

Could Al Qaeda's Own Strategy to Defeat Itself Actually Work?

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Introduction

Abu Yahya al Libi's importance within Al Qaeda and influence on its strategic decisions cannot be overstated. However, in his video titled "Dots of the Letters" released on September 9, 2007, Abu Yahya sabotaged the terrorist organization from within by providing the United States with six of the most potentially effective policy solutions to combat Al Qaeda to date. While not out of swagger or self-defeating tendencies, Abu Yahya offered these policy recommendations to illustrate just how far off the United States has been in its quest to defeat Al Qaeda.

This article will analyze the efficacy, feasibility, and current level of utilization of Abu Yahya's recommendations within the U.S. strategy against Al Qaeda. Through Abu Yahya's advice to America, Al Qaeda may have unwittingly triggered its own self-destruct button.

Could Al Qaeda's Own Strategy to Defeat Itself Actually Work?

Since his 2005 escape from Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, Abu Yahya al Libi's stock within Al Qaeda has continued to rise. As a member of the infamous "Bagram Four" which escaped U.S. custody, Abu Yahya publically defied and embarrassed the United States and gave hope to his fellow jihadists.[1] Overnight he became the jihadist movement's Robin Hood. He is young, energetic, intelligent, charismatic, well-spoken, and considered by many to be the future of Al Qaeda.[2] Further strengthening his resume within the jihadist movement, he, unlike Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri, is trained in religion. Abu Yahya is not only a senior member of Al Qaeda and member of its Shari'a Committee, but he has also been dubbed Al Qaeda's Defense Minister, Theological Enforcer, and the High-Command's attack dog.[3] In addition, his numerous appearances on as-Sahab, Al Qaeda's media entity, ranks second only to Zawahiri.[4]

Abu Yahya's importance within Al Qaeda and influence on its strategic decisions cannot be overstated. Why then would he personally wheel a Trojan Horse into Al Qaeda Central's compound in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan? This Trojan Horse arrived eight months ago in the form of a 93 minute video where Abu Yahya laid out how the United States could defeat Al Qaeda. In his video titled "Dots of the Letters," the Libyan provided six steps for the United States to win the war of ideas.

Jarret Brachman at the Combating Terrorism Center, West Point, has offered his insights as to why Abu Yahya has provided the United States with Al Qaeda's weaknesses. He argues that it

was neither out of "goodwill nor self-destructive tendencies."^[5] Brachman explains Abu Yahya's actions as an "explosive cocktail of youth, rage, arrogance and intellect," with the purpose of first, exposing how far behind the United States is in competing with Al Qaeda in the war of ideas and second, dispelling fears from within Al Qaeda that the United States will win the war anytime soon.^[6] As one of Al Qaeda's chief strategists, however, Abu Yahya may now be regretting letting this as-Sahab video get away.

Regardless of Abu Yahya's reasoning for providing the United States with Al Qaeda's weaknesses, or whether or not bin Laden sanctioned their release, the United States has been afforded an incredible opportunity to act on valuable recommendations. Abu Yahya's six steps are revolutionary not only because it may be the first time in history that a warring party has knowingly given its enemy the key to the kingdom, but also because of their incredible insight and potential efficacy. Through Abu Yahya's advice to the United States, Al Qaeda may have unwittingly triggered its own self-destruct button. For these reasons, a more in-depth evaluation of this unsolicited advice from a high-level insider is warranted to see how the United States could operationalize this counter strategy to Al Qaeda's war of ideas.

Abu Yahya's six steps for defeating Al Qaeda are:^[7]

1. Focus on amplifying cases of ex-jihadists who have renounced armed action
2. Fabricate stories about Jihadist mistakes and exaggerate mistakes when possible
3. Prompt mainstream Muslim clerics to issue fatwas that incriminate the Jihadist movement and its actions
4. Strengthen and back Islamic movements far removed from Jihad, particularly those with a democratic approach
5. Aggressively neutralize or discredit the guiding thinkers of the Jihadist movement
6. Spin minor disagreements among leaders of Jihadist organizations as being major doctrinal or methodological disputes

Collectively, this list is impressive because it hurts Al Qaeda on so many levels. It undercuts Al Qaeda by detracting from its base of support within the mainstream Muslim community. It exacerbates fractures within Al Qaeda and the jihadist movement, provides religious fatwas that counter its ideology, and undermines its legitimacy in relation to competing movements within Islam.

A recent speech by Juan Zarate, the U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor for Combating Terrorism, spoke of the current "markers of success" against Al Qaeda in the War on Terror.^[8] Several of his markers lined up with Abu Yahya's recommendations for defeating Al Qaeda. Zarate addressed how terrorists were being neutralized with consistency and frequency. He also pointed out that rejection of Al Qaeda has "started to emerge within extremist circles"—a point which Abu Yahya said was necessary for America to defeat Al Qaeda.^[9] While Zarate addressed some of Abu Yahya's points, a more comprehensive view of Abu Yahya's own markers of success would have formed not only a better scorecard by which to evaluate American progress against Al Qaeda, but also a better playbook by which to prosecute the war of ideas.

The balance of this paper will explore Abu Yahya's recommendations to defeat Al Qaeda. Their efficacy, feasibility, and current level of utilization within the U.S. strategy in the war of ideas will be analyzed. A closer look at each of the six steps will provide a walk-through for how the United States could implement these steps using both past examples and future actions.

1. Ex-jihadists

Telling the story of ex-jihadists to the world is one of the most powerful tools to defeat Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda prides itself on being on the right side of history in the clash of civilizations. It has

argued that short-term jihadist defeats at the hands of the West are inconsequential in the long war between Islam and the West. Al Qaeda has extended the time horizon of the war as to minimize the impact of any one tactical-level loss. Even a draw, such as the Battle of Tora Bora, can be seen as a victory because the West was not victorious. However, the defecting *en masse*, or even in part, of jihadists could be the strongest antidote to counter this message that Al Qaeda is winning the long war. Not only does it signal a shift in support for Al Qaeda, but it denotes future problems in recruitment and flaws in sustainment of the campaign for the Islamic Caliphate.

Jihadist recruitment and radicalization are analogous to wildfire in the most dry and combustible areas. When the number of recruits to jihadist groups rises, its impact is exponential on the jihadist cause. Every additional recruit serves as an ambassador for the greater movement, inspiring family members, friends, and acquaintances by both the good news in their religious solidarity and victories, but also with their bad news of injury and death. Often the latter inspires a sense of revenge with willing observers accepting the gauntlet.

Consequently, the most influential way to counter this spread of jihadist recruitment and radicalization is to inspire change from within. Internal change is even stronger than destroying jihadist fighters because it avoids their becoming martyrs and living on in memory to fight another day. This internal change can be manifested in ex-jihadists. Ex-jihadists have abandoned the cause for many reasons. Some leave because of disdain for the violations of noncombatant immunity and the targeting of civilians. Others disagree with the designation of the United States as the primary target instead of their more proximate source of anger—their own apostate Muslim regimes. Still others are disillusioned with the difficult and primitive lifestyles of a jihadist in Pakistan, Afghanistan, or Iraq, where constant fear of Coalition soldiers follows them everyday. Regardless of why ex-jihadists have defected, the critical step is the publication of their story. These individual stories, although anecdotal, will help to illuminate the cracks in the jihadist movement for all would-be recruits to see.

Noman Benotman, the former leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, is one such ex-jihadist with significant power to reform the jihadist movement and undercut Al Qaeda. Benotman fought with bin Laden in Afghanistan in the early 1990s against the communist government. He achieved a level of importance within the jihadist movement as to receive an invitation by bin Laden to a conference of jihadist leaders in 2000.^[10] Disillusioned by bin Laden's future plans to attack the United States, Benotman made waves at the conference by voicing his dissent in attacking the powerful, "far enemy." In the years that followed, he was further upset by Al Qaeda's targeting of noncombatants.^[11] He formally criticized Al Qaeda in 2007 with a public letter to Zawahiri. While this recantation by Benotman was a significant event in the Arab media, it was not well circulated in the Western media.^[12] It should have been. At a time when experts believe the future of Al Qaeda lies in Europe, this recantation by a prominent ex-jihadist must be aired on the likes of BBC, German RTL, and Italy's Rai Uno.

The story of Benotman is not a lone iceberg waiting to sink Al Qaeda. Abdullah Anas is another influential ex-jihadist recanter that had worked closely with bin Laden for ten years in Afghanistan. Further solidifying his stature within the jihadist movement, Anas married the daughter of one of the founding fathers of Al Qaeda, Abdullah Azzam.^[13] After disavowing Al Qaeda, the former mujahidin has publically worked to stem Islamic extremism. He has even spoken out against extremism in sermons at the Finsbury Park Mosque in London—a traditional hot-bed for radical Islamic thought.^[14] Greater dissemination of this story, and the stories of like-minded individuals with similar backgrounds, would pay huge dividends in undermining Al Qaeda's recruitment potential.

While the United States cannot force the hand of media to publish these stories, it can spread this message using venues such as speeches and conferences by State Department and counterterrorism officials.

2. Jihadist mistakes

Abu Yahya's second recommendation is to promote Jihadist mistakes. There are two basic components to this idea: 1) the exposure of true stories where Al Qaeda has shot itself in the foot, and 2) a disinformation campaign centered on introducing negative stories about Al Qaeda that may not be entirely true. In the first case, the United States has not done an adequate enough job exposing these propaganda gifts from Al Qaeda. Regarding a disinformation campaign, the United States should look into mirroring some of the CIA's successes during the Cold War.

While Al Qaeda has marketed itself as an Islamic movement, most of its violence has been against Muslim civilians.^[15] First, it is easier to attack civilians than it is an up-armored and prepared American military convoy. Second, the jihadist attackers are not always trained to the level necessary to execute precision attacks that limit harm to noncombatants. Increased media exposure of attacks on noncombatants, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, will increase animosity towards Al Qaeda. The United States and Europe must highlight Al Qaeda's atrocities against civilians for all to see.

With the proof in the polling numbers, Al Qaeda's miscalculation in targeting noncombatants has begun to detract from its support base. It has overstepped its bounds.^[16] Its increased suicide attacks within Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Pakistan have caused its supporters to leave in droves. In a Terror Free Tomorrow survey from 2005, the year suicide bombings first peaked in Pakistan, the number of Pakistanis believing that suicide bombing was justified dropped from 73 percent to 46 percent.^[17] A more recent Terror Free Tomorrow poll in Pakistan shows that support for bin Laden has plummeted from 46 percent to 24 percent, and backing for Al Qaeda has dropped from 33 percent to 18 percent in the past six months.^[18]

This falling support for Al Qaeda due to its mistake-ridden strategy of targeting noncombatants can be accentuated by highlighting the personal stories of its victims. Putting a face to a news story adds the human dimension to Al Qaeda's terror attacks. For example, the global networks of Al Qaeda's victims provide this face to the tragedies of Al Qaeda's movement and can aid its downfall through exposure to the world.^[19]

Al Qaeda's mistakes are not limited to killing civilians. Another kind of mistake that hurt Al Qaeda's cause was its employment of two mentally handicapped women as suicide bombers in Iraq. This February 1, 2008, bombing killed 73 Iraqis, and was responded to almost immediately with condemnation by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. In an uncharacteristically timely and well-engineered media release, she capitalized on this propaganda gift by saying that the attack proves that Al Qaeda is the "the most brutal and bankrupt of movements."^[20] In addition, the spokesman for the Multinational Division-Baghdad said: "by targeting innocent Iraqis, they [Al Qaeda] show their true demonic character"^[21] Further news coverage suggested conflicting reports that the handicapped women were remote detonated and that they were not aware of what they were doing.^[22] This remote detonation twist to the story brings us to the nexus of where the true and accurate reporting of Al Qaeda mistakes could intersect with possible fabrication and exaggeration.

Whether true information or not, a disinformation campaign can wield powerful results. Case in point is the use of disinformation in the Cold War by the CIA. In *The Mighty Wurlitzer*, the CIA's many front organizations were exposed along with how the United States undermined the USSR and communism. These front organizations received a paycheck from the CIA but were under no explicit obligation to follow CIA orders. The now defunct *Encounter Magazine* is one such example of how a liberal voice impacted the Cold War's war of ideas. While such organizations would need insularity from overt connections to the U.S. government, their benefits in criticizing jihadist extremism could be helpful in the current war of ideas against Islamic militants.

A second example of an effective disinformation campaign is Al Qaeda's own use of disinformation against the United States. Al Qaeda has used carefully orchestrated strategic misrepresentation campaigns running the gamut from slight exaggerations to flat out lies. An example of how successful this disinformation program has been is the fact that large majorities in Egypt, Pakistan, Turkey, and Indonesia still believe that the 9/11 attacks were not carried out by groups of Arabs.[23]

These strategic misrepresentations by Al Qaeda have all had one goal in common: to incite fury in the Muslim community. Once the anger stemming from the disinformation has bubbled over, the question of content accuracy is almost a moot point. An example of this misrepresentation is Zawahiri's statement about the United States telling Saudi Arabia to stop printing the Koran. In May 2003, Zawahiri said the following:

Part of the Congressional report on the 11 September events, which the U.S. Government banned its publication, included a recommendation to ban the Saudi Government from printing and distributing the holy Koran. Why? Because it includes verses that call for hating the Jews and Christians. Crime and arrogance have reached this point. This is why, beloved brothers, Muslims must consult each other, take care of their own affairs, examine their situation, and then strengthen themselves and rely on Almighty God in resisting this Crusader-Jewish campaign, which is aimed at destroying Islam and Muslims.[24]

Zawahiri then accused President George W. Bush of being addicted to alcohol. Since the use of alcohol is prohibited in Islam, addiction to it is even more abhorrent to Muslims. While Bush received a DUI at age 30, this misdemeanor is not commensurate to addiction. Zawahiri also attempts to cast all Americans as alcoholics; also inaccurate as only about 5 percent of Americans abuse alcohol.[25] Nonetheless, in this well engineered disinformation campaign, Zawahiri states:

Bush suffers from an addictive personality and was an alcoholic. I don't know his present condition (Americans know best about that as they are experts in alcohol and addiction to it). But the one who examines his personality finds that he is addicted to two other faults, lying and gambling.[26]

From this disinformation campaign, potential Al Qaeda recruits need look no further than these lies that all Americans are alcoholics and want to stop printing the Koran in Islam's most holy place. A disinformation campaign when cleverly executed, such as by Al Qaeda today and the CIA during the Cold War, can reap invaluable benefits.

3. Fatwas that incriminate the Jihadist movement

Abu Yahya's third of idea of pressuring Muslim clerics to issue fatwas contrary to the Jihadist movement would have incredible power in cutting off the cancer of Islamic extremism at the root.[27] Peter Bergen has compared this type of intervention on the part of clerics to religious chemotherapy that eradicates extremism. Implementing Abu Yahya's recommendation would have two distinct parts. First, it would be the identification of moderate clerics to encourage them to issue fatwas against the more extreme clerics and militants. Second, it would target extremist clerics and pressure them to recant and recall their previous incendiary remarks.

When dealing with Muslim clerics, it is important to differentiate between the non-violent and violent salafi scholars. The salafi movement is used to describe "proper religious adherence and moral legitimacy" to Islam.[28] The schism within this movement revolves around the use of violence and, hence, Islamic scholars are separated into those supporting violence and those who oppose it. Interestingly enough, since the non-violent salafi scholars comprise the vast

majority of the movement, their message should be louder.[29] Al Qaeda and the few violent salafi scholars, however, have hijacked the entire salafi movement and made it appear that violence is the true Islamic interpretation. This could be countered by more moderate clerics issuing contradictory fatwas.

Recently there has been some success by Middle Eastern governments to force the hand of extremist clerics to recant for their past remarks and even speak out against Al Qaeda. They have even used moderate and reformed clerics to retrain jihadists in prison with a more moderate interpretation of the Koran. The opponents of these "reprogramming campaigns" have attributed the recent trend of clerics and ex-jihadists recanting as a byproduct of torture in the prisons of secular governments. Abu Yahya, in a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde moment, also expressed his anger for this governmental and clerical pressure that follows his advice of disparaging the jihadist movement. Abu Yahya said in his "Dots on the Letters" video:

Tell me, what do you expect from someone who sees the sword above him, the rug in front of him and the sheik dictating to him the proof and evidence for the obligation of obeying the ruler?[30]

The names on the list of rehabilitated clerics, however, demonstrate that even extremely credible religious figures, especially those not prone to being turn-coats, have already spoken out against Al Qaeda.

The first is the Saudi religious scholar Sheik al Oudah. Lending to his credibility within the jihadist movement, he was the founder of the Islamic awakening movement in the 1980s known as Sahwa. While not regarded as an American sympathizer, he began criticizing bin Laden in September 2007.[31] His personal criticism of bin Laden stated that Al Qaeda's leader had "hijacked Islam," and that while Oudah believed he was unable to influence bin Laden himself, he wanted to tell bin Laden's followers about the problems of Al Qaeda.[32] The transformational impact of Oudah on future jihadist recruitment and retention within Al Qaeda has been enormous and his further exposure can only hurt the jihadist movement.

Sayyid Imam al Sharif, aka Dr. Fadl, is another significant cleric who has turned his back on Al Qaeda. As the ideological godfather of Al Qaeda and Zawahiri's mentor, Dr. Fadl published the Bible of modern jihad called, *The Basic Principles in Making Preparation for Jihad*. [33] He also provided the religious basis for the idea that Muslims martyring themselves in an act of jihad go straight to paradise. Then in November, 2007, Fadl momentarily withdrew his support for Al Qaeda in the blistering book entitled *Rationalization of Jihad*. [34] Fadl later called bin Laden and Zawahiri "extremely immoral" and cautioned Muslim youth against being "seduced by them." [35] While Zawahiri countered that Fadl's message is skewed because he wrote it from an Egyptian prison cell, the damage was already done to Al Qaeda and the greater jihadist movement.

The significance of Fadl's reversal cannot be overstated. Whether he was a product of the new reprogramming initiatives or not, these rehabilitation programs in the Middle East and Asia have thus far had an excellent track-record and should be continued in the future for both radical clerics and captured militants. Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan currently run very effective programs in which those rehabilitated persons must sign forms agreeing to avoid jihadist activity. In honor-based societies, those family members and local clerics that pick up their ex-jihadist from prison agree to ensure there is no relapse.[36] In Saudi Arabia, this type of program is called de-radicalization and in Afghanistan it is amnesty.[37] Semantics aside, Yemen, Indonesia, Egypt, and Singapore have also followed suit with similarly effective retraining systems.[38] The power of moderate clerics working in prisons and using their religious backgrounds to debunk violent interpretations of the Koran has paid huge dividends and dissuading jihadists from returning to action.

4. Strengthen other Islamic movements

Abu Yahya's point that the United States should strengthen and support Islamic movements dissimilar to Al Qaeda is also insightful. This idea is premised on the fact that there are many competing movements within Islam and that the competition for recruits is often fierce. In the recruiting pool for young, impressionable, and deeply religious Muslims, there are often multiple suitors. For example, in Gaza, Hamas and Al Qaeda-like start-ups such as Fatah al Islam have often stepped on each others' toes.^[39] When faced with the decision of which organization is better to support, the United States should actively favor the group that is less radical and most embraces Western ideas such as democracy. The possibility of an Al Qaeda affiliate winning out should be proactively prevented.

One approach the United States could adopt in deciding which competing Islamic groups to fund would be to see which groups Al Qaeda leaders are selecting to chastise and why. For example, Zawahiri has attacked both Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood because they have embraced democracy. The incompatibility of democracy and the Sharia Law is one of Al Qaeda's bones of contention. The Muslim Brotherhood, the largest Islamic organization, has not taken Al Qaeda's criticism sitting down. It has begun to mobilize its resources against Al Qaeda, and its Supreme Guide of the Brotherhood, Mohammed Akef, has said, "we have made a huge effort in combating [the radicals] through spreading a moderate understanding of the Koran."^[40] As such, the more competitors to Al Qaeda that emerge or become stronger, the more Al Qaeda's recruiting pool will narrow. The United States should look into initiatives that support Al Qaeda's competitors such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas as long as they continue to embrace Islamic moderacy, non-violence, and democracy.

5. Neutralize important figures of Al Qaeda

Abu Yahya's suggestion to aggressively neutralize the guiding thinkers of the Jihadist movement is something that the United States has done fairly well. Abu Yahya said that by decapitating the senior members and guiding thinkers of Al Qaeda, remaining members of the movement will be left, "without an authority in which they can put their full confidence and which directs and guides them, allays their misconceptions, and regulates their march with knowledge, understanding, and wisdom."^[41]

Since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, the bureaucracy of Al Qaeda has been decimated. In one fell swoop, Al Qaeda lost its sanctuary, lines of communication, funding and access to bank accounts, training bases, and most of its men. Marc Sageman has placed the remnants of Al Qaeda Central—the original members from the Afghan resistance of the 1980s—at only a few dozen men. He has also said that the second wave of Al Qaeda that joined in the 1990s has been whittled down to only about a hundred fighters.^[42] With the large majority of the remaining high-value Al Qaeda members holed in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan, the next step would be a coordinated and genuine effort between the governments of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United States to root out the hold-overs.

Once these "guiding thinkers" of Al Qaeda are obtained, however, a nuanced approach to dealing with their capture must be adopted. The captured jihadists, regardless of the level of importance within Al Qaeda, must be processed, interrogated, and imprisoned without the fanfare associated with recent captures or killings of other key figures.^[43] If bin Laden is brought to justice and paraded around, he will have a "platform for global propaganda."^[44] Not parading a high-level detainee, however, is counterintuitive to the political desires of displaying the fruits of its labor and providing a short-term psychological victory against Al Qaeda. Nonetheless, the value of a martyred bin Laden or Zawahiri can be greater in captivity or death than on the battlefield. To prevent Al Qaeda figures from becoming martyrs of mythical proportions, they must be "stripped on their glory" and treated as common criminals.^[45] They cannot be afforded the extra publicity

that has been so vital in building up Al Qaeda's reputation. Even applying the title of terrorist instead of criminal provides bin Laden and his associates with "a status and dignity that they seek and that they do not deserve."^[46] As Margaret Thatcher famously stated in 1985, "publicity is the oxygen of terrorism." A relatively quiet capture of bin Laden and other high-level Al Qaeda figures would steal this oxygen necessary for their legends to thrive.

6. Exploit internal disputes

It appears that Al Qaeda has been given a free-pass by the United States when it comes to its doctrinal or methodological disputes. Abu Yahya highlighted this American gift in his recommendation that America should attempt to spin minor disagreements between the leaders of jihadist organizations. Abu Yahya recommended a concerted "war of defamation" against Al Qaeda that provides, "a safe-haven for rumormongers, deserters, and demoralizers, [where] the door is left wide open for defamation, casting doubts, and making accusations and slanders."^[47] He argued that if Americans exploited these divisions, jihadist propagandists would be left as "hoarse as someone shouting in the middle of thousands of people."^[48] A closer look at past Al Qaeda disputes would show that the United States has given a bye to Al Qaeda by not playing up both its internal rifts and those between itself and other jihadist groups.

There are three major fault lines within Al Qaeda that, if exploited properly, could create considerable damage to the organization. These rifts involve the treatment of Shias, the issue of noncombatant immunity, and the targeting of the United States instead of apostate Muslim regimes in the Middle East. To date, there has been considerable controversy within Al Qaeda on these issues.

Regarding the question of Shias, Al Qaeda appears to be playing the good cop, bad cop routine. While the good cops (bin Laden and Zawahiri) try to secure Muslim unity in the fight against the West, the bad cops (Abu Yahya and the former Al Qaeda leader in Iraq Zarqawi) have called for the demise of the Shia. Whether bin Laden has consciously allowed Abu Yahya to rail on the Shia is difficult to know; however, Al Qaeda currently benefits from having its top leaders call for Muslim unity against the West and its second-tier senior leaders consolidate Sunni support by calling for attacks on Shia. Al Qaeda appears to be getting the best of both worlds by playing this dichotomy out in the global media. With the United States failing to expose this strategy, it has allowed Al Qaeda to carry-on unchecked with its bifurcated message.

An even closer look at bin Laden's priority of goals demonstrates that bin Laden and Abu Yahya's stance on the Shia question is incompatible. Bin Laden's current desire for Muslim unity and Abu Yahya's anti-Shia rhetoric point to what Michael Scheuer, the former CIA bin Laden unit chief, has called the "most lethal strategic danger to Al Qaeda ... the premature, worldwide intra-civilizational conflict between Sunni Muslims and Shiites."^[49] Thus, by certain senior members of Al Qaeda calling for the destruction of Shia, they are in direct contradiction to bin Laden's sequential priorities of 1) driving Americans out of Muslim world, 2) destroying apostate Muslim regimes and Israel, and 3) once the first two are complete, dealing with the Shia.^[50] The United States should emphasize these strategic differences pertaining to sequential priorities.

The second rift is the issue of noncombatant immunity. As previously discussed, the targeted killing of both Muslim and non-Muslim civilians has caused a rift in Al Qaeda which has forced many Al Qaeda members onto its enemy's bench. As the carnage of the attacks and the human element of the victims are increasingly exposed, this rift could widen. With polling numbers indicating plummeting support within the Muslim world for the targeting of noncombatants, the die-hard followers of this tactic could find themselves isolated enough to break away from Al Qaeda. If this occurred, the fracturing of the movement would be a tactical-level victory for the United States.

The third dispute within Al Qaeda was the decision to attack the United States instead of focusing on the secular Muslim regimes of the Middle East. Those that opposed attacking the United States believed that the near enemies in the Middle East were still the primary target, and that attacking the far enemy (the United States) would only bring disaster upon the future of the movement. Exposing this disharmony and all future strategic disagreements would be helpful in creating pressures of debate within Al Qaeda.

In addition to internal Al Qaeda disputes, the disagreements between Al Qaeda and other militant Islamic groups could help undermine the greater jihadist movement. In addition to the previously mentioned rift between Al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood, Al Qaeda and Hamas have also quarreled extensively. This is a telling example because both groups are Sunni and recruit from similar pools of individuals. With comparable views toward Israel, Shia, and the West, an amenable relationship would be expected. However, in the past year, Al Qaeda has condemned Hamas numerous times. It has criticized Hamas because it yielded to international law, "forfeited" too much of Palestine, trampled Sharia Law, and adopted democracy. Zawahiri said:

The Hamas Movement's leadership has transgressed on the rights of the Muslim nation and agreed to what it called respecting the international agreements, thus ridiculing Muslims' minds and sentiments. I am sorry to face the Muslim nation with the truth, and to tell it please accept our condolences for [the loss] of the Hamas leadership ... Now, at the time of the deal, the Hamas leadership is handing over to the Jews most of Palestine ... Hamas leadership has abandoned the rule of Shar'iah.[\[51\]](#)

He further chastised Hamas' loss of its fighter spirit:

We cannot relinquish the mujahidin in Hamas and in the rest of Palestine in these circumstances, because the defeat of the mujahidin in Hamas and in other mujahidin groups is a defeat of jihad in Palestine.[\[52\]](#)

With Al Qaeda's public ridicule of a would-be ally in the jihadist movement, exposing these macro-level disagreements via the global media would increase in-fighting, unpack suppressed dissent, and fracture the movement.

Another issue that has the potential to ostracize Al Qaeda from the greater Muslim community is Al Qaeda's adoption of takfir. Takfir is the ability to decide who is a Muslim and who is a kuffar, or nonbeliever.[\[53\]](#) With Al Qaeda's self-proclaimed takfir authority, many Muslims are disenchanted with Al Qaeda. For example, while Turkish people consider themselves Muslims, bin Laden calls the Turkish government apostate and labels its people the worst form of Muslim because they have a secular government, embrace democracy, and are allied to the West. Muslims, such as those in Turkey, are approaching the tipping point where they will not accept Al Qaeda calling them kuffars and will rebel *en masse* against Al Qaeda.[\[54\]](#)

Adding to the impending takfir confrontation, Al Qaeda is also on shaky ground regarding the use of women in some of its suicide bombings. In addition, Al Qaeda has not addressed the role of women in its Internet chat-rooms and their on-line interaction with men.[\[55\]](#) Al Qaeda has also run into contradictions with its selective embrace of modernization regarding the media and Internet. The media-savvy, publicity-mongering Al Qaeda and its relatively high tech media campaign runs juxtaposed to the Taliban's abhorrence for modernity and technology. Hence, the exploitation of this disharmony could drive a wedge between Al Qaeda and other jihadist groups.

Final Thoughts

The extent of Abu Yahya's recommendations for unraveling Al Qaeda is massive because they are an internal survey of Al Qaeda's own weaknesses. It would be on par with Erwin Rommel

providing the United States with Germany's gravest vulnerabilities in 1944. Furthermore, the advice contains culturally-sensitive insights difficult for American counterterrorism strategists to have imagined. For example, the power of a few violent salafi clerics within Al Qaeda and the greater jihadist movement was unknown until recently. Research has shown that only a handful of radical clerics around the world radicalize a large majority of jihadists.[56] Abu Yahya's suggestion to focus on clerics and fatwas corroborates the importance of fatwas in the war of ideas. By informing the United States that it should prompt clerics to issue incriminatory fatwas against Al Qaeda, reprogram jihadists, discredit guiding thinkers, and publicize cases of ex-jihadists, Abu Yahya seems to have exposed Al Qaeda's jugular to a culturally and religiously blind attacker.

Abu Yahya has given the United States the keys to the kingdom and, in doing so, has provided a great opportunity to turn the tide against Al Qaeda in the war of ideas. As argued in this paper, the six recommendations are employable and can serve as the blueprint for future initiatives in the psychological war. Successfully implementing Abu Yahya's advice would severely cripple, if not destroy, Al Qaeda. Augmenting the American counterterrorism and State Department infrastructure to better suit the implementation of this advice will be challenging; however, it is feasible with the shifting of resources within the fight. In a war where brute military force has proved to be insufficient to defeat the enemy, a pivotal turn in the war of ideas is greatly needed to win this long war. Abu Yahya's insightful, lucid pointers have provided a foundation for the way forward.

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