

Waiting out the Islamist Winter: Creating an Effective Counter Narrative to “Jihad”¹

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Abstract

Western governments have largely been ambivalent when it comes to actively countering the ideology behind militant Islamism. European governments have been among the most active in attempting to thwart radicalization by funding a range of community-relations programs, providing training and familiarization courses to imams, and promoting multiculturalism as the counterpoint to extremism. Still, no Western nations have put forward a clear and unified narrative to counter the violent jihadi message that has influenced a great many Muslims worldwide. Whether they should at all hinges largely on the efficacy of such efforts. This paper aims to identify and examine the central narratives of militant Islamism and present potential counter narratives for practitioners and policy makers. After an assessment of the jihadist narrative and its key elements, it contends that the most effective counter narrative will: argue relentlessly that Islam is compatible with democracy and pluralism; and that al-Qaeda and similar jihadist ideology is a perversion of mainstream Islamic belief and its proponents have a record of indifference toward both Muslim and non-Muslim life. An effective counter narrative will also erode the jihadists' religious legitimacy and ideological justifications for violent acts by targeting points of weakness and highlighting divisive issues, thereby diminishing the popular opinion and public support from Muslims on which they depend.

One trend in particular is clear in assessing patterns of radicalization: events abroad affect communities locally. In the ever-increasing caseload of radicalized individuals, a great many of those motivated to carry out an attack say they are moved to do so by the suffering of and oppression against Muslims afar, typically in conflict zones, rather than over the state of Muslim affairs in their home country or community.² This presents both a set of challenges and opportunities for policymakers. On the one hand, the limitations of community-based approaches must be taken into account; the community and its leaders have no influence over events in foreign lands, nor the message that jihadi groups disseminate regarding those conflicts.

¹ The term *jihad*, meaning 'struggle,' is a controversial one and it is used here in lieu of a better alternative. As many have argued, surrendering the term exclusively to the militants and their domain provides them with a degree of legitimacy, as jihad is an established concept in Islam pertaining to personal, spiritual, social, political and sometimes militaristic campaigns. Despite the desire for a convenient alternative, none has emerged into common usage, and contemporary militant Islamist movements are most frequently known as jihadi.

² See for example, Bergen, Peter and Hoffman, Bruce. *Assessing the Terrorist Threat*, Bi-Partisan Policy Center, September 10, 2010: Appendix A. Retrieved from <http://www.bipartisanpolicy.org>

Community engagement as a strategy to counter radicalization must, then, take into account that global events concerning Muslims may be more relevant to those vulnerable to extremist messages than local community issues. Moreover, global events, especially those in the Muslim world, may well have the most impact in diminishing the influence of the jihadi narrative among Muslim communities in the West.

No better example of this can be found than in the 'Arab Spring,' the mass protests and often violent revolt for reform that has taken place across the region, beginning in Tunisia in December 2010 and spreading to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and affecting a number of other neighboring countries. While the outcome of this popular unrest is still in the balance, it is not an exaggeration to say this upheaval represents the largest political event in the region in decades. The most salient aspect for the purposes of counter terrorism is that Islamists, militant or otherwise, played no initial role in bringing about this change and were largely marginalized as events began to unfold. The portrait of al-Qaeda as a vanguard for change in the Muslim world, as it has so often depicted itself, seemed much less plausible in 2011 than it has at any time in its existence. And this shift in perception was not a result of any act of Western policymaking, but rather of unforeseen events stemming from a fruit vendor's self-immolation in Tunis. Despite the initial hopes among many that these events could lead to the demise of militant Islamism—and they seemed to provide a near ideal counter narrative to it—Islamists have made determined efforts in the wake of the Arab Spring to assert themselves into the shaping of their nations' future, a trend aptly observed as the 'Islamist Winter.'

Following the political developments in Egypt in the months after the ouster of Hosni Mubarak, the overwhelming victory of Islamists in parliament prompted many to defer judgment on whether the revolution would indeed be democratic. Broadly defined "Islamists" were elected to hold roughly 75 percent of both the upper and lower houses of the Egyptian Parliament. Moreover, in January 2012, the newly formed elected Sa`ad al-Katatni, a Muslim Brotherhood member and Secretary-General of the Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, as Speaker of the Parliament. While the Brotherhood has demonstrated a moderate stance on many issues and has largely eschewed cooperation with the strict Salafist and primarily Alexandria-based al-Nur Party, it remains clear that political parties structured around Islamic principles dominated Egypt's first open elections since the fall of Mubarak. Certainly, Islamic precepts may frame

much of the discourse in post-Mubarak Egyptian politics, but that dynamic should not be viewed as deterministic of a militant Islamist agenda dominating the nation in the years to come. Rather, it should be viewed as an opportunity for demonstrating the compatibility of Islam and Democracy.

In this changing environment, additional considerations are necessary in crafting a viable counter narrative to jihad, but the fundamental challenge remains the same: The counter narrative must reject the jihadist worldview and storyline while also providing an alternative. This necessitates Islam, as a belief and value system, forming a central part of the counter narrative to jihad, and consequently requires Muslim stewardship to promote and advance it. The strength of the message of al-Qaeda and affiliated groups lies largely in its simplicity. Through an array of media in several languages, highly simplistic and often unrealistic solutions are proposed to the myriad of complex problems facing modern Muslims. The solutions offered within liberal democracy are, by contrast, complex and nuanced, where contradictory values often co-exist within a functional society (i.e. pluralism). The challenges of promoting such a differing system of governance and social organization are great; furthermore, it must be achieved while simultaneously ensuring that Islamic values, practices and cultural sensibilities are not diminished in the process.

Crafting the Counter Narrative

The construction of a counter narrative to violent jihad should be seen as part of a long-term strategy to combat radicalization and recruitment into Islamist militancy. The counter narrative differs from a counter information campaign in that, more than simply maligning the enemy or challenging its message, it offers an alternative vision to which one opts in; a storyline that gives meaning to the actions it is requesting of the subscriber. This narrative, then, must discredit that of the jihadists—most importantly de-legitimizing the violence they promote—while at the same time making a compelling case for forms of non-violent activism and civic participation. The first step in this process is the deconstruction of the jihadist narrative.

Leuprecht et al (2010) correctly identify four key elements of the jihadist narrative (as most prominently expressed by al-Qaeda), that must be considered in any effective counter narrative:

1. Islam is under attack by Western crusaders led by the United States;

2. *Jihadis*, whom the West refers to as ‘terrorists’, are defending against this attack;
3. The actions they take in defence of Islam are proportional, just and religiously sanctified; and, therefore
4. It is the duty of good Muslims to support these actions.

Indeed, the central message put forward by al-Qaeda and other groups is that the Muslim world is under siege, Muslims are suffering violent onslaught, hardship and oppression, and the only appropriate response is violent jihad. This message has been repeated for years, by jihadist theologians in lengthy ideological tracts, in the various online magazines propagated by al-Qaeda and its affiliates, and consistently in the group's video statements. The repetition, coming from a variety of sources, is essential to reinforcing the message. It is also rhetoric backed by examples: the tolls of Muslim casualties in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the actions of repressive regimes in Muslim countries (purportedly in power due to Western support), exploitation of Muslim wealth and natural resources, discrimination and bias against Muslim minorities, and other grievances, real or perceived. That Muslims often lack effective avenues of redress for these grievances has been often cited, correctly, as an important aspect in the radicalization process.

In order to effectively counter this elemental message of the jihadist narrative, Western policymakers must refute the notion of their nations’ doing harm to Muslims and their interests. Western policies that have benefited Muslim interests can and should be highlighted as part of countering the perception of the West crusading against the Islamic world. These include humanitarian and development work, education efforts (the American Universities in Beirut and Cairo enjoy tremendous popularity and esteem), and efforts at building democratic institutions, which should be emphasized in particular, following the mass protests to end autocratic rule and implement democracy. By and large, however, these policies and practices are not about Islam, but are instead secular endeavors in countries inhabited by Muslims.

A number of significant challenges will continue to face counter terrorism practitioners and policymakers as they attempt to counter al-Qaeda's narrative in the longer term. One significant challenge is (gaining) the ability to reach and influence Muslim opinion—not just the opinions of individual Muslims in a given constituency, but the ability to compete with thought leaders and

for thought leadership among Muslims globally. Another aspect of the challenge is how to disseminate the message of the counter narrative: via proxies in Muslim countries, or appointed, local Islamic leaders, or through government officials directly, a combination of these. These challenges demand an understanding of Islam and the Muslim world, and of its practices, values and culture, to an extent greater than has been typical of Western governments. In order to be successful in crafting and implementing a viable counter narrative, counter terrorism practitioners and policymakers must develop a greater familiarity with Islam, to wisely choose partners and understand the nuances of intra-Islamic debate.

The West has not had a policy toward Islam as a religion per se, nor any formal stance toward the Islamic world, but it takes a *de facto* one in response to the unanswered claims of militant Islamists. In order to develop this aspect of the counter narrative, Western nations must formulate a policy toward the Islamic world and Islam itself. This can evolve out of the existing rhetoric, along the basic principle that Islam is compatible with modern society and democratic practices. To do so with credibility, strong partnerships must be forged with leading scholars in the Muslim world that promote such thought, and indeed there are many—Khalid Abou El Fadl, Khursid Ahmad, Muqtedar Khan, to name a few. As with the totality of the counter narrative, this requires a familiarity and comfort with Islam and Muslim culture and practice, which has not fully been cultivated in most Western nations. The more that Islam is a set of foreign beliefs and practices, the more readily violent jihadists can find support from alienated communities. Without doubt, Muslims have the most authoritative role in counter radicalization; they have the greatest credibility in de-legitimizing terrorist actions, but they must be made to feel they are stakeholders in the process—that is, the process of Multiculturalism writ large—not under scrutiny unless and until they prove themselves to be against terrorism.

Al-Qaeda has long defined itself as a “Fighting Vanguard” (*al-Tali`a al-Muqatila*) that is defending Shari`a (Islamic Law) on behalf of the Muslim community, so that an Islamic state can rise out of the aftermath of their battles. This notion must be undermined in its entirety as part of an effective counter narrative; not only is al-Qaeda not a defender of the Muslim nation, but it is in opposition to mainstream Sunni Islamic law in its practices and beliefs. While the interpretation of Islamic law in regards to jihadist ideology is probably best left to Muslim scholars, Western policy makers crafting counter narratives have a number of points they can

leverage to erode al-Qaeda's standing as a defender of the Muslim nation. Most importantly, their perception as a 'defender' relies on Muslim popular opinion.

Importance of Public Opinion

Some of the most frequent attacks against jihadis and their operations center around the damage they do to fellow Muslims. Naturally, these condemnations have been most poignant in relation to the attacks carried out in Muslim-majority countries. This was perhaps best exemplified in the brief but tumultuous tenure of Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi, leader of the al-Qaeda in Iraq group. Al-Zarqawi, who was killed by a U.S. airstrike on June 7, 2006, was once mentored by the prominent Salafi ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, but preferred brutal and horrific attacks to scholarship. Al-Zarqawi's indiscriminate attacks were a cause of concern for al-Qaeda's deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. In his letter to al-Zarqawi on July 9, 2005, al-Zawahiri diplomatically warned al-Zarqawi that his excesses were turning otherwise supportive Muslims away from the movement. "Among the things which the feelings of the Muslim populace who love and support you will never find palatable, also, are the scenes of slaughtering the hostages."³ Al-Zawahiri feared that this could lead the average Muslim, otherwise "essentially sympathetic" to al-Qaeda, to question the usefulness of their actions.

Clearly, al-Qaeda's senior leadership is concerned with popular Muslim opinion, centered on their role as a defender of the umma and the ultimate good they can perform for it. This was again shown when al-Zarqawi expanded his theatre of operations to his native Jordan. The al-Zarqawi-sanctioned attack on three hotels in Amman on November 9, 2005 would indeed prove to be the clearest indication yet that his killing of innocent Muslim civilians was disastrous for al-Qaeda's relations with the Muslim public. As Muslims in Jordan turned their anger toward al-Zarqawi and al-Qaeda in Iraq in mass demonstrations, he and his organization issued statements attempting to explain their actions and assuage public resentment. Although al-Qaeda has learned from these past public relations failures, the legacy of past attacks killing innocent Muslims stands, and can be capitalized on in the counter narrative, to portray the group as one indifferent to the value of Muslim life.

³ The letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi is dated July 9, 2005. The contents were released by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence on October 11, 2005

Following the Amman attacks, opinion polls further demonstrated the decline in support for al-Qaeda among Jordanians. Prior to the attacks, support for al-Qaeda in Jordan had increased between 2002 and 2005, from 43 to 57 percent, according to a Pew poll.⁴ A separate survey conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan in 2005 showed that 70 percent of Jordanians considered al-Qaeda an armed resistance organization rather than a terrorist group. However, following the November hotel bombings, a public opinion poll carried out by Ipsos Stat for *al-Ghad* Newspaper revealed that 64 percent of respondents adopted a negative view of al-Qaeda, and 87 percent believed that al-Qaeda was a terrorist organization.⁵

With the drop in public opinion following those attacks, al-Qaeda was forced to go on the public relations defensive. In an audio statement, al-Zarqawi attempted to explain his rationale for the operation.⁶ After denouncing the regime of King `Abdallah as apostate and a stalwart supporter of Israel, he laid out six reasons for al-Qaeda's decision to bomb the hotels, the first among them the regime's refusal to implement Shari`a law. The remaining reasons cited support for the Zionists and Americans. But realizing that ideological stance was insufficient, al-Zarqawi pleaded,

“This is a message to the Muslims in Jordan: Let us assure you that we cherish your lives more than anyone else [cherishes them]. How could it be otherwise? We love you more than [we love] ourselves and our [own] children... Know that we selected these hotels only after we learned—after scoping them out for over two months and collecting information from reliable sources inside the hotels [themselves]—that they have come to [serve] as headquarters for the Jewish, American, and Iraqi intelligence apparatuses.”⁷

Al-Zarqawi went on further in the statement to apologize for the deaths of those Muslims killed in the attacks. Clearly, such events provide an opening to recast al-Qaeda and the broader jihadist movement as callous in their approach to Muslim life, and when combined with other such

⁴ “Support for Terror Wanes Among Muslim Publics, Islamic Extremism: Common Concern for Muslim and Western Public,” the PEW Global Attitudes Project, July 14, 2005.

⁵ Published in the Jordanian-based *al-Ghad*, November 16, 2005,

⁶ See MEMRI Special Dispatch Series No. 1043, December 8, 2005, memri.org

⁷ The recording, entitled “The Zero Hour Has Come and it is Time to Settle the Score With the Jordanian Regime” was posted on the al-Hesbah Islamic forum (alhesbah.org), and other Islamist forums, on November 18, 2005.

instances, can effectively undermine the group's claim to be a defender of Muslims. Another such example is found in the 2003 coordinated suicide bombings in Casablanca. On May 16, five nearly simultaneous suicide bombings were conducted in the city, targeting Jewish sites or those frequented by foreigners—in line with al-Zawahiri's guidance.⁸ The attackers, however, were unsophisticated, had received little training, and ineffectively researched their targets. The attacks took place on a Friday night—on the eve of the Jewish Sabbath when none were present at the Jewish Community Center—which resulted in the killing of the Muslim janitor at that site.⁹ The other bombings killed primarily Moroccans rather than foreigners. Yet, the Casablanca, Amman and other attacks killing innocent Muslims have not been used in any concerted way by counter terrorism practitioners or policy makers diminish the jihadis' standing.

Undermining al-Qaeda's image as defender of the Muslim nation will obviously serve to detract from their legitimacy as they call on Muslims to support their operations. Another critical means to detract from their base of Muslim support—inherent in the narrative—is that the group possesses an ideological legitimacy underpinning their actions. And indeed, there are a number of vulnerabilities in the jihadist narrative that can be exploited to diminish their legitimacy.

Jihadists' Ideological Legitimacy

The contemporary militant jihadi movement has its ideological origins in Salafi Islam. Salafism, although broad and diverse today, can be traced through Egypt back to the teachings of 18th century Arabia and the teachings of Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab. Throughout the late 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, reformers like Rashid Rida and Muhammad `Abduh, particularly the former, championed an ideology that combined the teachings of Ibn `Abd al-Wahhab with contemporary issues and social reforms, centered on Egyptian society. By the 1950s and '60s, however, large-scale crackdowns in Egypt against the Muslim Brotherhood (made up primarily of non-violent Salafi-inspired reformers) created an exodus of Salafi-leaning intellectual talent into neighboring Saudi Arabia. This movement of thinkers created a new hybrid ideology within the burgeoning educational institutions of Saudi Arabia—combing

⁸ Horror in Casablanca as al-Qaeda toll hits 41, *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/may/18/alqaida.terrorism2>

⁹ Comments of Gilles Kepel, "The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West," Carnegie Council, September 22, 2004.

Brotherhood activists with those more stringent and literalist “Wahhabi” ideologues, those who had maintained the lineage of Ibn `Abd al-Wahhab and were loyal to and supported by the Saudi regime.

This represented the formative era for Salafi thought, and spawned the branch within that movement that would embrace violent jihad as its chief tactic toward implementing their interpretation of Shari`a law into society. Within this framework, Muhammad Qutb, the brother of the famously martyred Sayyid, lectured, among others, Usama bin Ladin at Jeddah University in the 1970s. More significantly—from the early 1960s onward—this was the initial point for spreading that ideology from the kingdom of Saudi Arabia unto the world through the Muslim World League, the Organization of the Muslim Conference, and a myriad of other groups financed by billions of dollars in Saudi oil wealth. ¹⁰ This ideology was implanted in, most notably, the United States, Germany, France and UK, as well as other European nations and Australia, where it formed the backbone of student and 'grassroots' activism.

Beginning in 1979, that set of beliefs found a form of activism in Afghanistan, one that would capture the imaginations of a great many Muslims. That, of course, was the jihad against the Soviet Union, with the leadership—at least of the Arab Mujahidin—in the enduring personage of Abdullah `Azzam. By the end of that campaign, in 1989, we can properly trace the beginnings of the “Salafi-jihadi” movement, that which al-Qaeda and similar groups are a part. A great many Salafis—in the Gulf, Egypt, and elsewhere—supported the jihad in Afghanistan and like-minded campaigns in Bosnia, Chechnya, Southeast Asia, and East Africa in the 1990s, although they would have strongly disagreed to labeling support for the Muslim fighters in any of these conflicts as terrorism. But by this point, the lines become blurred, as jihadi groups (or more accurately, some related to or affiliated with them) previously fighting uniformed soldiers in conflict zones, turned to carrying out bombing attacks against civilian targets, such as the embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.

The ideological origins of those 'mujahidin' who carried out the attacks of Sept. 11 in New York and Washington, DC, the Madrid train bombings of 2004, the July 5, 2005 attacks in London and others, are an outgrowth of that same movement that arose in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The key

¹⁰ Chris Heffelfinger (2011), *Radical Islam in America*, Potomac Books, Washington, DC, pp 63-76.

themes that have motivated Muslims into terrorist acts are: depictions of the Arab leaders as *taghut*, or tyrants, Sayyid Qutb's reading of *Hakimiyya*, or the right to rule, found in his book *Milestones*, and other notions centering around *Shari`a* as the sole source of law in Islamic society. While the rhetoric of contemporary jihadists like Bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri is less focused on the doctrinal intricacies of Ibn `Abd al-Wahhab or Taqi al-Din Ibn al-Taymiyya's writings than it is on political and social discourse, the Salafi movement is undoubtedly the ideological backbone upon which the jihadist movement arose.

Although challenging, the ideology of militant Salafism must be confronted as a part of any effective counter narrative. Even a cursory look at the radicalization cases in Western societies reveals that most, nearly all, of the individuals who have pursued militancy were indoctrinated into Salafism to some degree. The *Militant Ideology Atlas*, a project of the Combating Terrorism Center at the United States Military Academy (West Point) released in 2006 analyzed an extensive array of Salafi ideological tracts written by the most popular ideologues of the movement. These scholars of jihad, such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada al-Filistini, `Abd al-Qadir bin `Abd al-`Aziz and others provide the religious sanctioning and justification for jihadis' attacks. As respected Sunni scholars, their words carry a tremendous weight in the Muslim world and condone the movement's bloodshed and violence as obligatory acts of Islamic law.

As belief in Salafism is the starting point for so many into violent jihad, efforts to discredit it must be part of an effective counter narrative. The *Militant Ideology Atlas* provided an insight into a number of vulnerabilities present in Salafi thought and rhetoric. One of the key themes present in those writings was the demand for unity of thought (even as these Salafis were often disagreeing with each other). They adamantly rejected pluralism and democracy, which allow man-made laws to stand equal or trump those of God (as embodied in their interpretation of the *Shari`a*). Challenging Salafi critiques of democracy, pluralism and secular society need to be an essential part of the counter narrative to violent extremism. Pluralism and Multiculturalism are the framework for countering extremist violence in Australia and many European countries, and that the jihadist ideology equates them with heresy clearly means the two cannot stand side by side.

Furthering Narratives of Fragmentation and Discord

As was noted earlier, al-Qaeda has demonstrated a need and desire for favorable Muslim public opinion, and as al-Zawahiri's writings and statements have demonstrated, that is harmed by the perception that they have killed innocent Muslims or done harm to Muslim interests. Al-Zawahiri has also repeatedly stressed the importance of unity—ideological and strategic—as necessary for the success of their movement. A number of former jihadists, both combatants and ideologues, have recently reneged on their support for violent tactics, and some Salafi scholars (some under duress from their governments) have similarly condemned violence and *takfir*. Two noteworthy examples of defections from violent jihad came from Egypt's `Abd al-Qadir bin `Abd al-`Aziz, popularly known as Sayyid Imam al-Sharif or Dr. Fadl, and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi of Jordan.

Given the preoccupation with unity of thought and doctrine shown by Salafi-jihadi leaders since the inception of the movement, fostering examples of dissonance and disagreement among those in the movement is a common-sense means of countering it. The recantations of Dr. Fadl, one of the leading Egyptian figures in jihad and a well-known contemporary of al-Zawahiri, were widely circulated in both the Western and Arab media. Dr. Fadl had been the leader of al-Jihad in Egypt, of which al-Zawahiri was also a senior leader before he joined al-Qaeda, and Fadl was once a member of al-Qaeda's shura (advisory) council.¹¹ Most significantly, Dr. Fadl's denunciation of violent jihadist resistance (part of a trend among Egyptian Islamists dating back to 1997, when the government instituted a non-violence initiative with the Islamist groups) forced al-Zawahiri to respond with a 188-page rebuttal, entitled *al-Tabri'a*, or "The Exoneration," defending their doctrine of violent jihad against local apostate regimes such as those in Egypt and Jordan, and against the United States and Israel.

Al-Maqdisi's changed position was less dramatic, and did not represent his departure from the jihadi movement overall; he remains an important voice in shaping its doctrine. As such, his renunciations of *takfir* should carry large significance.¹² Al-Maqdisi, after a term in Jordanian prison in 2008, addressed recantations of belief and doctrine by Salafi scholars under duress, and

¹¹ Lawrence Wright, "The Rebellion Within," *The New Yorker*, June 2, 2008.

¹² Maqdisi was the most frequently cited Salafi thinker in the Combating Terrorism Center's Militant Ideology Atlas, see: ctc.usma.edu/atlas.

suggested to his readers that his views were not formed under pressure during his latest stint in Jordanian prison. He was also one of several signatories to an open letter published on al-Hesbah Islamic forum, among other places, on October 27, 2008. The statement begins, “There have appeared in the city of Zarqa a small group of extremists who have taken on false doctrines, holding to the false ideas of the Khawarij [early Islamic rejectionists] which our Prophet, peace be upon him, and the righteous Salaf warned us about... and some believe that because they come from Muslim countries they have the right to make rulings of kufr on others.”¹³

The open letter deals with the Jordanian government’s Ministry of Awqaf (religious endowments) and Islamic Affairs, and the position of many hard-line clerics in Jordan that those under the ministry—it is responsible for oversight of imams and mosques—are considered *kuffar*, or unbelievers. The distinction is critical to Jordanian Salafi-jihadis’ campaign against the Jordanian government, as labeling that regime *kafir* provides the ideological legitimacy to target it in warfare. The *takfiris* (those who label other Muslims kafirs) of Jordan had written a number of articles attacking al-Maqdisi’s moderation and some contending that he softened his position on the regime for his own benefit.¹⁴ Al-Maqdisi responded to these critics with articles published on his website, Tawhed.ws, “My First Appearance on the Web After a Long Absence in the Prisons,” and “Steadfastness in the Time of Retrogression.”

At the least, such recantations and revisions to the legitimacy of takfir and violent jihad have forced al-Qaeda leadership into a time-consuming diversion of lengthy public rebuttals and seemingly endless debates. Cumulatively, however, these ideological challenges could threaten to undermine the legitimacy and standing of mujahidin operations, particularly when they are shown to harm Muslim interests. Underpinning the jihadists' necessity for unity is their practical need for respected and well-known scholars to support their actions. The dependency on scholars such as al-Maqdisi to add legitimacy to the movement also leaves it vulnerable when they recant, as has also been seen in recent years (2007-2010) with jihadist leaders denunciation of jihad in Libya and Saudi Arabia.¹⁵ These scholars' and former fighters' withdrawal from the movement

¹³ Al-Hesbah Islamic forum, *Bayan Nushira fi'l-Urdan yaradd `ala afrac min al-ghula, shawwahu surat al-Islam wa labbasu `ala al-nas dinihim*, alhesbah.org, October 27, 2008.

¹⁴ Murad al-Shishani. “The Neo-Zarqawists: Divisions Emerge between Jordan’s Salafist Militants,” *Terrorism Focus*, Volume 5, Issue 39, November 19, 2008.

¹⁵ The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group has undergone wide ranging revisions to its ideology in recent years, which

and denunciation of violence helps diminish the legitimacy of jihadi operations, as do attacks on the most vulnerable aspects of their ideology.

Points of Ideological Weakness

A theme common in Salafi ideology, *takfir* is, unsurprisingly, also the practice that most alienates other Muslims from their cause. While al-Qaeda is aware of this vulnerability, demonstrated by al-Zawahiri's previously noted concerns as well as those of other strategists like Abu Mus`ab al-Suri, the jihadi movement still remains highly susceptible to attack on the issue of *takfir*. The issue was used to criticize Usama bin Ladin in an open letter from a former Saudi militant Salman al-`Awda in 1997¹⁶ and has been at the center of debate among numerous other scholars, those in the Salafi camp and outside of it. Allegations of misunderstanding and misapplying the principles of *takfir* are among the most damaging to the jihadist movement, but that message needs to be repeated by numerous voices through numerous outlets to become reinforced. Another ideological point of weakness for militant Islamists is that of *al-wala' wa'l-bara.'*

In the contemporary Muslim world, the concept of *al-wala' wa'l-bara'* in Islamic doctrine is almost exclusively used by Salafis, and could potentially be refuted in order to undermine their ideology and reduce its appeal to the mainstream Sunni masses. The term can be translated a number of ways, but its essential meaning is “loyalty and enmity for the sake of Allah,” to be good to the Muslim nation, and disavow its enemies and things that threaten it. This concept—and the arguments that stem from it—is an integral part of the underlying ideology that creates a worldview wherein Islam is under threat. That mindset is a necessary precursor to declaring political enemies, establishing targets for the mujahidin, and to maintain that one's actions are pleasing to God. It has been a unifying tool for Salafi ideologues, establishing a clear, black-and-white view of the world in terms of friends and enemies, but the principle also demonstrates how distant Salafi belief is from that of most Muslims.

The concept was employed by some early Islamic groups, including Shi`a, but has been taken up by Salafis and other twentieth century Islamist reformers in earnest (Wagemakers). Over the past

now denounces violent tactics. See J. Vahid Brown, “A First Look at the LIFG Revisions,” September 14, 2009, <http://jihadica.com>

¹⁶ Salman Bin Fahd al- `Awda, “Letter to Usama Bin Ladin” *Islam Today*, September 14, 2007.

century, Salafis and other Islamists have used the call to *al-wala' wa'l-bara'* as a way to pay loyalty to Islam and promote Muslim unity by shunning “un-Islamic” influences, that “developed into an unmistakable part of Islam that basically constituted a litmus test to separate the 'true' Muslims from the rest” (Wagemakers). The principle of *al-wala' wa'l-bara'* has been employed by a number of leading Salafi-jihadi ideologues—notably Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Mus`ab al-Suri—to declare Arab regimes with secular governments as unbelievers, or *kuffar*, making warfare against them licit. In this sense, the concept can be linked to the Salafis' practice of *takfir*—both illustrations of Salafis' extreme beliefs that give cause to violent actions.

Muhammad Saeed al-Qahtani's book is one of the most popular tracts written on the concept, and is widely distributed on websites and in a number of Islamist message forums. Entitled *Al-Wala' wa'l-Bara': According to the `Aqida of the Salaf* was originally written as al-Qahtani's Masters thesis at Umm al-Qura' University in Medina (translated into English by a group in the UK). It was supervised by, among others, Muhammad Qutb, elder brother of the famous Sayyid. Over 200 pages in length, it provides a lengthy history of the concept, its basis in the Qur'an, and a range of its implications, including “What Negates Islam,” “Dealing with Non-Believers” and “Jihad for the Sake of Allah Alone.” The essence of this Salafi concept is captured in his statement, “The Disbelievers should be fought to establish the rule and authority of Islam on earth.” When published on sites such as <http://islamicthinkers.com>, the Islamic Thinkers Society, an often inflammatory Islamist group based in New York state, it morphs into a call to action (and activism, which is the organization's stated purpose). As their website reads in the excerpt from al-Qahtani's book, “As for 'enmity for the sake of Allah', it includes the obligation to declare enmity for His sake: opposition for the sake of Allah. it is to declare opposition in deed, to take up arms against His enemies, to shun them, and to stay far from them both in word and deed.”¹⁷

The Salafi stance on this concept, its legal permissibility and authenticity, give a mandate for Muslims to disavow themselves of non-Muslim societies (including those Muslim-majority countries whose governments are deemed to be *kuffar*), and to forcibly engage an enemy threatening the Muslim nation (as the West has, characterized as a Zionist-Crusader force at war

¹⁷ http://www.islamicthinkers.com/index/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=445&Itemid=74, retrieved January 12, 2011

with Islam). *Al-wala' wa'l-bara'* is also a clear threat to multicultural, democratic societies, making pluralism, along with secular or civic participation in non-Muslim societies, a grave sin. While the Salafi position is unambiguous and widely distributed, the refutations against it are numerous, but scattered and inconsistent. An organic consensus of Muslims likely exists that rejects the Salafi ruling on *al-wala' wa'l-bara'*, (opting instead to view Jews and Christians as 'People of the Book' per numerous Qur'anic references) but they have no united presence on the Internet or in other media. Thus, some mechanism is required for those who reject this ideology to voice their opinions, and seek a more commanding role in the intra-Islamic dialogue.

Efforts to manufacture dissent and condemnation of the beliefs condoning violence have yielded some positive results. One endeavor brought together dozens of influential Islamic scholars from around the world in Mardin, Turkey, to reassess an influential *fatwa* (legal ruling) of Ibn Taymiyya pertaining to relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. Described as a Peace Summit Conference (it was hosted by Artuklu University and sponsored by two British organizations), the convening scholars issued “The New Mardin Declaration,” March 28, 2010, examining the 13th century fatwa (penned by one of the scholars most frequently cited by Salafis) in the context of the modern world. The larger purpose of the conference was to gather notable and respected scholars from around the Muslim world to discredit the use of this fatwa for supporting terrorist actions.

The primary conclusion reached by the scholars was to state unequivocally that, “anyone who seeks support from this fatwa for killing Muslims or non-Muslims has erred in his interpretation and has misapplied the revealed texts.”¹⁸ The scholars' declaration also addressed the intricacies of Ibn Taymiyya's ruling, that of the classification of 'abodes' (*diyar*) in Islamic law to designate areas of war and peace, or truce through covenant (and most significantly, the resulting implications for relations with non-Muslims in those *diyar*). While maintaining a respect for Ibn Taymiyya, they were clear that today's circumstances make the fatwa unsuitable for our times. They also make clear condemnations of the practice of takfir, and “[t]he notion of loyalty and enmity (*al-wala' wa'l-bara'*),” stating “it is not permissible to narrow the application of this notion and use it for declaring a Muslim outside the fold of Islam.”

¹⁸ “The New Mardin Declaration,” March 28, 2010, <http://www.mardin-fatwa.com>

The conference appeared to send all the right notes, and confirmation of this came in a rebuttal of its declaration from Anwar al-Awlaki, the American-born Yemeni al-Qaeda cleric. The central challenge al-Awlaki made to the New Mardin Declaration was its finding that contemporary Muslims are bound by international laws which bring them “safety and security” (and therefore cannot be in a state of war with “unbelievers”). Al-Awlaki, while encouraging respect toward Muslim 'scholars' and 'learned ones,' rebuts that claim by reframing the issues along al-Qaeda's central narrative that Muslims and Islam are under siege. He asks, “Are Muslims enjoying security and peace? ... Are these scholars following the news?” And with some flair, adds,

It is an insolent statement that shows no respect to the sufferings of our ummah. It is a slap on the face of the Palestinian widow and the Afghan orphan. It is disrespectful towards the millions of Muslims around the globe who are suffering because of the international community which these scholars are crediting for bringing so much “security and peace”.¹⁹

The remainder of his rebuttal to the New Mardin Declaration reinforced this point in a discussion of various treaties that have harmed Muslim interests, and defended Ibn Taymiyya's fatwa along that argument—that Muslims are in a state of warfare and oppression, and thus the need for violent jihad is legitimate. It is clear that when a message such as this is issued to counter the jihadi narrative and underlying belief system, it will be challenged. This dialogue must not always end with al-Qaeda or Salafi-jihadi scholars putting in the last word, as they so often do; other counter-narrative messages must continue to be disseminated that bolster the argument. Among the recommendations conference participants in the New Mardin Declaration made was “[c]onvening an annual conference in Europe to research and explore the Islamic conception of peace, and peaceful co-existence, between nationals/communities and religions.” Certainly, a repetition of this message is needed, to counter that of al-Qaeda, which has been continuous.

The jihadist movement has relied upon their interpretation of *takfir* and *al-wala' wa'l-bara'* to declare secular regimes as apostates and enemy targets, and also to make democracy and pluralism sinful. The frequent disparagement of democracy, diversity, pluralism, etc. are based largely on the norms Salafis and militant Islamists generally have formed out of their interpretations of those two concepts. Condemning democracy and multiculturalism are indeed

¹⁹ Anwar al-Awlaki, The New Mardin Declaration, an Attempt at Justifying the New World Order, downloaded from <http://forums.islamicawakening.com> on October 15, 2010.

an integral part of declaring hostilities with Western nations, as they are branded as mechanisms to weaken Islam and relegate Divine Law below that created by men. Al-Qaeda may have to reconsider this long-held talking point, however, following the upheaval in the Arab world calling for democratic reforms.

Similarly, numerous refutations of jihadi operations and the doctrine underlying them have been made on the basis of traditional madhhabs (the four Sunni schools of thought), particularly on the targeting of non-combatants. One such refutation comes from the Malaysian shaykh Afifi al-Akiti, who also received his Dphil from and is a lecturer in the Theology Department at the University of Oxford. Dr. al-Akiti, who was traditionally trained in Shafi`i madrasas in Malaysia before earning his advanced degrees in the UK, published “Defending the Transgressed: Mudafi’ al-Mazlum,” in which he refutes jihadist targeting of civilians along basic precepts established by early Muslim jurists (which also make them more resistant to attack from Salafis).²⁰ In that 2005 fatwa, Dr. al-Akiti highlights the basic law that it is not only impermissible but also a major sin to target the enemy's women and children if they are not involved in direct combat, along with other flaws in the authority of Salafi-jihadis' claims that their targeting of non-Muslim civilians is justified by contemporary, extenuated circumstances.

Democratic uprising in the Middle East?

Western analysts and news commentators made much of al-Qaeda's early silence during the Tunisian revolt and, even more significantly, during the protests in Egypt that brought down Hosni Mubarak. The protests in Tunisia began in December 2010, and culminated in the ouster of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011. Mass protests and unrest began in Egypt in late January and led to Mubarak's resignation on February 12. Throughout this period, al-Qaeda made no official comment on the turmoil, the most significant to affect the region in decades, until a video message reached the Internet February 17. One prominent American terrorism analyst said of that silence, “[t]he burgeoning democracy movement across the Middle East appears to have caught al Qaeda off guard and threatens to reduce the terrorist group to irrelevance.”²¹ Indeed, al-Qaeda's irrelevance in these protests was all the more significant

²⁰ Republished on <http://www.livingislam.org/maa/dcmme.html>, with an introduction from Dr. Gabriel Haddad, a Shafi`i scholar also maintains that website.

²¹ Paul Cruickshank “Analysis: Why Arab Spring could be al Qaeda's fall”, February 21, 2011, cnn.com

because they led to the fall of the dictatorship that some of its senior members had themselves fought against and failed to bring down (two of the signatories to Bin Ladin's February 23, 1998 fatwa forming the "World Islamic Front" announcing the jihad against Crusaders and Jews included Rifa'i Ahmad Taha of the Egyptian Islamic Group and Ayman al-Zawahiri, formerly amir of the Jihad Group in Egypt, the two most prominent jihadist groups operating in Egypt in the 1980s and 90s²²). While al-Zawahiri and Taha abandoned the fight in Egypt and sought to fight the "far enemy," the United States, in the late 1990s, Mubarak's regime had in essence expelled them from their home country and now his ouster was brought about by a popular revolt with al-Qaeda nowhere to be seen. Since then, al-Zawahiri and scores of other Salafi ideologues have argued that the only suitable alternative to the corrupt dictatorships in the Middle East are Shari`a based Islamic states, only to watch the masses call for democracy.

But al-Qaeda's media absence was not to last, and the lack of response to the events may have been more a communications issue than one of substance. Al-Qaeda's first foray into the online media in the wake of the protests was dated Safar 1431, corresponding to the Gregorian dates January 5 - February 3, 2011.²³ In his communique, al-Zawahiri did not make any specific mention of Mubarak's fall, and it is likely the video was recorded before his February 12 resignation. In it, he addresses the Egyptian people and sends them "glad tidings," and begins, rather curiously, by expounding on the importance of preserving Muslim life during jihadi operations and on the laws of *tatarrus*, or using human shields in combat. It is unclear how this applies to the protests and ouster of Mubarak, other than as guidance to mujahidin planning operations in the country. Al-Zawahiri proceeds to give a lengthy discussion of foreign rule of Egypt over the previous century and the "Arab Zionists" complicity in it. While much of his talk seems out of touch with the recent events in the country, he appears to be attempting to place events within a broader historical context, broader than simply Mubarak's tyranny, and in a sense to Islamicize the unrest for the vacuum that is succeeding Mubarak's rule.

One thing is certain—al-Zawahiri and al-Qaeda are far out of synch with the communications used by the protesters, namely Facebook and Twitter. This is essentially a technical issue: while

²² <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>

²³ Ayman al-Zawahiri, "A Message of Hope and Glad Tidings to Our Fellow Muslims in Egypt" Global Islamic Media Front, downloaded from <http://ansar1.info>

protesters and reporters sent updates by the minute as events unfolded in Egypt and Tunisia, al-Qaeda, unable to utilize those technologies for security reasons, are forced to send their communiqués days after events have happened. This means that they can't have a part in shaping the daily commentary on events in any real way, which media consumers have come to expect. Clearly, this is a disadvantage in their strategic communications, but it does not necessarily mean that they are losing the larger communications battle of shaping the narrative, which occurs over a longer time period and to which their delayed, periodic communications may be better suited.

In the fifth issue of al-Qaeda's premier English-language publication, *Inspire*, published by the Yemen-based branch Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Zawahiri's initial February statement was followed up by two other pieces, and in them he extols the powers of the masses to bring down their governments, "If the unions, universities, factories and mosques were to rise up and take to the streets in mass protest, the government would give in." (p. 34) He goes on to state that he cannot prescribe an exact formula for change in each country because each is separate and distinct, but can instead offer some general characteristics necessary for it to succeed. Here, significantly, al-Zawahiri returns to one of his frequent concerns, "[t]he second characteristic [the first being to seek reward from Allah alone]: striving to achieve popular sympathy for the Islamic mujahid movement for change." He also reminds his audience of the need for unity among the movement and a need to have a unified body guiding it. These old, familiar themes are significant as al-Qaeda attempts to align itself with the protest movements.

The context into which the political upheaval in the Middle East is placed is critical; it is the formation of a narrative moving forward (exemplified further by the *Inspire* article "The Way Forward" by Abu Suhail.) Although al-Qaeda was absent for much of the initial discussion about the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt (a span of about a month), it subsequently set its communications apparatus into motion to addressing these events and place them within a framework consistent with their core narrative. In the aftermath of Mubarak's ouster, Western nations, under NATO, became consumed with the rebels' campaign to oust Mu`ammar al-Ghaddafi in Libya, and paid little attention to framing the momentous events in the region into any particular narrative, pro-democracy or otherwise. While the peoples' uprising and removal from power of decades-old autocrats in Tunisia and Egypt represents a massive political change and did indeed demonstrate that al-Qaeda's violent jihad was unnecessary in doing so, the way

forward for these now leaderless Arab states remains unclear.

Another important al-Qaeda ideologue weighed in on the events in that issue of *Inspire*, Anwar al-Awlaqi, with a piece entitled “The Tsunami of Change.” (It should be noted that like the late Bin Ladin, Anwar al-Awlaqi has not lost any esteem since his death in September 2011, and al-Awlaqi's recorded talks and writings have continued to circulate widely after his demise.) Al-Awlaqi proceeds to link the 1981 assassination of Anwar Sadat by the mujahidin to the toppling of Mubarak, as if both 'corrupt' and 'apostate' leaders were brought down by the Egyptian people. Like al-Zawahiri, he places events in a broader perspective, “Mubarak, Gadhafi, Ben Ali, Saleh, Assad and the kings of Morocco, Jordan and the Gulf have been a scourge on the ummah...” and that the struggle against them has been ongoing and, although there seemed to be almost no hope for decades, it has now come. This argument seems to be put the current mass protests calling for democracy on the shoulders of Islamists who have fought and been imprisoned across the region. He confirms that position by stating, “Muslims who understood Islam never accepted the rotten systems of government that were wrapping the area in a cloak of tyranny. They wanted change and they worked for it. They paid the price for their struggle and defiance by losing their lives, living in exile and being imprisoned.”

While behind most of the world's media commentators, who contributed their views on the upheaval within hours (or often, minutes) after events took place, al-Qaeda's leading voices have placed events within a longer time frame (in this case, thirty years of struggle), and can be seen as attempting to hijack the success of the protests and amalgamate it into their narrative. In reality, there seems to be a very tenuous link to Islamist resistance leaders in Arab countries and the masses who filled the streets in Tunis and Cairo to call for an end to corruption and dictatorship. But of course perception is more important in formulating a narrative storyline than the facts. What one sees at play, above all, is that al-Qaeda's ability to adapt events to its narrative is the most critical aspect of the success of their message. The ability for Muslims to relate to it, and believe in it as credible and a useful way forward translates into a growth of sympathy, and potential supporters.

Accordingly, al-Awlaqi picks up on the Western uncertainty of how to shape the events across the region:

It appears that the West was taken by surprise by the current events. This left them scrambling in their reactions and gave an impression of a Western leadership that is confused, worried, and unhappy for the departure of some of its closest and most reliable friends, but yet willing to betray them and ride on the wave of change that is sweeping the area.

He then goes on to counter the messages of prominent American voices on the uprisings:

Hillary Clinton claims that: “The success of peaceful protests discredited the extremists and exposed their bankrupt arguments.” Robert Gates thinks that the Arab protests represent a major setback to al Qaeda. Fareed Zakaria asserts: “there is an interesting debate on whether the events in the Middle East are good for the United States, the West, good for peace and stability, but I think there can be little dispute about whom they are bad for: al-Qaeda. In fact the Arab revolts of 2011 represent a total repudiation of al-Qaeda’s founding ideology.” Peter Bergen who sees that al-Qaeda would be watching the events with a mixture of glee and despair only sees the glee in the fact that al-Qaeda would be happy to see the current regimes gone but would mostly view the events with despair because: “whatever outcome there is in these different revolutions and revolts, I think it is very unlikely that a Taliban style theocracy is going to replace the regimes that are fallen.”

The statements of the U.S. State and Defense Secretaries prove that either the intelligence reports these guys are reading are misleading or that they are just trying to justify the stance that they are forced to take in support of the Arab masses, by claiming that they are bad for al-Qaeda when they know very well that the opposite is the case. In the case of Fareed Zakaria, well, he is wrong this time just like he, and his cabal of neoconservatives, are wrong every time they speak about an issue pertaining to the Muslim world. But for a so-called ‘terrorism expert’ such as Peter Bergen, it is interesting to see how even he doesn’t get it right this time. For him to think that because a Taliban style regime is not going to take over following the revolutions, is a too short-term way of viewing the unfolding events.

We do not know yet what the outcome would be, and we do not have to. The outcome doesn’t have to be an Islamic government for us to consider what is occurring to be a step in the right direction. Regardless of the outcome, whether it is an Islamic government or the likes of al-Baradi, Amr Mousa or another military figure; whatever the outcome is, our mujahidin brothers in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and the rest of the Muslim world will get a

chance to breathe again after three decades of suffocation.

That al-Awlaqi is American and spent much of his life in the country gives his opinion of American political discourse an accuracy that most jihadist commentators lack. That aside, it is a typical example of al-Qaeda's media efforts to counter derogatory statements by directly addressing the criticism and not only refuting that it will spell their demise, but arguing that the group will emerge stronger and on a better footing. There is much less discussion of the jihadi movement's long-standing disavowal of democracy and that they may in fact be at odds with the protesters that brought down their dictators. But in opting for an affinity with the protesters—really, the people—in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Yemen and beyond, al-Qaeda demonstrates a pragmatism and desire for mass support above ideological rigidity. This adeptness is surely a strength for the organization, and those in the West interested in putting forth a counter-narrative should note its approach.

Looking at the example of the uprisings in the Middle East and the subsequent communications strategies employed, some important differences arise. While al-Qaeda was slow to react and initially seemed likely to sustain damage, it eventually looked to how these events could provide an opportunity to further its existing narrative. Western nations, on the other hand, had events develop organically into a near ideal outcome—that the people of the Arab and Muslim world demand democracy and freedom—but have largely failed to advance the dialogue because there is no existing narrative for these events to reinforce. Following these revolts and uprisings, Western nations have an unprecedented opportunity to interact with the Muslim world and initiate a dialogue to move Tunisia, Egypt and other countries forward, to encourage the development of institutions that foster liberal democracy and pluralism. More than the overthrow of corrupt rulers in the Muslim world, the establishment of flourishing democracies—created by the people—would provide a long-term rejection of al-Qaeda's ideology and agenda. Within this discourse, a narrative can be formed that rejects the jihadists' declarations of *takfir* and the attitudes towards non-Muslims derived from their interpretation of *al-wala' wa'l-bara'*--and by doing so, defeat the notion that participating in democratic or pluralistic systems is an act of hypocrisy or apostasy.

Conclusion

Scores of conferences across the world, like that in Mardin, have seen Muslim scholars argue that Islam is not incompatible with democracy or its principles, denouncing jihad and calling for peaceful co-existence. These have helped to challenge al-Qaeda's credibility, but more high-profile events are needed to sustain their momentum. Similarly, Islamic social and political advocacy groups can help reduce violence by encouraging non-violent means of expressing grievances against Muslim suffering, perceived and real. In doing so, Muslim activists and their communities are empowered and less vulnerable to the simplistic jihadi narrative that they are under attack and the only means of redress is the use of force. Equally important, Western governments (often through funding private and public sector work) have made efforts to reach out to Muslim communities and promote multiculturalism and pluralism as remedies to extremism. At the center of all these efforts is a discussion over values, the nature of interaction and relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, and the form of Muslim inclusion in Western society and/or practices deemed to be “Western,” such as electoral democracy. Ultimately, Muslims living successfully in pluralistic societies provides the best counter message to jihadists' exclusionary view of 'unbelievers' (*kuffar*) and their ensuing violent agenda.

Efforts towards combating violent extremism have taken various forms in Western countries. The U.S. has implemented a range of domestic and foreign initiatives aimed at countering violent extremism. Law enforcement has built relationships with communities and increased engagement with Muslim groups and leaders. A number of government agencies are undertaking dedicated 'CVE' strategies, particularly the Department of Defense, State, Homeland Security and intelligence agencies, which include funding local efforts in Muslim countries. The Office of Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the State Department uses, “non-coercive and include social programs, counter-ideology initiatives, and working with civil society to delegitimize the al-Qa’ida narrative and, where possible, provide positive alternative narratives.”²⁴ In Germany and France, a range of social programs have included Imam training programs, to instill national values into those preaching at mosques and providing Islamic training.²⁵ In Australia, efforts to

²⁴ “U.S. Government Efforts To Counter Violent Extremism” Testimony of Daniel Benjamin, Coordinator, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism Before the Emerging Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Washington, DC, March 10, 2010. Retrieved from <http://state.gov>

²⁵ Kirsten Grieshaber, “German university launches training for imams,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 13, 2010; Reuters,

counter violent extremism have been coordinated across multiple levels of government around a platform of social cohesion, community engagement and multiculturalism. Efforts in the United Kingdom have been among the largest, with an emphasis on preventing radicalization through local community engagement. The overall success of these programs will take years to properly evaluate, as the goal of countering the phenomenon of violent extremism is, by its nature, a long-term one. But these interactions are necessary conduits for the dialogue on cultural values, the rule of law, and Muslim identity, which are all critical in co-existence and tolerance, necessary precursors to pluralism.

Such cultural and social programs are indeed a vital means of promoting a counter narrative to jihad. But for Muslims living in the West, there are a host of concerns far outside of extremism and terrorism. Issues of concern for observant Muslims in participating in a non-Islamic political system or society include matters of family law and inheritance, banking and usury, interaction between genders and women's modesty, etc. The issue of veiling women and wearing of the *niqab* (face covering) has sparked protest and anger in many countries, becoming a potent symbol of Islamic identity. Perhaps the most high profile example is in France, where the government instituted a ban on the *niqab* in April 2011. On a smaller scale, a controversy emerged in Dandenong, a suburb of Melbourne, Australia in October 2010 when a public pool required all attendees to cover themselves from their knees to the neck to their elbows, in order not to offend Muslim swimmers.²⁶ Although the clothing restrictions were only temporary, the restrictions catering to Muslim sensibilities created a small backlash against them, under fears that Australians were sacrificing their own identities to appease a minority of Muslims. Yet, in France and Australia, these controversies sparked a public discussion on what it means to Muslim, and the nature of Muslim interaction with other faiths and communities. As such, differences over cultural sensibilities can create barriers to social inclusion, but they can also create opportunities for engagement. However challenging, when these issues can be resolved within the framework of pluralism, they provide examples of the protection of Muslims' rights, traditions and practices and contribute to the strength of the overall counter narrative.

In essence, a simultaneous religious, social and political discourse is needed, to reflect those

“French student imams study at Catholic university,” February 1, 2008.

²⁶ Julie Szego, “Under the Cover Up,” *The Age*, October 9, 2010.

components of the counter narrative. As complex a task as this is, it requires specialized transmitters. Speaking in Riyadh at the opening of a conference on countering the appeal of terrorism through the Internet on 31 Jan 2011, United Nations official and former UK intelligence officer Richard Barrett provided some useful insights for a successful counter narrative. He stated, "... possibly most important of all, we need to find the right people to deliver the message; people who command respect and have credibility in the vulnerable communities that the terrorists seek to influence." Indeed, the narrative cannot be effective without a credible narrator. In dealing with the religious components, violent extremists who have renounced their past, conservative scholars and Muslim leaders have the most sway. Figures such as Noman Benotman, a former combatant with the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group and acquaintance of Usama bin Ladin, now affiliated with the UK-Based Quilliam Foundation, is working to counter extremism and has a great deal of credibility due to his background. In addition, more formerly jihadist scholars like Dr. Fadl in Egypt and Salman al-`Awda in Saudi Arabia are needed to openly challenge jihadi doctrine and chip away at its legitimacy.

It may not be possible to entirely eliminate the jihadist movement, nor every sympathizer of al-Qaeda, but their support—and ultimately their influence, and capability—can be greatly reduced by undermining their religious legitimacy and ideological justifications for violence. Attacking the group, and the broader jihadist movement, on their killing of innocent Muslims and the underlying beliefs that have legitimated mass murders proves most effective, because it is one of their greatest weaknesses. That, and other divisive ideological issues can illustrate how divergent Salafi and jihadi views are from that of the majority of Muslims, and serve to damage the jihadists' standing. Al-Qaeda is rightly concerned with public opinion in the Muslim world. Al-Qaeda's ability to maintain popular support depends on its ability to effectively portray itself as a defender of the Muslim people, under the claim that Islam is under attack. By attacking that premise, improving relations and building partnerships between the "Muslim world" and the "West," and furthering the principles of tolerance and pluralism and their compatibility with Islam, a viable, alternative narrative is constructed that can compete with and defeat that of al-Qaeda.

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