing, required Padilla to provide information on his educational and religious background, foreign travels, health status and military experience, among other things. It also included a section to be filled out by al-Qaeda administrators, which required information on Padilla's passport, visa and ticket status.

Wall Street Journal reporter Alan Cullison, who serendipitously obtained two of al-Qaeda's most valuable computers after damage to his own laptop forced him to get to know Kabul's computer dealers, discovered further evidence of al-Qaeda's meticulous administrative practices.⁶³ Cullison explained that al-Qaeda's digital files included a "network of folders and subfolders that neatly laid out the group's

organizational structure,” and discussed “budgets, training manuals for recruits, and scouting reports for international attacks.”⁶⁴ Al-Qaeda integrated these bureaucratic processes into its day-to-day operations. Anne Stenersen notes that recruits had to pre-register for training camps at the Office of Mujahedin Affairs, before reporting to their camp on a “designated date.”⁶⁵

The extensive training and organizational infrastructure that al-Qaeda developed in Afghanistan was integral to the organization’s efforts to expand its membership ranks. In the pre-9/11 period, al-Qaeda was one of several jihadist groups competing for recruits in Afghanistan. According to Abu Musab al-Suri’s estimate, fourteen different groups operated training camps in the country by the end of 1999.⁶⁶ Al-Qaeda’s capacity to absorb new recruits, however, was superior to that of other groups. Al-Qaeda’s training programs were also more comprehensive, and its trainers more experienced, than what other militant groups offered.⁶⁷ Moreover, al-Qaeda’s transnational vision appealed to fighters of all nationalities. For these reasons, al-Qaeda was able to capitalize on the influx of new recruits streaming into Afghanistan after the 1998 Embassy attacks.

From its safe haven in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda engaged in organizational learning and improved its operational capabilities. Cullison found that al-Qaeda operatives discussing sensitive operational issues used code words and a cryptographic system to communicate. Though al-Qaeda’s cryptographic system was rather basic, it still required coordination, indicating that the organization had established standard operating procedures for internal communications. One of the more chilling documents on the computers discussed al-Qaeda’s nascent efforts to develop a biological and chemical weapons program. In a letter to Abu Hafs al-Masri, Ayman al-Zawahiri outlined the “destructive power” of these weapons, and provided a brief review of articles that could help al-Qaeda improve its unconventional weapons capabilities.⁶⁸ American forces later discovered a videotape documenting al-Qaeda testing chemical weapons on dogs.⁶⁹

As al-Qaeda’s bureaucracy became more professionalized, it encountered an issue familiar to many growing organizations: micro-management. In one letter stored in the data files recovered by Cullison, Zawahiri took a Yemeni operative to task for failing to provide a comprehensive accounting of recent expenses. Zawahiri’s criticisms included questions about why the Yemeni had renovated a computer and bought a new fax machine, when, according to Zawahiri, the Yemeni cell already had two fax machines.⁷⁰

Micro-management aside, al-Qaeda sought to maintain a culture wherein lower-level commanders were empowered to take initiative and shape the implementation of strategic plans. Indeed, the story behind the conception of the 9/11

attacks illustrates al-Qaeda's efforts to maintain a bottom-up innovation model even as it pursued greater bureaucratization. In 1996, as al-Qaeda was getting settled in Afghanistan, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed approached bin Laden with a grandiose plan to hijack planes and crash them into prominent buildings in the United States.⁷¹ Bin Laden initially rejected Mohammed's proposal, reportedly because al-Qaeda lacked the necessary funds. By early 1999, however, al-Qaeda had received an infusion of money from external sources, and when Mohammed approached bin Laden again with a less ambitious version of his initial plan, he was given a green light to proceed.⁷²

Other al-Qaeda operatives were similarly empowered to innovate and think creatively about external operations planning. Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, the mastermind behind the USS Cole attack, was first dispatched to Yemen in 1998, and tasked with scoping out potential American targets. Over the next two years, Nashiri conducted reconnaissance and built his network in Yemen, regularly returning to Afghanistan to report to bin Laden. Bin Laden assisted Nashiri in his operational planning—when Nashiri struggled to find United States naval vessels off the western coast of Yemen, bin Laden suggested that he instead focus on the Port of Aden—but Nashiri “retained discretion in selecting operatives and devising attacks,” according to the 9/11 Commission Report.⁷³

A close review of the three most prominent attacks engineered by al-Qaeda while the group was in Afghanistan—the 1998 Embassy bombings, the USS Cole attack, and the 9/11 operation—reveals another aspect of the organization's management approach. The 9/11 Commission Report indicates that bin Laden personally selected the hijackers who would carry out that operation. Similarly, bin Laden attempted to replace the operatives whom Nashiri selected to carry out the USS Cole attack, though he was ultimately rebuffed by Nashiri.⁷⁴ These two actions seem to contradict al-Qaeda's principle of “decentralization of implementation,” since picking foot soldiers for an attack is generally assumed to be a responsibility of the field commander. But bin Laden's involvement in selecting operatives for these plots may in fact *reinforce*, rather than undercut, the al-Qaeda leadership's hands-off approach to operational planning. Bin Laden planned to delegate almost all responsibilities for coordinating and preparing attacks to subordinates, but he had to ensure that the individuals who assumed these duties were competent and trustworthy. Hand picking operatives for an attack, therefore, was an exercise in quality assurance. That bin Laden appears not to have involved himself in selecting operatives for the 1998 embassy attacks may imply that he did not deem it necessary.⁷⁵ At the time, al-Qaeda's East Africa network was directed by Abu Muhammad al-Masri, one of the jihadist organization's original members. He

had been operating in East Africa for several years by that point, and had likely earned bin Laden's confidence long before the attacks were launched. The logic behind selecting operatives for the aforementioned attacks is similar to that behind al-Qaeda leadership's current involvement in picking or, at least, approving the emirs of regional affiliates.⁷⁶

Despite al-Qaeda's continued efforts to support decentralization of implementation, there should be little doubt that al-Qaeda functioned as a hierarchical, and increasingly professional, organization during its later years in Afghanistan. Yet some observers continued to view al-Qaeda as a diffuse network, and discounted its organizational capacity. Perhaps the most misleading characterization of how al-Qaeda functioned at the time appeared in a January 2000 *New Yorker* profile of bin Laden, which claimed that al-Qaeda lacked a robust internal structure.⁷⁷ The article included several quotes from former State Department counterterrorism official David Long, who argued that al-Qaeda resembled "an informal brotherhood [rather than] a clear, sterling network," and asserted that the group was best understood as a "clearing house from which other groups elicit funds, training, and logistical support."⁷⁸

The tendency among some government officials to downplay al-Qaeda's organizational structure and capacity may have affected the ability of the United States intelligence community to anticipate a complex operation like 9/11. Some pre-9/11 intelligence assessments did make note of al-Qaeda's training activities and budding organizational structure. For example, one CIA report, entitled *Afghanistan: An Incubator for International Terrorism*, determined that Afghanistan "provide[d] bin Laden a relatively safe operating environment to oversee his organization's worldwide terrorist activities," and emphasized that training camps in the country "form the foundation of the worldwide mujahidin network."⁷⁹ While desk officers at the CIA and other agencies documented al-Qaeda's increasingly sophisticated training activities, it is not evident that senior policymakers fully appreciated "the gravity of the threat."⁸⁰ As the 9/11 Commission Report explained, government officials were still debating whether al-Qaeda was "a big deal" as late as September 4, 2001.⁸¹

Unsurprisingly, the 9/11 attacks eliminated any doubt about al-Qaeda's capabilities. The attacks also quickly rendered obsolete the paradigm that had governed al-Qaeda's activities and capabilities prior to September 2001. The United States invasion of Afghanistan rapidly dismantled al-Qaeda's physical infrastructure, and disrupted the bureaucracy that the group had spent years building. Al-Qaeda's senior leaders scattered across the Middle East and South Asia.

Remarkably, Al-Qaeda adapted to these challenges, maintaining its organizational

cohesion and decision-making approach at the same time that it expanded its geographical presence and reach. The organization that analysts confronted in the aftermath of 9/11, however, would be significantly more difficult to interpret than the organization that had operated prior to 9/11.

Al-Qaeda in Flux

IN NOVEMBER 2002, SEVERAL SENIOR AL-QAEDA LEADERS AND ASSOCIATES gathered for a meeting in Iran, where the organization had found space to continue operating after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan.⁸² While the meeting was not a full gathering of al-Qadah *shura* council—bin Laden, Zacharie and other top members were in Pakistan at the time—it nonetheless marked a rare occasion on which multiple al-Qadah leaders convened in person to discuss the organization's affairs. One participant was Abu Musa al-Subir, who had urged al-Qadah to cease planning external operations while the group was under the protection of the Taliban.⁸³ Subir concerns about what would happen if al-Qadah launched a major attack from Afghanistan had been borne out in the aftermath of 9/11. As he had predicted, the Taliban's emirate collapsed following the United States invasion and al-Qadah training camp infrastructure was crushed along with it. By the time of the November 2002 meeting in Iran, American and allied forces were hunting down al-Qadah members.⁸⁴ By then, several prominent jingoists, including general manager Abu Hays al-Marsi, had been killed or captured. Subir believed that under these circumstances, al-Qadah could not survive as a centralized organization. He proposed that al-Qaeda dismantle its hierarchy, disperse its networks across the globe, and pursue a model of leaderless jihad, where individuals and small cells that were not directed by al-Qaeda would assume responsibility for continuing the military campaign.

Suri presented this proposal for leaderless jihad at what was likely the most vulnerable point in al-Qaeda's history. Its leaders were dispersed and inter-organizational communication was growing increasingly perilous as the United States ramped up its electronic surveillance capabilities. United States Special Forces routinely conducted raids to kill or capture al-Qaeda commanders and used information gathered during one operation to prompt additional raids. A leaderless organizational model, which would have permitted members to sever ties with one another and operate autonomously, may have addressed these issues.

The fact that al-Qaeda did not adopt Suri's proposal and has never considered such a policy since the November 2002 meeting in Iran is significant. Even when its organizational structure was under immense strain, al-Qaeda's leadership never considered using its diminished influence as a justification for transforming the organization into a decentralized movement. Doing so would contradict its *raison d'être*. As the self-styled vanguard of the global jihadist revolution, al-Qaeda considers its strategic and ideological guidance essential to the global movement. In Zawahiri's words, al-Qaeda must serve as the "organization and leadership leading change."⁸⁵

Instead of dismantling its hierarchy in the aftermath of the United States invasion of Afghanistan, al-Qaeda's leadership regrouped. The best account of how al-Qaeda members escaped Afghanistan comes from Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark's *The Exile*, a 2017 book that draws heavily from primary sources, including interviews with al-Qaeda members and associates. Levy and Scott-Clark found that most al-Qaeda members moved to one of three locations: Iran, the tribal areas of western Pakistan, and cities in the Pakistani provinces of Sindh and Punjab.

One group of al-Qaeda members, which included security chief Saif al-Adel, Abu Muhammed al-Masri (a key figure in the 1998 Embassy bombings), and Abu Khayr al-Masri, fled first to Pakistan, and then made its way to Iran via Quetta Province.⁸⁶ Iran provided these militants a refuge from American forces, but also closely monitored their activities. The Iranian government's relationship with al-Qaeda militants would oscillate over time. Though a complete story of the relationship between Iran and al-Qaeda has yet to be told, it is clear that the al-Qaeda contingent in Iran was often effectively incarcerated. Even under these controlled conditions, however, these al-Qaeda operatives managed to maintain frequent communications with their counterparts elsewhere,⁸⁷ helped to facilitate the movement of fighters and funds between different conflict zones,⁸⁸ and were even involved in directing attacks.⁸⁹

A second contingent of al-Qaeda members fleeing Afghanistan found refuge in the tribal areas of western Pakistan, which would eventually become al-Qaeda's new global command hub. Hassan Ghul, an al-Qaeda facilitator arrested by the United States in early 2004, told American officials that Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi and over 200 al-Qaeda fighters and associates had settled in the Shakai Valley in South Waziristan. This region was also home to Nek Mohammed, a Pakistani militant and al-Qaeda sympathizer who had become a major irritant to the Pakistani military.⁹⁰ The Pakistani military and American drones targeted al-Qaeda safe havens in the tribal areas, forcing Zawahiri and his contingent out

of the Shakai Valley. These al-Qaeda members were forced to resettle numerous times, but even as they moved locations, Zawahiri and other senior operatives continued to coordinate with al-Qaeda commanders outside the tribal areas. They coordinated, for example, with bin Laden, who himself had bounced between safe houses in Pakistan before settling in Abbottabad in 2005. They also oversaw the al-Qaeda network in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Middle East.

A key node in this transnational network was Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who is believed to have taken over al-Qaeda's external operations portfolio after the 9/11 attacks. Mohammed, drawing on pre-existing relationships with Pakistani militant groups and kinship ties with members of his Baluch ethnic group, developed a robust operational network based in Karachi and extending to cities across Pakistan. Almost immediately after 9/11, Mohammed mobilized the cells under his command, which executed a series of attacks across the globe. This network was eventually degraded, as Pakistani and United States operatives successfully worked their way through Mohammed's couriers and facilitators, before finally ensnaring Mohammed himself in 2003. But Mohammed's frenetic planning in the months leading up to his arrest demonstrated that al-Qaeda had retained its external operations capabilities despite having been displaced from Afghanistan.

That al-Qaeda managed to survive and then rebuild its organization after 9/11 reflects the organization's penchant for adaptability. For instance, it quickly recognized that American and allied forces often identified operatives who used mobile phones. Many al-Qaeda members, including bin Laden, thus eschewed cell phones in favor of human couriers, radios and the like.⁹¹ For his part, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed secured his communications and protected his network by constantly switching sim cards in his cell phone, rotating between a vast number of safe houses, relying heavily on couriers and using email dead drops.⁹² Through these adaptations, al-Qaeda slowed the disruption of its network. The adaptations, though, also came at a cost to information flow within the organization, making it more difficult to coordinate strategy internally. This underscores the tension between security and efficiency that jihadist groups confront.⁹³

Also contributing to al-Qaeda's resurgence was the manner in which the group exploited territorial safe havens. The tribal areas of Pakistan offered an ideal location to rebuild the organization and reestablish structured decision-making processes. In the immediate post-9/11 period, the Pakistani army was reluctant to intervene in the tribal areas, and proved to be largely ineffective when it conducted military operations there. The ability of the United States to collect and act on intelligence in the tribal areas was also limited. Moreover, some of the local Pakistani population was sympathetic to the Arabic-speaking foreigners who

sought shelter and protection there after the United States invasion of Afghanistan. In the tribal areas, therefore, al-Qaeda found a permissive environment in which to operate. Al-Qaeda commanders could conduct in-person meetings, reinstate training exercises, and plan military operations without attracting the attention of counterterrorism forces.

Strategic errors that the United States committed during the early years of the “global war on terror” further enabled al-Qaeda to rebuild itself. The most glaring mistake was the diversion of critical resources from Pakistan and Afghanistan to Iraq. The negative consequences of the invasion of Iraq from a counterterrorism perspective are well established, and do not need to be reiterated here at length. Still, it is worth noting that the United States began to shift counterterrorism resources to Iraq in late 2002, several months before the invasion—and at a time when the hunt for al-Qaeda operatives in Afghanistan and Pakistan was just gaining momentum. This decision to divert resources away from Afghanistan and to Iraq slowed the hunt for al-Qaeda commanders still on the lam. According to retired general Wayne Downing, who helped lead the post-9/11 counterterrorism campaign, it left “reams of material waiting to be exploited.”⁹⁴

The organizational structure to which al-Qaeda adhered was a final factor contributing to its recovery. United States officials continuously overestimated the strategic impact of the death or capture of al-Qaeda leaders. After the capture of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM), for instance, Porter Goss, then-chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, declared that “the tide has turned in terms of al-Qaeda.”⁹⁵ It is true that the capture of Mohammed helped slow al-Qaeda’s external operations, given his outsize role in coordinating and supporting attacks across the globe. But the U.S. government has consistently overestimated the impact that the loss of a single leader, regardless of how senior, would have on al-Qaeda’s organizational capacity. Al-Qaeda had cultivated a cadre of skilled commanders in Afghanistan, many of whom gained battlefield experience fighting against the Northern Alliance. Al-Qaeda’s “deep bench” allowed the group to replace commanders who had been taken off the battlefield without sacrificing institutional knowledge or suffering major disruptions to its operations.

Al-Qaeda's External Operations Chiefs After KSM

Head of External Operations	Years
Abu Hamza Rabia ⁹⁶	2003-2005
Abu Ubaydah al-Masri ⁹⁷	2005-2007
Saleh al-Somali ⁹⁸	2007-2009

Other key post-KSM external operations planners include Younis al-Mauritani, Abd al-Rahim al-Sharqi, and Faruq al-Qahtani.⁹⁹ Many analysts, however, have discounted al-Qaeda's structural resilience, and have argued that its post-9/11 losses heralded the organization's collapse. Journalist Jason Burke articulated an extreme version of this theory, claiming that al-Qaeda as an organization had "existed for a short period, between 1996 and 2001," and met its demise in the mountains of Tora Bora in late 2001. Al-Qaeda had been replaced by "a broad and diverse movement of radical Islamic militancy," according to Burke.¹⁰⁰

While more extreme than widely held contemporary views of al-Qaeda, Burke's argument relates to another theory about al-Qaeda that retains some popularity among analysts. This theory holds that al-Qaeda had evolved from a hierarchical organization into a networked social movement. According to this theory, after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, al-Qaeda's leaders no longer maintained and commanded a formal organizational structure. Instead, bin Laden and others served as spiritual and ideological guides for a motley crew of militant groups, small cells and radicalized individuals, all of which adhered to a salafi jihadist worldview but maintained their own parochial interests.

There were important implications of this networked social movement theory for jihadist strategy. Decentralized movements, especially those that are transnational, do not possess the organizational structure, communications capabilities, and internal discipline needed to coordinate and pursue a common strategy. Adherents to such movements share a common worldview, but both their goals and

their means of pursuing those goals differ and may even conflict with one another. In short, an implication of this argument was that as al-Qaeda's organizational structure withered, the jihadist movement would no longer have an actor able to coordinate the activities of disparate groups and cells.

This theory of al-Qaeda as a social movement became the prevailing wisdom within the analytic community within a few years of the 9/11 attacks. An August 2003 symposium featuring five RAND Corporation terrorism scholars and produced in coordination with *FrontPage Magazine* (a publication that was then less strident than is the case in 2018), illustrates the prevalence of this view. When the symposium moderator asked panelists how to define al-Qaeda, almost all of them offered some version of the social movement theory.¹⁰¹ To William Rosenau, al-Qaeda was a “worldview, not an organization.” John Parachini argued that since 9/11 al-Qaeda had “evolved from a loosely aligned network of militant Islamic terrorists who shared the formative experience of expelling Soviet forces from Afghanistan to a movement with adherents around the world enabling a global reach.” Even Bruce Hoffman—who, as we referenced in our introduction, is well known for his arguments against the leaderless jihad hypothesis—said, “Al Qaeda is an ideology more than army; a transnational movement and umbrella-like organization, not a monolithic entity.”¹⁰² Although Rohan Gunaratna had produced a rather comprehensive account of al-Qaeda's pre-9/11 organizational structure, by 2004 he suggested that al-Qaeda had fulfilled its goal of spearheading a jihadist uprising, and had transformed into a movement.¹⁰³

The “al-Qaeda as a movement” theory is flawed, because it relies on incomplete and inaccurate information about the organization. The theory is based on the assumption that al-Qaeda had no involvement in several prominent terrorist attacks carried out between 2001 and 2004, and that these attacks were, instead, orchestrated by local militant groups that shared a common worldview with al-Qaeda but little else. These attacks include the 2002 Bali bombings, the 2002 attacks on an Israeli-owned hotel and airline in Mombasa, multiple attacks in Turkey in 2003, the 2003 Riyadh bombings, and the 2004 Madrid bombings. The claim that al-Qaeda was not involved in these attacks appears less credible when each attack is scrutinized:

- Hambali, the 2002 Bali bombings mastermind, admitted in interrogations that al-Qaeda provided \$30,000 to fund the attack, and gave him another \$100,000 afterward to support new operations.¹⁰⁴

- The suicide bomber who killed 19 in an attack on the El Ghriba synagogue in Djerba was in regular contact with Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Christian Ganczarski, an al-Qaeda member who maintained close ties with bin Laden, Saif al-Adel and Abu Hafs al-Masri.¹⁰⁵
- Al-Qaeda's East African network, which was led by Fazul Abdullah Mohammed and answered directly to al-Qaeda's senior leadership, perpetrated the Mombasa attacks.¹⁰⁶
- The operatives who carried out the 2003 bombings in Turkey had met with bin Laden and Abu Hafs al-Masri in Afghanistan prior to 9/11, and had received training in bomb construction during that time. Luayy Sakka, a veteran al-Qaeda member who also maintained close ties with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, financed the operations, and housed some of the operatives who fled Turkey to Syria after the attacks.¹⁰⁷
- An al-Qaeda cell in Yemen, which had been operating in the country prior to 9/11 and had perpetrated the USS Cole attack, carried out the 2003 Riyadh bombings. Those bombings may in fact have been ordered by Saif al-Adel and other al-Qaeda commanders based in Iran.¹⁰⁸
- Fernando Reinares, Spain's foremost scholar of jihadism, has documented al-Qaeda's role in supporting and approving the Madrid attacks at length in his 2014 book *Al-Qaeda's Revenge*.¹⁰⁹

While the degree of al-Qaeda's importance differs from one plot to another, some of the aforementioned attacks clearly reflected the creativity and expertise of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. Though KSM enjoyed significant autonomy while he was in Karachi, he continued to coordinate with and seek approval from bin Laden. According to *The Exile*, bin Laden surreptitiously traveled to Karachi in late 2001 to meet with Mohammed.¹¹⁰ During these meetings, bin Laden and KSM discussed current and future operational planning, and bin Laden signed off on a plot to hijack planes and crash them into Heathrow airport.¹¹¹ Bin Laden allegedly also met with Richard Reid and Saajid Badat in Karachi before they departed for Europe, where they were charged with bringing down planes by

detonating bombs implanted in their shoes.¹¹² Bin Laden's trip to Karachi indicated that the al-Qaeda emir maintained some degree of influence over external operations even while the organization had made a strategic decision to significantly limit its communications in an effort to avoid detection. (It also highlights his extraordinary freedom of movement in the settled areas of Pakistan.)

At best, the premises upon which the theory that al-Qaeda had been transformed into a movement are based are oversimplified. Recently declassified evidence recovered from bin Laden's Abbottabad hideout cuts against this hypothesis. Al-Qaeda actually played a role in *most* of the major jihadist attacks that occurred between late 2001 and 2005. The organization leveraged its financial, logistical and operational networks to enable and direct attacks on multiple continents. Sometimes, however, al-Qaeda's involvement in plots was not discovered until months or even years after the attacks occurred.

Even as new evidence emerged that contradicted the "al-Qaeda as a movement" theory, the theory continued to flourish, clouding future analysis. The notion that al-Qaeda's organizational structure had been dismantled featured heavily in the investigation into the July 7, 2005 terrorist attacks on London's mass transit system. British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw noted on the day of the attacks that the bombings bore "the hallmarks" of al-Qaeda.¹¹³ A subsequent *New York Times* article about the investigation, however, noted that many intelligence officials interviewed described al-Qaeda as a "badly hobbled, barely functioning organization." A senior counterterrorism official claimed, "Al-Qaeda is finished. But there is Al-Qaedaism. This is a powerful ideology that drives local groups to do what they think Osama bin Laden wants."¹¹⁴ Some intelligence services considered Abu Musab al-Suri's *Call to Global Islamic Resistance* to be the new blueprint for the jihadist movement. This was the 1600-page treatise in which Suri articulated his theory of leaderless jihad, which, as explained earlier, al-Qaeda explicitly rejected.

Though intelligence agencies were initially skeptical that al-Qaeda possessed the organizational capacity to carry out the 7/7 attacks, subsequent evidence demonstrated that the group played a central role in the plot. Mohammed Siddique Khan and Shehzad Tanweer, the ringleaders of the 7/7 cell, had traveled to Pakistan. There, they met with senior al-Qaeda member Abu Ubaydah al-Masri, who convinced the two men to carry out an attack in England. Rashid Rauf, a British al-Qaeda operative, then took responsibility for overseeing the logistical and operational aspects of the plot, remaining in contact with Tanweer and Khan after they returned to the UK, and coaching the men as they built their explosives.¹¹⁵ On the one-year anniversary of the bombings, Al Jazeera posted a video from al-Qaeda

featuring footage of the attackers before they struck. Ayman al-Zawahiri appeared on the tape, explaining that Khan and Tanweer had visited an al-Qaeda camp “seeking martyrdom.” Comparing the revelations in this tape to the conclusions of officials’ inquiry into the 7/7 attacks, Bob Ayers, a security expert at London’s Chatham House think tank, commented, “It makes the police look pretty bad. It means the investigation was either wrong, or they identified links but were reluctant to reveal them.”¹¹⁶

A Global Organization

DESPITE EVIDENCE THAT CONNECTED THE 7/7 ATTACKS TO AL-QAEDA, THE THEORY that al-Qaeda was organizationally fragmented remained popular. To the contrary, the theory gained new life as al-Qaeda embarked on its next phase of organizational development.

In bin Laden’s words, the Iraq war presented the organization a “golden and unique opportunity,” particularly at a time when al-Qaeda leadership was under immense pressure in Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹¹⁷ As the insurgency gained momentum, al-Qaeda recognized an opportunity to capitalize on widespread popular discontent, attack U.S. forces in Iraq, and galvanize a new generation of jihadists. Al-Qaeda’s decision to formalize its relationship with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s organization in 2004 was thus both opportunistic and prudent. The relationship between Zarqawi and al-Qaeda dated to the late 1990s, when al-Qaeda funded Zarqawi’s training camp in Herat, and had grown stronger after Zarqawi and his men fought alongside al-Qaeda members at the battle of Tora Bora. Senior leaders of al-Qaeda always had trepidations about Zarqawi. They harbored reservations about his background as a street thug, as well as his lack of formal education, and bin Laden found Zarqawi’s boisterous and brazen nature off-putting.¹¹⁸ Ultimately, these concerns gave way to the attractive strategic position that Zarqawi had achieved in Iraq, as al-Qaeda’s senior leaders chose to capitalize on the robust network that Zarqawi had built. Zarqawi’s group became known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

Al-Qaeda’s senior leaders, however, quickly found themselves at odds with Zarqawi. Zarqawi’s proclivity for extreme violence, his reluctance to cooperate with other militant groups in Iraq, and his slaughters of the Iraqi Shia were all incongruent with al-Qaeda’s preferred methodology for the Iraq jihad. Fearing that

al-Qaeda's reputation in the Muslim world would be tarnished by AQI's actions, al-Qaeda Central's leaders sent at least two letters to Zarqawi counseling him to moderate his approach. In the first letter, Ayman al-Zawahiri urged Zarqawi to build public support, and to avoid inflaming tensions with the Shia.¹¹⁹ Zawahiri was no pacifist—he advised Zarqawi to shoot prisoners rather than behead them—but he feared that Zarqawi's proclivity for brutality would alienate the population. Zawahiri stated, "the strongest weapon which the mujahedeen enjoy ... is popular support from the Muslim masses." Jihadists, therefore, "must avoid any action that the masses do not understand or approve." Later that year, senior al-Qaeda official Atiyah Abd al-Rahman wrote a harsher letter to Zarqawi echoing Zawahiri's advice.¹²⁰ Atiyah told Zarqawi that military policy was subordinate to political objectives, and exhorted the Jordan-born leader to rein in his violent tendencies or risk eroding public sympathy for al-Qaeda. He counseled Zarqawi to overlook the "mistakes and flaws" of the population, and to tolerate "a great deal of harm from them for the sake of not having them turn away and turn into enemies on any level." He also criticized Zarqawi for failing to consult with al-Qaeda's leadership before acting on any "comprehensive issues."

The interactions between Al-Qaeda Central, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and AQI illustrate both the organizational opportunities and challenges that al-Qaeda faced then and continues to face now, as it continues to expand its geographical reach and formalize its relationship with allied jihadist groups across the globe. On the one hand, the strategy of developing alliances made it possible for al-Qaeda to project its influence into new theaters, demonstrate (or, in some cases, simply create the *perception* of) momentum, and expand the pool of resources on which it could draw. It also helped al-Qaeda move closer to its foundational goal of becoming the vanguard organization. Al-Qaeda could provide strategic and ideological guidance to organizations under its umbrella, thus giving it greater influence and control over the trajectory of the jihadist movement. On the other hand, this strategy complicated al-Qaeda's efforts to maintain organizational cohesion and strategic unity.

One challenge that al-Qaeda encountered, for example, was its ability to establish and then maintain lines of communications with an ever-growing number of affiliates. While the organization employed couriers to communicate in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the courier strategy has proven riskier and less reliable when communicating with affiliates in Iraq and other countries further afield from the senior leadership. Couriers tasked with passing letters between al-Qaeda leadership and its affiliates were sometimes arrested, and the content of their communications were revealed to the public. In some cases, security conditions actually prevented

al-Qaeda from dispatching envoys (who, in contrast to couriers, are formal representatives) to meet with affiliates. In his letter to Zarqawi, for example, Atiyah Abd al-Rahman explained that al-Qaeda's leadership was unable to send an envoy to Iraq, and, therefore, encouraged Zarqawi to send a courier to Pakistan, instead, to reopen lines of communication.¹²¹ Zarqawi did send the requested courier, and al-Qaeda Central sent Zarqawi's successor multiple envoys once the security situation improved.

The challenges associated with establishing reliable lines of communication increased the likelihood that al-Qaeda's affiliates would deviate from the strategic course outlined by al-Qaeda Central. Affiliates could, in certain circumstances, also be left unaware of dictates issued by al-Qaeda Central, and thus, adopt measures that unintentionally undercut the interests of the organization as determined by senior leaders. Such communications barriers could similarly inhibit al-Qaeda Central's ability to effectively advise affiliates on how to respond to events as they unfolded. This could then result in missed opportunities and strategic confusion. For affiliates that disagreed with and *wanted* to ignore strategic advice from al-Qaeda Central, real communications issues served as an ideal excuse for actions that contravened the dictates of senior leadership.

The decision to acquire affiliates also raised the possibility that al-Qaeda would experience preference divergence and strategic incoherence. Prior to its geographic expansion, the risk and potential impact of preference divergence between al-Qaeda and its affiliates were limited. Field commanders tasked with conducting attacks abroad were often hand-picked by bin Laden or by one of his lieutenants. Even if a commander deviated from the operational playbook while carrying out an attack, the impact this single attack would have on either al-Qaeda's image or its strategy would be minimal.

But geographic expansion increased the possibility that affiliates would have interests that differed significantly from those of al-Qaeda Central. Local cultural, social and political dynamics have a profound effect on the strategy, tactics, and concerns of affiliates. Affiliates may be inclined to prioritize their local considerations over the global agenda of al-Qaeda Central. Preference divergence may also result from regional commanders who begin to view themselves as autonomous from—or even superior to—the core organization. Al-Qaeda Central can use sticks and carrots—like withholding funds and other resources—to deter affiliates from going rogue, but such coercive power is greatly diminished when affiliates develop alternative sources of funding.¹²²

The potential impact of preference divergence on al-Qaeda's image and long-term prospects also increases as the organization expands geographically. Some

affiliates have control over their own media outlets, which can effectively restrict the ability of al-Qaeda Central to sustain a common narrative across all public lines of communication. Should affiliates choose not to comply with al-Qaeda's agenda, or unknowingly engage in behavior that undercuts it, the consequences for al-Qaeda Central can be considerable. For this reason, some scholarship argues—incorrectly, in our judgment—that al-Qaeda's expansion, both before and after the Arab Spring, should be understood to reflect the organization's weakness, rather than its strength.¹²³

This skeptical view of al-Qaeda's expansion has been rather consistent over time. By 2004, al-Qaeda was widely perceived as deeply fragmented and decentralized. The decision to establish a formal alliance with Zarqawi's group in Iraq was interpreted by many observers as a last-ditch effort to allow al-Qaeda to remain relevant in the eyes of its followers. During AQI's period of strength, many observers believed that Zarqawi had eclipsed bin Laden. Indeed, one analyst asserted that al-Qaeda's base had shifted from Afghanistan to Iraq.¹²⁴ To be clear, al-Qaeda's senior leadership clearly did have trouble controlling AQI at key times, particularly when al-Qaeda Central tried to reign in its affiliate's ultraviolent methods.

But arguments that al-Qaeda's decision to ally with Zarqawi was a sign of weakness do not consider the wide variety of factors that may be indicative of its organizational strength. For example, a powerful Iraqi-based militant group thought it advantageous to bring the al-Qaeda brand to Iraq. Further, while al-Qaeda's association with AQI did ultimately damage its brand, what were the intermediate benefits to al-Qaeda? What were the immediate financial implications of this decision?

Many analysts also interpreted al-Qaeda Central's decision to formalize its relationship with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in 2007 and with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in 2009 in a similar manner. Bin Laden's death in May 2011 cemented the view of many observers that al-Qaeda Central wielded little to no control over its affiliates. An August 2011 *New York Times* article entitled "Al Qaeda Affiliates Growing Independent" articulated the conventional wisdom in that regard.¹²⁵ Terrorism experts both within and outside of government, the article reported, had come to view al-Qaeda Central as increasingly marginalized, while the affiliates were "gaining in stature." Brian Fishman, then at the New America Foundation, said, "it's increasingly likely that the Al Qaeda affiliate groups are just going to start doing their own thing," and added that "at some point, the guys in Pakistan might be reduced to issuing a lot of public statements and hoping for the best." Scholar Barak Mendelsohn wrote, "rather than a

demonstration of al-Qaeda's prowess, as some scholars view it," the organization's expansion was "in fact a sign of great difficulties." Through expansion, he continued, al-Qaeda "has been considerably weakened."¹²⁶

But the principle of "centralization of decision and decentralization of execution" proved to be well suited to the organization's strategy of establishing affiliations. The primary responsibilities of al-Qaeda's leadership, according to this model, are to provide strategic guidance to affiliates and to advise them on major personnel and operational decisions, including the appointment of local leaders. The affiliates are then charged with putting al-Qaeda's strategic plan into action. In doing so, the affiliates are given considerable autonomy with only limited oversight. This management structure, which closely mirrors al-Qaeda leadership's relationship with cell leaders tasked to carry out specific attacks, has allowed the group to maintain command and control of the expanding organization. The leadership's role in determining the military, political and propaganda strategy of the organization allows it to shape the behavior of affiliates, to mitigate preference divergence, and to avoid the kind of strategic incoherence that could taint al-Qaeda's global image. Al-Qaeda Central's involvement in selecting or at least approving the appointment of its affiliates' emirs similarly reduces the likelihood that commanders will deliberately deviate from al-Qaeda's strategic guidance.

Meanwhile, al-Qaeda's decentralized approach positioned the organization to more effectively deal with communications barriers between the leadership and its affiliates. Since al-Qaeda Central's role is restricted to providing guidance to affiliates on strategy and major personnel and operational issues, the amount of communication needed between the leadership and affiliates is fairly limited. It seems, though, that in the post-Edward Snowden world, al-Qaeda may be capable of communicating with its affiliates daily if need be.¹²⁷ Moreover, because al-Qaeda has authorized its affiliates to adapt strategic plans to local contexts, the organization as a whole remains flexible. This "glocalized" model—a global strategy and outlook integrated into a local environment—has also served as an additional buffer against preference divergence.

Al-Qaeda Central has, in many regards, effectively managed its affiliates. But some affiliates have engaged in behavior that contravenes al-Qaeda's objectives and the group's overall brand. In the mid-2000s, AQI's brutal violence and sectarian tendencies illustrated how harmful such deviance could be to the organization. Al-Qaeda Core attempted to "rebrand" the organization after AQI's failure. Extreme preference divergence emerged again under ISIS, ultimately producing a complete breakup between al-Qaeda and ISIS.

Rather than over-interpreting well-known cases in which preference divergence between al-Qaeda and its affiliates produced open conflict, it is worth asking why this does not occur more frequently. Al-Qaeda's internal documents, including the trove of information seized from bin Laden's Abbottabad compound, contain the strongest evidence of how al-Qaeda maintained relative organizational cohesion with its affiliates. A small subset of the Abbottabad documents—17 documents released in 2012—was initially used to advance the theory that al-Qaeda's senior leadership was out of touch with and had lost control of its affiliates.¹²⁸ This early theory proved to be misleading. At the time, Bruce Hoffman argued that public pronouncements by individuals who did not have the opportunity to view the entirety of the Abbottabad document collection should have been far more cautious, especially since their assessments were at odds with the initial conclusions drawn by intelligence officials. Indeed, the early pronouncements by intelligence officials who reviewed the documents, which appeared in print even before the theory emerged that the documents showed that al-Qaeda Core had lost touch, held that they showed bin Laden to be highly involved and perhaps even a “micro-manager.”¹²⁹

These discrepancies were resolved when new tranches of documents were released—in 2015, 2016, and 2017. The new documents illustrated bin Laden and other core al-Qaeda leaders' extensive involvement in—and sometimes micro-management of—affiliates' strategic and operational decisions. It also became clear that al-Qaeda's chain of command was still intact, despite leadership losses suffered by the group prior to 2011, and that affiliates and operational commanders generally considered bin Laden's directives and advice binding. The insights that the Abbottabad documents have provided include the following revelations:

- Around May 2010, bin Laden ordered a senior al-Qaeda commander to establish external operations wings throughout Africa that would allow al-Qaeda to target Western and U.S. interests across the continent.¹³⁰ Abdelmalek Droukdel was charged with directing external operations in North Africa, while Shabaab was given responsibility for the Horn of Africa, and Yunis al-Mauritani was given control of the rest of Africa. In the years following bin Laden's directive, al-Qaeda affiliates in Africa carried out several sophisticated attacks against Western targets, including the Westgate Mall massacre in Nairobi and the siege on the In Amenas gas facility in southern Algeria.

- Bin Laden was directly responsible for determining al-Qaeda’s policy toward state actors, including their truce negotiations with Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence Agency, as well as separate talks with Nawaz Sharif’s brother in his capacity as the Governor of Punjab. Bin Laden also often instructed affiliates to *refrain* from targeting states with which al-Qaeda was not engaged in active conflict. In an October 2007 letter to Abu Ayyub al-Masri, AQI’s war minister, bin Laden called for AQI to avoid carrying out attacks in Turkey, “unless there is a chance for a large operation against the Jews or the Crusaders.”¹³¹ He also advised Masri not to target or threaten the Iranian regime, as Iran served as a “main artery for funds, personnel, and communication” for al-Qaeda.¹³² In several other letters written around 2010, al-Qaeda’s senior leadership and affiliates discussed the merits and religious legitimacy of a truce, which was ultimately approved, between al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the Mauritanian government.¹³³ Both AQIM and AQI appear to have followed Bin Laden’s guidance. Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, a former AQI member who became ISIS’s chief spokesman, said in a May 2014 statement that AQI had complied with bin Laden’s request not to target Iran, prior to that organization splitting from al-Qaeda.¹³⁴ Similarly, AQIM refrained from targeting Mauritania for several years following internal deliberations about the truce.¹³⁵
- Al-Qaeda’s senior leadership engages in an extensive process of internal deliberation before making decisions, and sometimes consults leaders of affiliates about other affiliates’ affairs. A 2010 letter from Shabaab emir Ahmed Abdi Godane explained that Atiyah Abd al-Rahman and Abu Yahya al-Libi, two senior al-Qaeda officials based in Afghanistan/Pakistan, were “tasked” (presumably by bin Laden or Zawahiri) to write a report on the prospective Mauritanian truce from an Islamic legal perspective.¹³⁶ The report was to be submitted to al-Qaeda’s leadership, which would discuss the matter further and convey its decision to Abdelmalek Droukdel. In the letter, Godane weighed in on the prospective truce as well, which indicated that the leaders of al-Qaeda’s affiliates were consulted on major strategic issues, even if these issues did not directly impact them. As documents related to al-Qaeda Core’s recent dispute with

Syrian affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham make clear, this practice continues today.

- Bin Laden involved himself in tactical and operational decisions, which is why some in the intelligence community characterized him as a micromanager. For instance, in late 2010, bin Laden wrote two letters to Atiyah instructing his subordinates to move al-Qaeda operatives out of North and South Waziristan, two tribal agencies that were under constant surveillance by American drones, and to safer locations in Pakistan and the eastern Afghan provinces of Nuristan, Kunar, Ghazni and Zabul.¹³⁷
- Relatedly, bin Laden was intimately involved in personnel decisions, including the vetting of emerging leaders. One telling exchange involved Anwar al-Awlaki, the prominent American-born cleric who had joined AQAP in the late 2000s. With Awlaki's star rising, AQAP emir Nasir al-Wuhayshi suggested that he step aside and allow Awlaki to take over as AQAP's leader. Wuhayshi argued that this would allow al-Qaeda to capitalize on Awlaki's popularity.¹³⁸ Bin Laden responded in an August 2010 letter to Atiyah, instructing him to tell Wuhayshi to remain AQAP's leader. Bin Laden also requested that Wuhayshi provide bin Laden with Awlaki's resume, as well as specific reasons why Wuhayshi recommended Awlaki.¹³⁹ This letter reflected bin Laden's cautious approach to the selection of al-Qaeda leaders, as well as his wariness of Awlaki.
- Though bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders based in Pakistan experienced challenges trying to communicate with affiliates and operatives in the Middle East and North Africa, they developed a way to overcome these difficulties. For instance, Atiyah served as an intermediary between bin Laden and al-Qaeda's affiliates in Yemen, Somalia and North Africa. The decision to create a degree of distance between bin Laden and al-Qaeda's affiliates was probably intended to reduce the chances that bin Laden's communications would be intercepted and his location revealed. In a letter, bin Laden explained that the two couriers whom he used to pass statements to the media were only willing to carry messages every

three months, and he asked a subordinate to identify other means of publicizing his statements.¹⁴⁰

The Abbottabad documents, as well as other primary source materials, offer additional insight into the relationship between AQI and al-Qaeda's senior leadership. AQI's insubordination at the height of the Iraq war, which prompted rebukes from Zawahiri and Atiyah, has long been cited as evidence that al-Qaeda Central maintained little to no control over its affiliates. Indeed, some have argued that even after Zarqawi's death and prior to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's ascendance, al-Qaeda Central could not rein in its Iraqi affiliate. Further, some observers have argued that al-Qaeda's Iraqi affiliate declared the establishment of an Islamic state in Iraq in October 2006 without consulting bin Laden, Zawahiri or other al-Qaeda leaders.¹⁴¹ The Abbottabad documents, however, suggest that coordination between al-Qaeda Central and AQI after Zarqawi's death and prior to bin Laden's was more robust than previously assumed. For instance, as previously noted, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani said in a 2014 statement that the Iraqi affiliate had eventually complied with bin Laden's 2007 mandate to stop targeting or threatening Iran.¹⁴² (While ISIS's idea of compliance may differ from our own, Adnani's statement at least shows that al-Qaeda's directives were able to influence its actions while it remained an affiliate.) In another 2007 letter, bin Laden instructed Zawahiri to "remove ambiguity" concerning al-Qaeda's ties with the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)—the name by which al-Qaeda in Iraq was known at the time—and to come to the defense of ISI in his future public statements.¹⁴³ A letter from bin Laden to an unknown recipient, written sometime after April 2010, reveals the most about continuity in the al-Qaeda-ISI relationship.¹⁴⁴ In the letter, bin Laden commented on reports of the deaths of ISI's emir and war minister, and discussed al-Qaeda's succession plan for its affiliate, wherein ISI would establish a "temporary administration" to manage the organization's affairs while ISI and al-Qaeda Central worked to appoint a new emir.

These revelations from the Abbottabad documents highlight the need for a more nuanced assessment of the historical relationship between al-Qaeda Central and its Iraqi affiliate. There is little doubt that al-Qaeda's senior leadership faced persistent struggles in preventing AQI/ISI from acting on its more destructive impulses. Similarly, al-Qaeda's leadership experienced difficulties communicating with its Iraqi affiliate, which likely further affected the former's ability to shape events in Iraq. At the same time, though, AQI still complied with some key instructions from al-Qaeda Central, and bin Laden retained the ability to appoint the group's leaders. Only in late 2013, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi openly defied

Ayman al-Zawahiri's guidance concerning the organization's expansion into Syria, did the relationship between al-Qaeda Central and its Iraqi affiliate fray completely.

The Abbottabad documents also clarify the details of another relationship: al-Qaeda Central's relationship with Shabaab prior to the latter's February 2012 announcement of affiliation with al-Qaeda. The Combating Terrorism Center's report, *Letters from Abbottabad*, concluded that bin Laden was wary of formalizing al-Qaeda's relationship with Shabaab because he saw Shabaab's "poor governance and inflexible administration of hudud" as a potential liability for al-Qaeda's brand.¹⁴⁵ The report, which based its findings on an August 2010 letter from bin Laden to Godane, also suggested that bin Laden may have been stringing Shabaab along in order to ensure that Shabaab continued to provide al-Qaeda with funding, even though al-Qaeda had no intention of making it an affiliate.

Subsequently released documents show that at the time of bin Laden's letter to Godane, al-Qaeda Central had *already* privately accepted Shabaab's *bayat*, thus making it an undeclared—but nonetheless official—al-Qaeda affiliate. For instance, Godane was consulted on the merits of the Mauritanian truce proposal, a sensitive subject that would have only been shared with official affiliates.¹⁴⁶ Similarly, in a letter to Atiyah written in 2010, bin Laden discussed how Shabaab and AQIM could work to obtain pledges of *bayat* from other actors in their respective theaters who supported the jihadist cause.¹⁴⁷ The fact that bin Laden mentioned Shabaab alongside AQIM, which had publicly joined al-Qaeda in 2007, and wished to advise Shabaab on expanding its network, makes clear that al-Qaeda already considered the Somali group to be a bona fide affiliate.

These findings cast bin Laden's directive to Shabaab to conceal its ties with al-Qaeda in a different light. Bin Laden's efforts to mask the Shabaab-al-Qaeda relationship were likely intended to help Shabaab develop its network without attracting the attention of counterterrorism forces or scaring off local allies. Evidence gathered prior to the Abbottabad raid also supports this interpretation. In August 2010, the *Long War Journal* reported that al-Qaeda officials told Shabaab to "maintain a low profile on al Qaeda links," and that al-Qaeda reasoned that any public statements linking it to Shabaab would "draw international scrutiny" to the Somali group's activities.¹⁴⁸ Bin Laden's words in his letter to Godane in 2010 are consistent with this view. He wrote that once al-Shabaab's relationship with al-Qaeda "becomes declared and out in the open, it would have the enemies escalate their anger and mobilize against" it.¹⁴⁹

Al-Qaeda's Covert Growth Strategy

AL-QAEDA'S EFFORTS TO MASK ITS TIES WITH SHABAAB FORESHADOWED THE STRATEGY that al-Qaeda would adopt after the Arab Spring. The collapse of autocratic regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya presented al-Qaeda with an unprecedented opportunity to expand its presence into countries that had previously been difficult to penetrate. Al-Qaeda also understood that it had to be cautious as it built its networks in North Africa. Any public advertisement of its activities in the region risked triggering attention from local and international security forces. Al-Qaeda did not want to risk having its nascent affiliates outlawed before they hit a critical mass. Al-Qaeda, therefore, opted for a covert growth strategy. The group would deploy envoys to countries affected by the Arab Spring and establish affiliates there, but no public announcement about these new relationships would be made. The covert affiliates—which included Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, the Ansar al-Sharia factions in the eastern Libyan cities of Benghazi and Derna, and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria—were instructed to mask their links with al-Qaeda.

Today, a sizable body of evidence highlights al-Qaeda's covert growth strategy in the post-Arab Spring period and its ties with affiliates, all of which were once covert. In 2013, Zawahiri wrote a letter scolding Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the emir of Jabhat al-Nusra, for publicly revealing the Syrian organization's ties with al-Qaeda without first asking permission from al-Qaeda Central.¹⁵⁰ Meanwhile, al-Qaeda's ties with Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia became increasingly clear by 2013. The Tunisian government had captured documents, subsequently reported in the Tunisian media, showing that Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi, Ansar al-Sharia's emir, had secretly pledged allegiance to Abdelmalek Droukdel, AQIM's emir.¹⁵¹ Additionally, a 2012 report produced by the Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress detailed al-Qaeda's extensive activities and network in Libya, including its ties with Ansar al-Sharia.¹⁵²

In the immediate post-Arab Spring period, however, analysts were slow to recognize the relationship between al-Qaeda Central and its covert affiliates. Ansar al-Sharia groups in both Tunisia and Libya were labeled localized jihadist groups that shared al-Qaeda's ideology, but operated independent of al-Qaeda's command structure.¹⁵³ The question of al-Qaeda's links with its covert affiliates in Libya became highly politicized following the 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi. While the intelligence community immediately concluded that al-Qaeda had been involved in the attack,¹⁵⁴ spokespeople for the Obama administration initially

declared that the attack occurred when spontaneous protests escalated into violence. Numerous journalists and analysts subsequently repeated the line that Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi and Derna were “purely local extremist organizations.”¹⁵⁵

Why did some observers initially conclude that the Ansar al-Sharia factions in Libya and Tunisia were not linked organizationally to al-Qaeda? At least three factors explain this error. First, al-Qaeda was largely successful in masking its ties, at least initially, with its covert affiliates. As one of the authors of this article noted at the time, terrorism analysts were “stuck reading shadows” as they tried to assess the relationship between al-Qaeda and jihadist groups that had popped up in Libya, Tunisia and Syria.¹⁵⁶ With only incomplete and ambiguous information about Ansar al-Sharia’s origins and relationships, observers resorted to what had become a default assessment about the jihadist movement: that al-Qaeda Central possessed little control over militant groups operating outside Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Second, the analytic community’s misguided view of how the Arab Spring would impact the jihadist movement may have led many to overlook key shifts in al-Qaeda’s strategy. As autocratic regimes in Egypt and Tunisia succumbed to the pressure of largely peaceful protest movements, analysts, pundits and journalists came to an early consensus that al-Qaeda’s revolutionary model, which revolved around the notion that only violence could uproot regimes, had lost its appeal in the Muslim world. The Arab Spring and bin Laden’s death were perceived as the “final bookends” to the war against al-Qaeda.¹⁵⁷ Such an optimistic view failed to seriously consider how al-Qaeda might seek to exploit the tumult and instability that followed the Arab Spring revolutions. This impulse to view regional events through an optimistic lens where jihadism was concerned, coupled with the assumption that the organization was struggling to assert its relevance in this new environment, may well have helped lead the analytic community to miss critical signs that al-Qaeda was pursuing a covert growth strategy as it sought to gain a foothold in post-revolutionary countries.

Third, analysts adopted an overly simplistic view of al-Qaeda’s global strategy, which prevented them from understanding how Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and other covert affiliates fit into the organization’s growth model. Many observers asserted that al-Qaeda was exclusively focused on striking the “far enemy” (*i.e.*, the United States and its allies in Western Europe), and was largely disinterested in carrying out governance projects in the Middle East. Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, however, had a locally-oriented strategy—which one of us analyzed as a progression from *dawa* to *hisba* to *jihad* in one of the earliest full-length studies on the group¹⁵⁸—that appeared incongruent with al-Qaeda’s global activities and aims.

President Obama articulated this sentiment in a May 2013 speech on terrorism in which he noted that the jihadist movement in the post-Arab Spring period consisted of “collections of local militias or extremists interested in seizing territory” that operated “perhaps in loose affiliation with regional networks.”¹⁵⁹

This limited view of al-Qaeda’s strategy persists to this day. In a 2016 monograph heralding al-Qaeda’s decline, scholar Jarret Brachman argued: “Al-Qaeda’s primary affiliates have turned inward and are concentrating more on making territorial gains locally, appealing to the local populous [sic] and consolidating themselves through low-level criminality than they are on advancing al-Qaeda’s grandiose global agenda.”¹⁶⁰ Georgetown University scholar Daniel Byman has similarly asserted that al-Qaeda is on the decline because its “affiliate organizations focus on their local and regional concerns rather than attacking the West.”¹⁶¹

Such assessments define al-Qaeda’s strategy in the post-Arab Spring period too narrowly, and thus overlook both the organization’s rationale for violence against the West, as well as the possible ways in which the Arab Spring may have altered these dynamics. Al-Qaeda’s strategy of attacking the “far enemy” was motivated by a strategic belief that al-Qaeda could only topple local regimes and establish Islamic emirates if it first crippled the West, because Western military and economic support would prevent “near enemy” regimes from falling. The “far enemy” strategy was, in other words, a means to an end, rather than an unalterable commitment to prioritize attacks against the West. The events of the Arab Spring shifted al-Qaeda’s calculus, because it revealed that Western states would not necessarily step in to save the autocratic regimes against which al-Qaeda also wages jihad. In the case of Libya, Western governments actually stepped in to topple Qaddafi; while they did not intervene at all when Hosni Mubarak fell in Egypt. The enormous opportunities that exist for al-Qaeda in the post-Arab Spring world mean that attacks against Western countries may be deprioritized for the time being, as the jihadist movement exploits opportunities in the region.

Conclusion

AL-QAEDA’S NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH, OF COURSE, PRESENTED THEIR own set of challenges. Following a period of mounting tensions between al-Qaeda and ISIS, in February 2014, al-Qaeda expelled its Iraqi affiliate from the organization. The dramatic rise of ISIS thereafter led many observers to conclude that the

breakaway group had usurped its parent organization between 2014 and 2016, and that various al-Qaeda branches would likely break away and join ISIS. We have already written a lengthy analysis in these pages about how al-Qaeda survived the ISIS challenge, after having survived two other significant challenges (the black mark on the organization's reputation after AQI's 2007–09 defeat and the Arab Spring revolutions).¹⁶² In successfully navigating the ISIS challenge, al-Qaeda again proved resilient. This time, however, it showed resilience in an area where analysts had previously been skeptical about its capabilities: in the relationship between parent organization and affiliates.

There are again storm clouds surrounding al-Qaeda's core-affiliate relations, as its leadership clashes with Syrian affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).¹⁶³ Most analysts have interpreted this dispute in a manner consistent with the field's ingrained tendency to perceive al-Qaeda's senior leadership as marginal. But one immutable lesson of past struggles within al-Qaeda and other jihadist organizations is that their meaning is not best understood through the lens of analysts' immediate response, but their significance becomes clearer over time. Suffice it to say that disputes like this raise the risk for al-Qaeda that, if insubordination and rebellion goes unpunished, other branches will perceive the cost of acting against al-Qaeda Core's directives as lower.¹⁶⁴ Conversely, al-Qaeda's multiple networks are interlocking. See, for example, the relationship between Shabaab and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or between AQIM and the Sahelian jihadists. If al-Qaeda's affiliates step out of line, as Boko Haram did, then al-Qaeda Core can withdraw its support and invest its resources with competitor organizations. Only time will tell which of these two countervailing considerations will prove more decisive in resolving the conflict with HTS, and managing other affiliate relationships beyond Syria.

While questions persist about the direction that the jihadist movement will take—questions magnified by the fact that jihadist organizations are clandestine in nature—al-Qaeda has, thus far, been able to sustain an overall *trend* toward greater relevance. This article outlines the formula that the organization has followed to remain important. As we examine current and future challenges facing the organization, it is crucial to bear in mind the logic of al-Qaeda's organizational design, and also the various advantages that spring therefrom. In order to stop almost willfully *perceiving* al-Qaeda as weak, we must continue to work towards better understanding how the organization actually functions. Equipped with more accurate analyses, we will put ourselves in a position to more effectively weaken al-Qaeda.

NOTES

1. The plots referenced here are the August 2006 transatlantic air plot and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab's December 2009 underpants bomb plot.
2. Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).
3. See, for example, Paul Cruickshank and Mohannad Hage Ali, "Abu Musab Al Suri: Architect of the New Al Qaeda," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30:1 (2007); Lawrence Wright, "The Master Plan," *The New Yorker*, September 11, 2006, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/09/11/the-master-plan>; Douglas Frantz et al., "The New Face of Al-Qaeda," *Los Angeles Times*, September 26, 2004.
4. Bruce Hoffman, "The Myth of Grass-Roots Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs*, May 2008.
5. Regarding the public disputes and occasional disobedience that to some analysts demonstrate al-Qaeda's decentralization, it would be interesting to subject contemporary American institutions to the same standards, especially under the Trump administration. Bureaucratic, personality, and policy-based conflicts are part and parcel of any organization, even (especially?) in authoritarian systems.
6. See Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of al Qaeda's Leader* (New York: Free Press, 2006), p. 253 (quoting Nasser al-Bahri, whose *kunya* is Abu Jandal); Khalid al-Hammadi, "The Inside Story of al-Qaeda, Part 4," *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, March 22, 2005.
7. Sayyid Qutb, *Ma'alim fi'l-Tariq* (1964), p. 12.
8. Hassan al-Banna, *Majmuat al-Rasael* (Le Caire, 1999), pp. 74-75.
9. For discussion of how Azzam ran afoul of bin Laden, and how this influenced the creation of al-Qaeda, see Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, "Revisiting the Early Al Qaeda: An Updated Account of Its Formative Years," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35 (2012).
10. Abdullah Azzam, "Al-Qaeda al-Sulbah," *Al-Jihad*, April 1988, translation available at <https://insidethejihad.com/2014/03/al-qaida-al-subah-the-solid-base/>.
11. Ibid.
12. Abdullah Azzam, *Join the Caravan* (1987).
13. Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner* (2001), translation available at <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/6759609-knights-under-the-prophet-banner.pdf>.
14. Azzam, "Al-Qaeda al-Sulbah."
15. Ayman al-Zawahiri, letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, 2015, available at <https://ctc.usma.edu/posts/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-english-translation-2>.

16. Azzam, "Al-Qaeda al-Sulbah."
17. See the founding minutes at <http://intelfiles.egoplex.com/1988-08-11-founding-of-al-qaeda.pdf>.
18. See translation at <https://ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Al-Qaida-Goals-and-Structure-Partial-Translation.pdf>.
19. Al-Qaeda did not stringently apply all of these requirements, as Abu Hafis al-Masri, the group's military commander prior to 9/11, dropped out of Asyut University in Egypt without obtaining a degree. See the profile of Abu Hafis at https://ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Abu_Hafis.pdf.
20. See document at <https://ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Al-Qa'ida's-Structure-and-Bylaws-Translation1.pdf>.
21. See discussion in Nelly Lahoud, *Beware of Imitators: Al-Qa'ida Through the Lens of Its Confidential Secretary* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2012), <https://ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/CTC-Beware-of-Imitators-June2012.pdf>.
22. One noteworthy work providing insight into this period for al-Qaeda is Camille Tawil, *Brothers in Arms: The Story of al-Qa'ida and the Arab Jihadists* trans. Robin Bray (London: Saqi, 2011).
23. Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, p. 116.
24. However, a significant remnant forced remained, especially in the east. See Peter Tomesen, *The Wars of Afghanistan: Messianic Terrorism, Tribal Conflicts, and the Failures of Great Powers* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011); Vahid Brown & Don Rassler, *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973-2012* (London: Hurst, 2013).
25. Calvert Jones and Assaf Moghadam have both written about al-Qaeda's spirit of entrepreneurship. See Calvert Jones, "Al-Qaeda's Innovative Improvisers: Learning in a Diffuse Transnational Network," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 19:4 (December 2006); Assaf Moghadam, "How Al Qaeda Innovates," *Security Studies* 22:3 (2013).
26. Nasser al-Bahri, *Guarding bin Laden: My Life in al-Qaeda* (London: Thin Man Press, 2013), loc. 1508.
27. Bin Laden's approval of operations was not always guaranteed. Before 9/11, bin Laden rejected several attacks, either because they were too costly or because they were inconsistent with al-Qaeda's strategic aims. For instance, al-Bahri reports that bin Laden rejected a proposal to target the metro system in Cairo because he believed it would undermine public support for al-Qaeda. He similarly rejected several attacks in Yemen, citing concerns about civilian casualties; and rejected a plan to strike a prison in Jordan, because it could result in the deaths of Islamist prisoners. Bahri, *Guarding bin Laden*, loc. 1508.
28. Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, pp. 116-20.

29. Ibid., p. 253 (quoting Nasser al-Bahri).
30. Ibid., p. 221.
31. *9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), pp. 145–53.
32. Moghadam, “How Al Qaeda Innovates”; see also Jones, “Al-Qaeda’s Innovative Improvisers,” p. 561.
33. See the group’s “deep bench” discussed, for example, in Craig Whitlock, “The New al-Qaeda Central,” *Washington Post*, September 9, 2007, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/08/AR2007090801845_3.html.
34. One of the most prominent studies to push this line of argument was a May 2012 report published by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. Nelly Lahoud et al., *Letters from Abbottabad: Bin Ladin Sidelined?* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2012), https://ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/CTC_LtrsFromAbottabad_WEBv2.pdf.
35. See document at <https://ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/Al-Qa'ida's-Structure-and-Bylaws-Translation1.pdf>.
36. For example, see Ben Hubbard, “The Franchising of Al Qaeda,” *New York Times*, January 25, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/26/sunday-review/the-franchising-of-al-qaeda.html?mcubz=0>; Abby Ohlheiser, “The State Department Warns of an ‘Evolved,’ Decentralized Al Qaeda,” *The Atlantic*, April 3, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/04/the-state-department-warns-of-an-evolved-decentralized-al-qaeda/361452/>.
37. Lahoud, *Beware of Imitators*, p. 67.
38. Moghadam, “How Al Qaeda Innovates.”
39. Ibid., p. 470.
40. A report published by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point provides a concise explanation of preference divergence within terrorist and insurgent groups. *Harmony and Disharmony: Exploiting al-Qa’ida’s Organizational Vulnerabilities* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2006), <https://ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Harmony-and-Disharmony.pdf>.
41. Examples of al-Qaeda commanders scolding subordinates for violating organizational directives include al-Qaeda senior leadership’s reprimands of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi for using excessive violence, and for fueling sectarianism in Iraq; and AQIM emir Abdelmalek Droukdel’s criticism of Ansar Dine, a subsidiary of AQIM, for alienating local populations in northern Mali through hasty implementation of an austere version of

- sharia* law. Both of these examples illustrate our observation about the organization's relatively limited enforcement powers.
42. For discussion of these analytic misjudgments, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross & Nathaniel Barr, "How al-Qaeda Survived the Islamic State Challenge," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, March 1, 2017, at <https://www.hudson.org/research/12788-how-al-qaeda-survived-the-islamic-state-challenge>, especially footnotes 3-5.
 43. Further, Boko Haram's reliance on ISIS as a new patron resulted in its own frictions. See discussion in Daveed Gartenstein-Ross & Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram's Doomed Marriage to the Islamic State," *War on the Rocks*, August 26, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/08/boko-harams-doomed-marriage-to-the-islamic-state/>.
 44. Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden* Kindle ed. (New York: The Free Press, 2001), locs. 1200-1212. He was only *persona non grata* while the Bhutto government remained in power.
 45. Trial testimony of L'Houssaine Kherchtou, *United States v. bin Laden* (S.D.N.Y., February 12, 2001).
 46. Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), loc. 48.
 47. Several accounts claim that bin Laden was primarily, if not exclusively, focused on legitimate economic activities during his time in Sudan, and that few resources were dedicated to furthering the jihadist cause. See, e.g., Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007); Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003). Though bin Laden made a conscious effort to highlight his business interests in Sudan, robust primary source evidence documents his continued involvement in jihadist activities throughout his time in the country.
 48. *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 58.
 49. See a confidential informant's account to U.S. authorities at <http://intelfiles.egoplex.com/1999-09-16-FBI-FD302-confidential-informant.pdf>.
 50. For a report detailing some of the challenges that al-Qaeda faced as it tried to build relations with Somali armed groups, see *Al-Qaida's (Mis)Adventures in the Horn of Africa* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2007), <https://ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Al-Qaidas-MisAdventures-in-the-Horn-of-Africa.pdf>.
 51. See background in Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "The Strategic Challenge of Somalia's Al-Shabaab," *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2009, pp. 25-36, <http://www.meforum.org/2486/somalia-al-shabaab-strategic-challenge>.

52. Quoted in *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 341.
53. Cannistraro was interviewed for an ABC News special on bin Laden in 1998, which included Jon Miller's May 1998 in-person interview with the jihadist leader.
54. Testimony of Jamal al-Fadl, *United States v. bin Laden* (S.D.N.Y., February 6, 2001), p. 304.
55. BIF's involvement in Bosnia is documented in *United States v. Arnaout* (N.D. Ill., 2003).
56. United Nations Security Council, Press Release, "Security Council Demands Sudan Act to Extradite Suspects in Assassination Attempt of Egyptian President by 10 May, or Face Limited Sanctions," April 26, 1996.
57. Testimony of Jamal al-Fadl, *ibid.*, p. 357.
58. All of these activities are detailed in Bergen and Cruickshank, "Revisiting the Early Al Qaeda."
59. James Astil, "Osama: The Sudan Years," *Guardian* (London), October 16, 2001, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/17/afghanistan.terrorism3>.
60. Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, loc. 302.
61. See document at <http://bit.ly/2kreFs5>.
62. See "Mujahideen Data Form" for José Padilla, n.d., at <http://abcnews.go.com/images/TheLaw/padilladoc.pdf>.
63. The account of how he came to purchase these computers can be found in Alan Cullison, "Inside Al Qaeda's Hard Drive," *The Atlantic*, September 2004, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/09/inside-al-qaeda-s-hard-drive/303428/>.
64. *Ibid.*
65. Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, loc. 3171.
66. Abu Musab al-Suri, *Call to Global Islamic Resistance* (2004), p. 727.
67. Vahid Brown has emphasized al-Qaeda's training advantages over its jihadist rivals. See Vahid Brown, "Classical and Global Jihad: Al-Qa'ida's Franchising Frustrations," in Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman eds., *Fault Lines in Global Jihad: Organizational, Strategic, and Ideological Fissures* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), p. 92.
68. Cullison, "Inside Al Qaeda's Hard Drive."
69. Nic Robertson, "Tapes Shed New Light on Bin Laden's Network," CNN, August 19, 2002.
70. Cullison, "Inside Al Qaeda's Hard Drive."
71. Commentators often assert that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who is generally known by his initials, was not a member of al-Qaeda at the time he proposed the 9/11 attacks. This characterization is debatable, and serves to obfuscate rather than to illuminate. It is true that KSM had not sworn *bayat* at the time, and was not a salaried member. However, the same was equally true of Zawahiri until well into 2001, when the group he led, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, finally merged with al-Qaeda.

72. Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark, *The Exile: The Stunning Inside Story of Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda in Flight* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 44.
73. *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 153.
74. See the discussion in Nashiri's Guantanamo detainee file, at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/guantanamo/detainees/10015-abd-al-rahim-al-nashiri>.
75. Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan*, loc. 4729.
76. For example, in February 2016, a jihadist media operative posted a letter from Ayman al-Zawahiri in which Zawahiri approved the appointment of Abu Ubaydah Ahmad Umar (a.k.a. Ahmed Diriye) as the new emir of al-Shabaab. See Thomas Joscelyn, "Al-Qaeda Insider Returns to Twitter, Discusses Group's Global Leadership," *Long War Journal*, March 16, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/03/al-qaeda-insider-returns-to-twitter-discusses-groups-global-leadership.php>.
77. Mary Anne Weaver, "The Real Bin Laden," *New Yorker*, January 24, 2000.
78. Some historical accounts that enjoy the benefit of hindsight have come to similar conclusions, despite the abundance of primary source evidence demonstrating the scale of al-Qaeda's organizational infrastructure prior to 9/11. For instance, Fawaz Gerges assessed that al-Qaeda demonstrated an "unwillingness to construct formal institutions and organizations, as opposed to informal committees and networks, that could survive the incarceration of [its] founding charismatic emirs." Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 41.
79. DCI Counterterrorist Center, "Afghanistan: An Incubator for International Terrorism," March 27, 2001, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/369161-2001-03-27-afghanistan-an-incubator-for.html>.
80. *9/11 Commission Report*, p. 9.
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82. The meeting was detailed in a report drawing from a Spanish government investigation into the 9/11 attacks and 2004 Madrid train bombings. "The Frightening Evolution of al-Qaida," *Dateline NBC*, June 24, 2005, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/8307333/ns/dateline_nbc/t/frightening-evolution-al-qaida/#.WdzTxEzMz-Y.
83. Suri was not alone in his skepticism about some of the group's external operations plans. For discussion of internal misgivings about the 9/11 attacks, and the consequently bureaucratically idiosyncratic manner in which the operation was approved, see discussion in Levy and Scott-Clark, *The Exile*, pp. 13-14.
84. For a synopsis of Suri's concerns about al-Qaeda launching attacks while enjoying a safe haven in Afghanistan, see Cruickshank and Ali, "Abu Musab Al Suri: Architect of the New Al Qaeda."

85. Zawahiri, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*.
86. Levy and Scott-Clark, *The Exile*, pp. 90-91.
87. For instance, Saif al-Adel sent numerous missives to al-Qaeda members in Waziristan and Iraq, and helped to coordinate Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's move to Iraq. See *ibid.*, p. 204.
88. The U.S. government has acknowledged on numerous occasions that al-Qaeda maintained, and continues to maintain, facilitation networks in Iran. See, for example, Thomas Joscelyn, "State Department: Iran Continues to Host al-Qaeda's 'Core Facilitation Pipeline,'" *Long War Journal*, July 23, 2017, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/07/state-department-iran-continues-to-host-al-qaedas-core-facilitation-pipeline.php>.
89. For example, Saif al-Adel's phone was intercepted giving the order for the 2003 Riyadh bombings.
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95. Quoted in Dana Priest and Susan Schmidt, "Al Qaeda's Top Primed to Collapse, U.S. Says," *Washington Post*, March 16, 2003, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2003/03/16/al-qaedas-top-primed-to-collapse-us-says>. An anonymous U.S. law enforcement official struck a similar note at the time, stating that Mohammed's "arrest will hit Qaeda like a body blow and send shock waves throughout the organization." Don Van Natta Jr., "Al Qaeda Hobbled by Latest Arrest, U.S. Says," *New York Times*, March 3, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/03/world/threats-and-responses-terror-network-al-qaeda-hobbled-by-latest-arrest-us-says.html>.

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Conflicts in Indonesian Islam

By Paul Marshall

IN THE THREE YEARS FOLLOWING THE 1998 ECONOMIC CRISIS AND THE FALL of President Soeharto, Indonesia endured economic dislocation, political turmoil, and religious violence that claimed thousands of lives. However, since this period of upheaval the country has been on a broadly upward path both politically and economically. Religious violence has tended to be sporadic and local, aside from the Bali bombings of 2002. Indonesia now has the largest economy in Southeast Asia and among the countries of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. At 260 million people, the country, which has now had nearly two decades of largely free elections, is the third-largest democracy in the world. Some 88 percent of its population are Muslims, making it the largest Muslim-majority country in the world.

Despite these positive political and economic trends, in recent years, Islamist movements have flourished in Indonesia. Indeed, their pressure was a major factor leading to the imprisonment of the Christian governor of Jakarta on charges of blasphemy in 2017. The moderate forms of Islam that have historically been hegemonic in Indonesia may now be under threat.¹

Trends Since Soeharto's Fall

AFTER SOEHARTO'S RULE (1968-1998), SUCCESSIVE PRESIDENTS ENCOURAGED tolerant and moderate forms of Islam. This was especially true of former president and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) leader Abdurrahman Wahid (r. 1999-2001). However, during the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) (r. 2004-2014), more radical currents of Islam grew in influence, often with the president's explicit or tacit encouragement.²

Under SBY, the authority of the Indonesian Ulama Council, Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI), was enhanced. The MUI was created by Soeharto in 1975 to provide halal certification and issue fatwas on current matters of concern. Its membership is drawn from large Sunni organizations like NU and Muhammadiyah as well as numerous smaller groups. Shiites and Ahmadis, however, are excluded. Although the government appoints its members and funds it, the Council makes its decisions independently, its fatwas are not legally binding, and they do not necessarily reflect government policy. This semi-official status creates widespread confusion about its authority, especially since the MUI has become more extreme and has sought to expand its powers, as evidenced by the wider range of subjects upon which it issues fatwas. In 2016, after police started to enforce some MUI fatwas, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) had to warn them that MUI edicts were not government laws or regulations and that therefore the police had no authority to enforce them.³

In 2005, while SBY was president, he spoke to the MUI's National Congress and promised to increase its authority to define what constituted proper Islam. Shortly thereafter, the MUI issued fatwas prohibiting interfaith prayer, mixed marriages, interfaith inheritance, religious pluralism, liberalism, and secularism.⁴ SBY's government also issued a "Joint Regulation on Houses of Worship" in 2006, which has been used widely to restrict minorities. Two years later, the government issued a specifically anti-Ahmadiyya decree.

President Jokowi, in office since 2014, has been critical of more restrictive forms of Islam, stressed religious toleration, and emphasized that the MUI does not make government policy. Despite these changes, the radicalization that took hold during SBY's presidency has continued, resulting in increased incidents of religious violence and other forms of intolerance, such as blasphemy charges.⁵ Islamist groups are outmaneuvering and outperforming the massive but unwieldy NU and Muhammadiyah organizations.

Traditional Indonesian Islam

ISLAM INITIALLY SPREAD THROUGHOUT INDONESIA VIA MERCHANTS AND missionaries, several of whom had Chinese or Central Asian ancestry.⁶ The largely peaceful spread of Islam has led to a variety of co-existing, independent Islamic organizations, which have formed the basis for a robust civil society. The country is home to the world's largest Muslim organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, which have perhaps fifty million and forty million followers, respectively. NU's base is in villages and towns, where it operates a massive network of thousands of Islamic schools (*pesantren*) serving millions of students. NU also runs twenty-two universities, owns many magazines, and engages in expansive charitable and social work. Similarly, Muhammadiyah runs twenty-nine universities. Its focus, however, is somewhat different from NU's: It stresses the importance of a modern and pure Islam, freed from cultural accretions, and gives particular attention to influencing and educating people in the professions and in higher education.

Both NU and Muhammadiyah, along with other organizations and Muslim scholars, refer to a particular kind of Indonesian Islam: Islam of the archipelago (*Islam Nusantara*), or the Islam of the islands.⁷ Some scholars have described *Islam Nusantara* as syncretism rather than Islam. For example, eminent cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz called his landmark study *The Religion of Java* rather than a study of Islam in Java.⁸ Other scholars, however, simply describe *Islam Nusantara* as Sunni Islam. Historian Azyumardi Azra describes the Islam of Indonesia not as an amalgam with Hindu-Buddhism, but as Sunni Islam based on three pillars: Ash'arite theology, Ghazalian Sufism, and the Shafi'i Madhab. According to Azra, it is an Islam of moderation (*moderasi*), a middle path (*wasatiyyah Islam*), which seeks to balance sacred revelation and human reason.⁹ In Indonesian, the word '*moderasi*' has quasi-Aristotelian undertones of balance and harmony.

In *Islam Nusantara* there is an emphasis on Indonesia and Indonesians as a country and people shaped by islands, coasts, ports, trade, and travel, as distinct from more restrictive desert cultures. Within this culture of the islands, Islam developed into the dominant religion, but coexisted alongside other belief systems. The concept of *Islam Nusantara* reinforces understandings of Islam that reject an Islamic state in favor of a state founded on the recognition of Indonesia's religious pluralism. While recognizing that geography has influenced Indonesian Islam, Muslim scholars of the country tend to strenuously resist the allegation that their

beliefs are simply accidents of that geography and that their practices are fit only for anthropological inquiry but not for theological and legal insight.¹⁰

Surveys by the Pew Research Center indicate that Indonesian Muslims tend to be more pious than those in the Middle East.¹¹ This is one reason that NU and Muhammadiyah scholars have in recent years grown more confident in challenging radical views imported from the Arabian Peninsula.¹² They emphasize that, as NU chairman Said Aqil Siradj has said, Islam should be propagated by “respecting local cultures, not eradicating them.”¹³

Wahhabism and the Growth of Radicalism

NOTWITHSTANDING THE WIDESPREAD CONCEPT OF ISLAM NUSANTARA, INDONESIA has long had indigenous Islamist currents. At independence, such currents sprang from within the Hadhrami (Arab) community. Darul Islam, an Islamist group seeking the establishment of an Islamic state in Indonesia, was particularly influential in the early years after independence.¹⁴ The Masyumi Party was a major early Islamic political party. In 1945, in preparation for independence, there was a strong push these organizations and some other Islamic groups to incorporate a particular clause regarding sharia into the Jakarta Charter. The clause, which read, “the obligation to abide by Islamic law for adherents of Islam” (*dengan kewajiban menjalankan syariat Islam bagi pemeluknya*), would have opened the way to state-enforced sharia.¹⁵ It was ultimately rejected in the name of national unity, but there have been periodic calls since then to incorporate it into the constitution.

There have also been ongoing Wahhabi influences, which have often been strenuously resisted. Indeed, Islam in Indonesia has been shaped in no small measure by opposition to Wahhabism.¹⁶ There were tensions between Indonesian Muslims and Wahhabis in the eighteenth century, but the first major conflicts arose in the early nineteenth century in the Minangkabau Highlands of West Sumatra.¹⁷ In 1803, after Wahhabis had again taken control of Mecca and Medina, their ideology began to influence many Indonesian students and scholars studying or on hajj in the Hejaz. When these Indonesians returned home, they denounced the prevailing Islam in their homelands as syncretic and even apostate. Many locals who had not been abroad sharply rejected what they considered foreign, upstart notions of Islam. Conflict between Muslims inspired by Wahhabism and those in favor of

preserving the status quo eventually led to all-out war. In 1815, the returnees from Arabia and their followers, known as Padris, killed most of the Minangkabau royal family. Facing defeat, the Minangkabau nobility sought assistance from the Dutch in Padang, who after years of fighting, defeated the Padris in 1838 and took control of West Sumatra.

The war was, to be sure, about more than rival interpretations of Islam.¹⁸ Local merchants, for example, hoped that they might enjoy greater opportunities under Padri-inspired sharia than under the rule of powerful families. Opposition to Dutch colonialism also played a role. Nevertheless, attempts to impose what were considered foreign and more austere forms of Islam on those Muslims comfortable with their local inheritance certainly triggered the war.

Like the Wahhabis, Muhammadiyah, which was founded in 1912, sought a purer Islam, one freed from cultural accretion. Its leaders, however, advocated for an Islam that was reformed but also modern. Rather than look to the Saudis for inspiration, therefore, they turned to Mohammad Abduh and similar modern reformers. In 1926, the NU was founded, partly in response to the Saudi destruction of tombs and other holy places in Mecca and Medina, and to rumors that they intended to destroy the Prophet's tomb. NU's founders saw this as a threat to true Islam as embodied in Indonesian beliefs and practices.¹⁹ When I attended NU's five-year Congress in 2015, I was particularly struck by the sale of reprints of the 1922 work *Menolak Wahhabi (Wahhabism Rejected)* by Muhammad Faqih Maskumambang, one of the organization's founders. The 2016 NU-hosted International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders (ISOMIL) warned that "various governments in the Middle East have exploited religious differences, and a history of enmity between sects, without regard to the consequences thereof for humanity at large.... These sectarian propaganda campaigns have deliberately nurtured religious extremism, and stimulated the spread of terrorism throughout the world."²⁰

Nevertheless, the Saudi influence in Indonesia is evident. Saudi Arabia has now established more than 150 mosques in the country, providing schoolbooks, preachers, and teachers, and disbursing thousands of scholarships for graduate study in Saudi Arabia.²¹ A key center of this program is the Institute for the Study of Islam and Arabic (LIPIA), a completely Saudi-funded university in South Jakarta. LIPIA opened in 1980, ostensibly with the purpose of teaching Arabic, and no Indonesian is spoken on the campus. Tuition is free and music, television, and loud laughter are forbidden. Men and women are segregated. The Ministry of Religious Affairs accredited LIPIA in 2015 but has voiced concerns over whether it will uphold moderate Islam and Indonesia's state philosophy of Pancasila,

which stresses belief in one God rather than any specific Islamic reference. After King Salman's visit to Indonesia in March 2017, the Saudis expressed an interest in opening two or three more similar institutes.

Terrorism

GROWING RADICALISM IN INDONESIA CERTAINLY POSES A THREAT TO THE STATUS quo. Terrorism, however, has not reached the same scale as in the Philippines. The single deadliest act of terror was the 2002 nightclub bombing in Bali, which resulted in 202 deaths. Attacks since then have included the 2003 J. W. Marriott Hotel bombings in Jakarta, which killed twelve people; a 2004 car bombing outside the Australian Embassy, which killed ten people; bombings in Bali in 2005, which killed twenty-six people; and the bombings of the Marriott and Ritz-Carlton Hotels in Jakarta in 2009, which killed at least nine people. The most recent larger attack occurred in January 2016, when multiple explosions went off near the Sarinah shopping mall in Jakarta. Many were injured in this attack, but of the eight people killed, half were the terrorists themselves. This failure to cause greater mayhem is a welcome sign of the terrorists' incompetence.²²

In recent years, some Islamist movement followers may have begun affiliating with ISIS.²³ This most recent attack was also the first one claimed by ISIS. Several smaller-scale bombings have also been linked to the organization, such as the November 2016 attack on a church in Samarinda, East Kalimantan, where three home-made bombs were detonated, killing one child and injuring three others. Initially, this was considered a "lone-wolf" attack, but the perpetrators were subsequently linked to an ISIS-related group called Jamaah Anshorud Daulah (JAD), which appears to be the largest ISIS-related network in Indonesia and has had cells in several parts of the country.²⁴ JAD has been linked to ISIS through Indonesian national Salim Mubarak Attamimi (Abu Jandal), who has close ties with the ISIS central leadership and who leads an Indonesian splinter unit called Forces of the East (Katibah Masyaari).²⁵

A combination of factors has effectively limited the success of these terrorists. The major anti-terrorism unit, Special Detachment 88 (*Detasemen Khusus 88, Densus 88*), which was formed in 2002 in the wake of the Bali bombings and received American and Australian training, has had a significant impact. The unit is aggressive on both the intelligence-gathering and operational fronts.²⁶ Another

factor has been the response of Muslims adhering to dominant local forms of Islam, who have rejected radicalism and terrorism. Their response has limited the size of the ISIS recruiting pool and has isolated those already recruited. According to certain statistics, a Muslim from Indonesia is about seventy times less likely to join ISIS than a Muslim from the UK or several other European countries.²⁷

Saudi influence, however, has been unyielding. In 1972, Saudi money helped found the “Ivy League” of jihadist *pesantren*, the Al-Mukmin school in Ngruki, Central Java. The four Bali bombers graduated from that school, as have other militants. The school was co-founded by Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, the “spiritual leader” of the Bali bombers. Although he was sentenced to fifteen years in prison in 2011, he continues to heavily influence the school. Additionally, Umar Faruq, a senior member of the terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah, who was arrested in 2002, told the Central Intelligence Agency that Saudi charity al-Haramain provided money to his group.²⁸ Jafar Umar Thalib, the leader of Laskar Jihad, a militia that slaughtered Christians in Maluku, graduated from LIPIA. Meanwhile, supporters of Wahhabi and other radical ideologies have been prominent on social media, including a radical “Muslim Cyber Army,” inundating their moderate counterparts.²⁹

The Imprisonment of Ahok

THE TRIAL AND CONVICTION FOR BLASPHEMY OF THE GOVERNOR OF JAKARTA, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), was a watershed in this trend toward radicalization. Ahok is both ethnic Chinese in a society with strong anti-Chinese sentiments, and Christian in a country that is 88 percent Muslim. Ahok, however, was an energetic and efficient governor with a 70 percent approval rating.

While campaigning for election in September 2016, Ahok remarked that the Koranic verse al-Maidah 51, warning Muslims against taking Jews or Christians as allies, was being misused by some clerics to argue that Muslims must not vote for a Christian. Several days later, a video of his remarks that had been deceptively edited by Buni Yani, a communications lecturer, went viral. The MUI responded with a fatwa accusing him of blasphemy. The radical Islamic Defenders’ Front (Front Pembela Islam, FPI), which has violently attacked Muslim minorities, churches, and nightclubs, joined with the newly formed National Movement to Safeguard the Indonesian Ulema Council’s Fatwa (GNPF-MUI). Together, they called for demonstrations demanding that Ahok be tried and imprisoned. Other

Islamist groups, such as the Forum Umat Islam (FUI), the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI), Forum Ulama Umat Indonesia (FUUI), Aliansi Nasional Anti Syiah (ANNAS), and the Jamaat Ansharut Tauhid (JAT), also joined the movement. On November 4 and December 2 there were massive, largely peaceful demonstrations against blasphemy, one of which drew half a million people. This was an unusual display of strength for the hitherto marginal FPI.

NU and Muhammadiyah leaders, for their part, counseled calm and advised their members to avoid demonstrations and simply vote for those candidates they believed would contribute most to the public good. Despite these pleas, some senior members of these two organizations joined in the accusations against Ahok. In the end, the moderate NU and Muhammadiyah were outflanked by the radicals.

Ahok was ultimately arrested and tried for blasphemy, and on May 9, 2017, he was sentenced to two years in prison. Further, three of the five trial judges were promoted by the Indonesian Supreme Court the following day.³⁰ Senior politicians, the military, and other elites had managed to manipulate sincere religious grievances for political purposes. These actors also likely helped fund the massive demonstrations—the thousands of buses, lunch boxes, and neatly printed signs and T-shirts.

The 2016 election had echoes of the 2014 presidential election, when Jokowi defeated Prabowo Subianto, son-in-law of the last dictator, Soeharto, and a former special forces general suspected of human rights abuses. Jokowi is the first Indonesian president from outside the military and political establishment. He and Ahok campaigned together in 2014, and both won their respective offices. Prabowo is widely suspected of seeking revenge in 2016 for his loss in 2014. His machinations may have also been aimed at influencing the 2019 presidential election. There had been rumors that Jokowi might be considering Ahok as his vice-presidential running mate. Prabowo and some of Suharto's children are thought to be planning another presidential run, and they may be hoping that current unrest will increase demand for expanded security services and a firm political hand.

The Ahok verdict split the country. It also created tensions between the president and the military and the police and the military, who have tended to take different sides in the Ahok affair. Gatot Nurmantyo, then chief of the Indonesian Military (TNI), publicly contradicted the national police chief, General Tito Karnavian, a Jokowi ally, about whether there was anything treasonous in the anti-Ahok demonstrations.

A Political Counterattack on Radicalism

THE AHOK INCIDENT POINTS TO GROWING RADICALIZATION, ESPECIALLY AMONG university students (with the exception of the state Islamic universities, which are usually sites of moderation). Ahok's conviction, however, may have salutary effects. Many Indonesians, including those in the government, have now acknowledged the increase in radicalism. This realization has led to a counterattack.

On November 17, 2017, Buni Yani, who had created and promulgated the tampered video of Ahok's talk, was himself sentenced to one and a half years in prison for spreading hate speech.³¹ Then, Rizieq Shihab, leader of the FPI and a leading instigator of the demonstrations, was investigated for blasphemy after reports that he made denigrating remarks about the Holy Trinity. He was then questioned concerning an alleged insult to the official state ideology of Pancasila. Finally, the police interrogated him about insulting Soekarno, Indonesia's revered first president. He was again summoned to answer accusations that he had insulted the new banknotes, saying they featured Communist symbols. On May 30, 2017, he was charged under the pornography law for allegedly sending sexually explicit messages to Firza Husein, who herself has been arrested for treason for her role in organizing the mass demonstrations. Rizieq, a graduate of King Saud University, fled to Saudi Arabia, where he remains today.³² His lawyer claims he is a guest of the government of Saudi Arabia, which is covering all his expenses, because he is a descendent of the Prophet. The Saudi government has not commented on the matter.³³ The ongoing legal folderol suggests the police are using multiple vague accusations to keep troublesome people in line. After all, few Indonesians actually face charges for insulting the Trinity, Pancasila, a former president, or banknotes, not to mention engaging in pornography and consorting with a treason suspect.³⁴

The counterattack has also involved new policy initiatives aimed at further cracking down on radical organizations. In July 2017, an administrative decree, Perppu n. 2/2017, banned Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) because its call for the restoration of the caliphate violates Pancasila, Indonesia's official state ideology. The Constitutional Court has upheld the decree.³⁵ Additionally, on October 24, 2017, the parliament passed a law allowing the government to ban organizations opposed to Pancasila.³⁶ Furthermore, President Jokowi has made multiple speeches emphasizing the importance of diversity and national unity and has

appointed a special committee to advise him on how best to promote the official ideology of Indonesia.

On November 7, 2017, the Constitutional Court unanimously held unconstitutional the existing legal requirement that Indonesians identify only as Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, or Confucian on their national identification cards. The case concerned the religious status of “tribal religions” (*loran kepercayaan*), which had not previously been regarded as real religions but as “cultural belief systems.” There are about 1,200 such groups with a total of at least twelve million followers.³⁷ The court held that *loran kepercayaan* must be treated equally and recommended that identity cards include a seventh category, “Believers of the Faith.”

A Doctrinal Counterattack on Radicalism

WHILE AHOK’S IMPRISONMENT HAS GIVEN MORE URGENCY TO GOVERNMENTAL efforts to counter radical Islam, members of moderate Muslim organizations, especially NU, have been advocating for their own reformist agenda for several years. In May 2017, NU’s five-million-member-strong youth movement, Gerakan Pemuda Ansor, convened more than 300 international religious scholars to consider the “obsolete tenets of classical Islamic law” that call for “perpetual conflict with those who do not embrace or submit to Islam.” At this gathering, the Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam was drafted, which builds on the May 16, 2016, NU-hosted International Summit of Moderate Islamic Leaders.

This declaration is far more self-critical than the much more famous 2016 Marrakesh Declaration “The Rights of Religious Minorities in Predominantly Muslim Lands,” propagated under the auspices of the Moroccan and Emirati governments, and argues that there are elements within classical Islam that are problematic and need to be changed. It states:

If Muslims do not address the key tenets of Islamic orthodoxy that authorize and explicitly enjoin ... violence, anyone—at any time—may harness the orthodox teachings of Islam to defy what they claim to be the illegitimate laws

and authority of an infidel state and butcher their fellow citizens, regardless of whether they live in the Islamic world or the West. This is the bloody thread that links so many current events, from Egypt, Syria and Yemen to the streets of Mumbai, Jakarta, Berlin, Nice, Stockholm and Westminster.

At the press conference announcing the declaration, Ansor chairman Yaqut Qoumas stated, "It is false and counterproductive to claim that the actions of al-Qaeda, ISIS, Boko Haram and other such groups have nothing to do with Islam, or merely represent a perversion of Islamic teachings. They are, in fact, outgrowths of Wahhabism and other fundamentalist streams of Sunni Islam."³⁸

Yahya Cholil Staquf, head of Ansor and general secretary of the NU Supreme Council, reemphasized these themes in a July 18, 2017, address to the Council of the European Union Terrorism Working Party, many of whose members may well have accused the speaker of Islamophobia had he been anyone else.³⁹

While the NU organization as a whole has not endorsed the declaration, Yahya says it is being discussed and that he has had surprisingly little pushback either in Indonesia or internationally for his remarks. He believes his critics are boxed in: they must say either that classical Islam does not teach what he says it does, which would be exegetically difficult, or that it does teach such things and Muslims should follow them.⁴⁰

It remains to be seen what influence this initiative might have, especially in the Middle East, which is often aloof from ideas and arguments offered in more distant areas. Regardless, this is a striking initiative.

Toward the 2019 Election

THE TACTICS USED AGAINST AHOK IN THE 2017 JAKARTA GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION are already being employed in anticipation of the 2018 presidential election. In anonymous leaflets, Jokowi is accused of being a secret Christian and is simultaneously being linked with the disbanded Indonesian Communist Party. Islamists using the name Alumni 212, referring to the December 2 date of the biggest anti-Ahok demonstration, staged a reunion in Jakarta in which speakers declared that Jokowi had criminalized the MUI and was selling Indonesia to Chinese tycoons and foreigners. To counter these allegations, Jokowi has distanced himself from

Ahok, stressed the importance of Jerusalem to Muslims, come to the defense of persecuted Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, and is developing stronger ties with the NU and Muhammadiyah as well as the military.⁴¹

In the short term, two tests will indicate what Islam's future is in Indonesia. First, will the government circumscribe the authority of the MUI, and second, will it implement the recent Constitutional Court ruling concerning the *loran kepercayaan*. These will be bellwethers for whether Indonesia strengthens its tolerant traditions or slides into radicalism.

NOTES

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- https://www.amnestyusa.org/files/_index-asa_210182014.pdf; Dicky Sofjan, "Religious Diversity and Politico-Religious Intolerance in Indonesia and Malaysia," *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 14, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 53-65, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15570274>.
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 9. Azyumardi Azra, "Sustainable Indonesian Islam, A Blessing for the Universe," *Indonesia Netherland Society*, August 3, 2015, originally published in the Indonesian daily *Kompas*, August 3, 2015, <http://indonesia-nederland.org/events/azyumardi-azra-sustainable-indonesian-islam-a-blessing-for-the-universe/>.
 10. Hefner, Riddell, and many others stress that Islam forms an obvious layer of Indonesian cultures. See Robert W. Hefner, *Hindu Javanese: Tengger Tradition and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) and Peter Riddell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World: Transmission and Responses* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001).
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 16. This section draws on my "Saudi Influence and Islamic Radicalism in Indonesia: How Can They Be Countered after Ahok's Imprisonment?," *Lausanne Global Analysis* 6, no. 5

- (September 2017), <https://www.lausanne.org/content/lga/2017-09/saudi-influence-islamic-radicalization-indonesia>.
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 19. For an overview, see Jeremy Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 48–51.
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 21. See Krithika Varagur, “Saudi Arabia Is Redefining Islam for the World’s Largest Muslim Nation,” *Atlantic*, March 2, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/03/saudi-arabia-salman-visit-indonesia/518310/>.
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33. "Fugitive FPI Leader Rizieq's Expenses Being Paid by Saudi Government Since He's a Descendant of the Prophet: Lawyer," *Coconuts Jakarta*, October 12, 2017, <https://coconuts.co/jakarta/news/fugitive-fpi-leader-rizieqs-expenses-paid-saudi-govt-since-hes-descendent-prophet-lawyer/>.
34. The investigation into the accusations of insulting Pancasila and Soekarno was dropped in early 2018.
35. "Disahkan jadi UU, gugatan Perppu ditolak MK," *CNN Indonesia*, December 12, 2017, accessed January 17, 2018, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20171212162704-12-261871/disahkan-jadi-uu-gugatan-perppu-ormas-ditolak-mk>. Following independence in 1945, under President Sukarno, the country embraced the broad state ideology of Pancasila, which was enshrined in the preamble to the 1945 constitution. It proclaims five principles, some of which can be difficult to render into English: "One Lordship, just and civilized

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Contributors

NATHANIEL BARR is a Research Manager at Valens Global.

SVANTE CORNELL is Director, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, American Foreign Policy Council/Institute for Security and Development Policy, and publisher, Turkey Analyst.

C. CHRISTINE FAIR is Provost's Distinguished Associate Professor with Georgetown University's Security Studies Program.

DAVEED GARTENSTEIN-ROSS is a Senior Fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

PAUL MARSHALL is Wilson Professor of Religious Freedom at Baylor University and Senior Fellow at Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom and the Religious Freedom Institute.

NATHANIEL RABKIN is Managing Editor of Inside Iraqi Politics.

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