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"Bring It On" Worked

by James R. Van de Velde

Through accident or design, mostly through accident and blunt trauma, the war in Iraq was brutal, costly in lives and money, and heavy-handed, but dealt al-Qa'ida a severe blow -- hopefully a fatal one and even better, a self-inflicted blow. By creating such a rallying cry for the West's alleged 'war against Islam,' thousands of al-Qa'ida fighters were directed to Iraq where they trained and committed terrorist acts. These acts killed the perpetrators, of course, and killed thousands of innocent Muslims and many American, and Coalition soldiers and civilians. But the attacks revealed al-Qa'ida's brutish nature, its willingness to kill Muslims, and its goal of achieving chaos and totalitarian rule in pursuit of deposing 'apostate regimes' and restoring a new Caliphate (under al-Qa'ida rule, of course) – all of which undermined its legitimacy.

Usama bin Laden may have thought having the West invade Iraq was exactly what he needed to further his narrative that the West was at war with Islam. And at first certainly it worked to rally thousands to confront the West in a physical manifestation of this narrative. But al-Qa'ida couldn't contain its glee and took advantage of its perceived fortune by fighting the way it wants to fight: brutal, indiscriminate, wanton, chaotic, purposeless terrorism. The war revealed to the Muslim world in particular -- like nothing else could -- how nihilist and evil al-Qa'ida is.

Early chaos gave al-Qa'ida a false sense of impending victory in 2005-2007. More al-Qa'ida attacks led to more recruits. More western news reports of bombings and civilian deaths led to more al-Qa'ida attacks (close to a thousand suicide bombings from 2005-2007) – including the use of chlorine as a mass casualty weapon -- and an al-Qa'ida assessment that attacking Iraqi civilians was proving successful to eject the Coalition and destabilize the Iraqi government. But such attacks led to the crucial US decision to approve the surge and subsequent valiant and successful American counter insurgency in Iraq, along with the disillusionment of many Iraqi insurgents who at first were fighting alongside al-Qa'ida. And equally as important, such attacks led to a reevaluation of al-Qa'ida's methods by the very Muslims in Iraq and worldwide who once may have supported their operations.

Al-Qa'ida Declares War on the World – Narrative 'Over-reach'

Despite al-Qa'ida's incessant claim that the West is at war with Islam, al-Qa'ida attacks tended overwhelmingly to kill ... Muslims. And in some ways, after having declared war on the West in 1998, al-Qa'ida ended up declaring war on the world, including and especially on Muslims: on Shia in Iraq in 2005, then on those Muslims they considered apostates in 2006,

then on fellow Sunnis who cooperated with the new Iraqi Government in 2007.¹ Since its inception, al Qa'ida's treatment of noncombatants has migrated a full 180 degrees from observing their immunity to their complete disregard.² Originally, al-Qa'ida considered noncombatants inviolable; today, not only are noncombatants targeted, but millions are at risk today from al-Qa'ida's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. In short, al-Qa'ida's narrative – that the West is at war with Islam -- has been clouded: al-Qa'ida seems largely at war with Islam as well.

Who Killed More?

Of the 85,000+ Iraqis killed since 2003,³ al-Qa'ida killed far more Iraqis than the Coalition and inspired, supplied and supported years of Sunni and Ba'ahist insurgency. Following the spike of Iraqi deaths in March and April 2003, civilian deaths dropped but then picked up and peaked again in 2006-2007 – the height of the al-Qa'ida/Sunni insurgency.⁴⁵

Year	Civilians Killed
2003	10,077 – 12,010
2004	9,741 – 10,573
2005	13,071 – 14,324
2006	25,699 – 27,519
2007	22,586 – 24,159

¹ This negative narrative proved so damaging that al-Qa'ida 'Second in Command,' Ayman al-Zawahiri, attempted to quell this al-Qa'ida war on Shia with a public rebuke of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi the founder and leader of al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, which al-Zarqawi led until his death in June 2006. al-Zarqawi conducted or directed numerous acts of violence in Iraq including suicide bombings and hostage executions. In 2004 he joined al-Qa'ida and pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden. After this, al-Tawhid wal-Jihad became known as al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI), and al-Zarqawi was given the al-Qa'ida title, "Emir of Al Qaeda in the Country of Two Rivers." In September 2005, he declared "all-out war" on Shia in Iraq after the Iraqi government offensive on insurgents in the Sunni town of Tal Afar.

² See Carl J. Ciovacco, The Erosion of Noncombatant Immunity within Al Qaeda. Small Wars Journal, 2008. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/67-ciovacco.pdf>

³ Sinan Saliheddin, "Iraq: 85,000 Iraqis Killed from 2004 to '08," *Time*. Oct. 14, 2009. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1930122,00.html>

⁴ See *The Iraq Body Count*. <http://www.iraqbbodycount.org/>

⁵http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/in_depth/baghdad_navigator/

The statistics⁶ suggest (given the lack of specific reference material on who killed whom) that al-Qa'ida in Iraq and Sunni insurgents killed far more Iraqis than Coalition forces killed. One can argue the West's culpability for this; nevertheless Iraqis died in far greater number during post-Hussein Iraq than during the Coalition's military effort to oust Hussein. And an unknown statistic, but one that is likely very revealing, is the number of Iraqis killed by Iranians or Iranian munitions supplied by Iran – no doubt in the thousands.

Al-Qa'ida in Iraq launched a series of chlorine-laden Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) – a rudimentary chemical weapon – in 2007, which killed only two Iraqis but injured hundreds. But the visceral, negative reaction to such attacks was so severe, the attacks ended. Instead of engendering fear, the attacks seem to have engendered severe hate and opposition to al-Qa'ida. It is possible too that no biological weapon attack has been conducted to date in Iraq precisely because of the fear that such a terror attack will be counter-productive to al-Qa'ida's goal of eliciting support and toppling the regime.

Muslim Support for al-Qa'ida's Tactics Dropped Because of al-Qa'ida Tactics in Iraq

Muslim support for terrorist violence against civilians has declined by half since 2002 in the key countries of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iraq.⁷ Iraqi support for attacks on civilians by al-Qa'ida in Iraq (not surprisingly) is near zero.⁸ Violent extremists became their own worst enemy. Iraqis see their fate belonging in their hands now, which means they don't want al-Qa'ida telling them what to do. Muslim confidence in bin Laden 'to do the right thing in world affairs' fell significantly from 2002-2007.⁹

President Bush gave them a theater – Iraq – far from our shores, to show fellow Muslims what al-Qa'ida is all about. The Iraq war, having become al-Qa'ida's self-proclaimed 'global priority,' may have motivated a significant percentage of passive extremists to become violent, but also drained personnel, resources, transportation, weapons and leadership away from other theaters, likely weakening them and their networks worldwide.

It may have been the Administration's very lack of preparedness for the post-Hussein insurgency that led to the flood of al-Qa'ida into Iraq ... which led to their narrative over reach and physical defeat (a sort-of accidental strategic 'rope-a-dope'). Those who argue that Iraq served as an al-Qa'ida recruiting tool now must deal with the reality that, even if this is true, it led to al-Qa'ida pouring attention, recruits and bombers into Iraq, where al-Qa'ida was exposed as wanton murderers of Muslims and was largely defeated by the surge and by Iraqis themselves disgusted by al-Qa'ida's tactics.

Al-Qa'ida leadership badly assessed the American electorate and its own worldwide support, especially among Muslims. Americans didn't approve of the chaos in Iraq but perhaps what upset them more was the thought of losing. They re-elected George Bush who found US military leaders who had a solution: go out and kill al-Qa'ida. And they did -- in the thousands

⁶ *The Iraq Body Count*. <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/analysis/numbers/2007/>

⁷ Sharp Decline in Support for Suicide Bombing in Muslim Countries, *Pew Global Attitudes Research*. July 24, 2007. <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=257>

⁸ BBC Iraq poll September 2007: In graphics. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/6983027.stm>

⁹ Sharp Decline in Support for Suicide Bombing in Muslim Countries, *Pew Global Attitudes Research*. July 24, 2007. <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=257>

(over 4000 according to Abu Ayyub al-Masri -- the leader of al-Qa'ida in Iraq). The US military has also finger, face and iris printed thousands of suspected terrorists or sympathizers in Iraq, which will limit their ability to travel to the West in the future – something they would not have been able to do had the conflict not occurred.

Further still, Iraq is perhaps today the most US intelligence-permissive state on the planet. It is easier in many ways for US forces and intelligence services to collect on and track suspected terrorists in Iraq than in the United States. It would have been much harder to find al-Qa'ida around the world, than in one highly militarized Iraq during these past five years.

Success against al-Qa'ida allowed Iraqis to turn around and cooperate with the Coalition to eject the foreign fighters they first tolerated and then grew to despise. It also disproved Usama bin Laden's argument to his followers that the United States is a paper tiger. The world learned this too. Iraq is a success story today in the war against al-Qa'ida.

Al-Qa'ida Created Four Counter Narratives for Itself in Iraq

There are at least four message threads, or ‘counter messages,’ that al-Qa'ida created for itself by its actions in Iraq:

1. Popular, visceral, moral, Muslim disgust over the large number of gruesome Muslim deaths it purposefully caused.
2. The heresy of wantonly killing innocent Muslims, including ‘good’ Muslims.
3. The tactical failure of its strategy (killing Muslims did not lead to the fall of the new Iraqi government); the tactical lesson learned was, ‘al-Qa'ida’s violence does not work.’
4. The inability of al-Qa'ida to govern effectively, once it grabbed a tiny bit of sovereignty inside Iraq: from al-Qa'ida’s ‘victory’ in Fallujah in April 2004 to its defeat and expulsion in November 2004, al-Qa'ida’s rule there was chaos.

“*Bring it on...*” exposed the soft underbelly of Islamist extremism. It showed the world the reality of al-Qa'ida violence. Market and car bombings are repulsive at a visceral level. Just one image of a suffering Muslim can and did turn off many mainstream and would-be extremists.

Unless one shared the extreme view that all apostates can be killed, even violence against innocent non-Muslims is reprehensible to even most Salafi Muslims. Further still, the problem of fighting for power is that, once in a while, you just might get it. And al-Qa'ida got it briefly in a few villages and towns. But by winning such control, al-Qa'ida’s romantic narrative of being an opposition group fades overnight. A populace is unforgiving once power must be turned into successful governance. And al-Qa'ida cannot govern.¹⁰ Its brief experience running Fallujah was a disaster. In fact, it has no plans to assume governance, meaning it fought to replace a supposed oppressor with anarchy – not exactly a positive trade off. Al-Qa'ida governing ideology seems to be that it is an ‘anti-government,’ much like the world saw in Taliban-control Afghanistan.

10 Pepe Escobar, The Islamic emirate of Fallujah, Asia Times online, July 15, 2004.
http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/FG15Ak01.html

“Bring it on...” worked’ does not necessarily mean that the Coalition invasion of Iraq led only to al-Qa’ida counter narratives, or that Iraq has become the tipping point against al-Qa’ida, leading now inevitably to its worldwide defeat and irrelevance. Indeed, Iraq provided, of course, an enormous pro-al-Qa’ida narrative, however tortured and false its logic: that the West invaded to oppress Muslims. The question now is whether the counter narratives it created outweighed the pro-al-Qa’ida narrative it continues to profess.

Al-Qa’ida violence in Iraq has lessened, of course, as the number of al-Qa’ida in Iraq has diminished and al-Qa’ida violence has become a bit more circumspect. Thus, al-Qa’ida might be able to rehabilitate its image in Iraq. Yet the reality is that for al-Qa’ida to ‘win’ in Iraq, it will have to depose the Shia-dominated Iraqi government – which means it will likely have to kill many more Muslims, ‘albeit’ (to them) mostly Shia. But the closer al-Qa’ida comes to hurting the Shia-dominated government, the more Iran will likely involve itself and work to suppress the al-Qa’ida militant threat – not to mention the likely increased hostility such actions would engender from Iraqis themselves. In short, it’s hard to see how al-Qa’ida can ‘win’ in Iraq.

Certainly, al-Qa’ida’s actions in Iraq were overwhelmingly brutal and likely exposed al-Qa’ida like nothing before – not even 9/11 -- that al-Qa’ida’s tactics are extraordinarily violent and indifferent to whom they hurt. Zarqawi’s beheading of Westerners and later Iraqis will long brand al-Qa’ida’s tactics. Hopefully, that brand will stain al-Qa’ida for a long time.

The Creation of al-Qa’ida Counter Narratives Do Not Necessarily Equal Defeat for al-Qa’ida

It may not have been necessary, of course, to draw al-Qa’ida out in this manner in Iraq for the West to have fashioned a successful branding and counter message of al-Qa’ida. There were many opportunities that the United States could have marketed to dissuade potential extremists well before Iraq:

- Taliban governance was a failure;
- 9/11 killed Muslims;
- The 1993 WTC attack would have killed Muslims;
- Algeria’s civil war killed hundreds of thousands of innocent Muslims;
- The al-Qa’ida East Africa embassy attacks killed hundreds of Muslims;
- al-Qa’ida predecessors in Yemen’s civil war killed innocent Muslims;
- Al-Qa’ida in Pakistan killed many Muslims in their own ranks.

The Egyptian government successfully turned all Arabs against the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) when the EIJ accidentally killed one girl during one of its attacks. The Egyptian government mobilized most of Egypt, North Africa and the Middle East against the EIJ—tagging it a perversion and evil—at the girl’s funeral. The Egyptian government used photographs and a personal story to make EIJ so hated they feared the public more than the security forces. The EIJ subsequently fled to Peshawar and became al-Qa’ida with UBL (the man with the money) at the helm. If the Egyptian government accomplished this marketing success with one victim, might the West have been able to brand al-Qa’ida similarly? One would think so, though the United States is not terribly proficient at such strategic branding.

It could be that the United States and the West does not know how to persuade the Muslim world, or is uncomfortable, or un-used to, fighting a war of competing narratives. American credibility in the Muslim world is so low, perhaps even with al-Qa'ida's history, Iraq was indeed necessary to expose al-Qa'ida at its worst.

But even if it *was* necessary, has al-Qa'ida's experience in Iraq fatally turned off the Muslim world? The violence there has not turned off Muslims everywhere from al-Qa'ida, of course. In fact, al-Qa'ida continues to grow in many places. Iraq may be quiet somewhat now, but Somalia, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, Saudi, Pakistan and Afghanistan are seeing new recruits daily. Images of Abu Ghraib still riddle extremist sites (yet it is difficult to find images or personable stories of Zarqawi's torture chambers and beheading of Muslims on the internet to provide a consistent counter narrative – why?).

Although "*Bring it on...*" exposed al-Qa'ida's main vulnerability – its nihilism, our presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, some argue, still has outweighed al-Qa'ida's negative branding of itself. There is at least anecdotal evidence to suggest that US boots in Iraq turned otherwise disinterested Muslims to support violence. A US military presence in Iraq brings back all the original extremist fears of humiliation and colonization.¹¹ Which narrative proves larger over time may not be known for years, though there is one inescapable reality to "*Bring it on...*" for al-Qa'ida to win, it must 'defeat' Muslims in Iraq, given that al-Qa'ida has declared – and continues to declare -- Iraq the central fight against the West. In other words, the West's battlefield with al-Qa'ida is no longer in New York, but is in Iraq, where al-Qa'ida must kill more Muslims.

Iraq certainly energized al-Qa'ida. But it turned the fight onto a Muslim state -- blasting the Muslim perception that al-Qa'ida's means are extreme, but since they are performed in Western countries, the West deserves it. Unless al-Qa'ida wins in Iraq and Afghanistan, there will be no victory over the West. In order to win in Iraq and Afghanistan, they blow up Muslims by the thousands. Ergo, they cannot win. Even if the war has been energized with the West, the new battlefield makes it impossible for them to win. "*Bring it on...*" may have been accidentally clever.

'Near Enemy'/'Far Enemy'

Noman Benotman, the former leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, is an ex-jihadist who fought with Usama bin Laden in Afghanistan in the early 1990s. Disillusioned by bin Laden's plans to attack the United States, Benotman argued at an al-Qa'ida 'conference' in 2000 that priority should remain with the 'near enemy:' corrupt Muslim states, rather than the 'far enemy' -- the West. In the years that followed, he was further upset by al-Qa'ida's targeting of noncombatants. He formally criticized al-Qa'ida 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 13}

¹¹ Daniel Kimmage, *The al-Qaeda Media Nexus, The Virtual Network Behind the Global Message*, An RFE/RL Special Report. http://docs.rferl.org/en-US/AQ_Media_Nexus.pdf

¹² Carl J. Ciovacco, *Could Al Qaeda's Own Strategy to Defeat Itself Actually Work?*, Strategic Insights, Volume VIII, Issue 3 (August 2009).

<http://www.nps.edu/Academics/centers/ccc/publications/OnlineJournal/2009/Aug/ciovaccoAug09.html>

¹³ Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, "The Unraveling: The jihadist revolt against bin Laden," *The New Republic*, June 11, 2008. <http://www.tnr.com/article/the-unraveling>

The ‘near enemy’ vs. ‘far enemy’ debate for al-Qa’ida has been around even longer than Benotman and al-Qa’ida. Historically, Salafists have debated which they wish to attack first. Bin Laden ended the internal al-Qa’ida debate by planning and implementing 9/11. But President Bush turned al-Qa’ida’s direction 180 degrees back to a near enemy, Iraq, within two and one half years of 9/11, and in which al-Qa’ida remains mired. Ironically, “*Bring it on...*” forced the war with the West back to a near enemy: the (‘apostate and corrupt’) Muslim state of Iraq. Once al-Qa’ida declared Iraq the central front against the West, they had unintentionally assumed a near enemy state as its strategic priority. It is likely al-Qa’ida leadership may not have realized what they had done -- a strategic shift, forced upon them by President Bush, which they at first gladly accepted, thinking that it played to its narrative.

Benotman challenged al-Qa’ida leadership again in November 2009 when the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), wrote a new ‘code’ for jihad -- a 417-page religious document entitled “Corrective Studies.” The code directly challenges al Qaeda, most likely in direct response to al-Qa’ida’s actions in Iraq:

"Jihad has ethics and morals because it is for God. That means it is forbidden to kill women, children, elderly people, priests, messengers, traders and the like. Betrayal is prohibited and it is vital to keep promises and treat prisoners of war in a good way. Standing by those ethics is what distinguishes Muslims' jihad from the wars of other nations."¹⁴

The code states that jihad is permissible if Muslim lands are invaded. But the guidelines it sets down for when and how jihad should be fought, and its insistence that civilians should not be targeted, are a clear rebuke to the goals and tactics of bin Laden's terrorist network, according to a CNN report.¹⁵

Abu Yahya’s Six Easy Steps for Defeating al-Qa’ida

In a September 2007 video release, Shaikh Abu Yahya al-Libi outlined a list of ideas for the West to adopt to better fight its ‘war of ideas’ against al-Qa’ida.¹⁶ The list is quite instructive and most helpful. Abu Yahya’s may have believed that the United States lags so far behind the global jihadist movement in its war of ideas that al-Qa’ida has little to fear any time soon.¹⁷ But if so, he may have been wrong about this. His strategy for the West focuses almost exclusively on countering al-Qa’ida’s narrative:

1. Use those former jihadists who have retracted previous commitments to violence.
2. Fabricate stories regarding jihadist abuses and exaggerate real mistakes whenever they are made, including, in particular, blaming al-Qa’ida terrorism for killing innocents, particularly women, children and the elderly. Be sure, he admonishes the West, to convince populations that the murder of innocent people is a core part of global al-Qa’ida goals. Cast such actions as emblematic of the entire al-Qa’ida organization.

¹⁴ <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/africa/11/09/libya.jihadi.code/index.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/africa/11/09/libya.jihadi.code/index.html>

¹⁶ Abu Yahya al-Libi. 93-minute video tape. Produced by As-Sahab. Recorded early *Sha'bani 1428*.

¹⁷ Jarret Brachman, *Abu Yahya’s Six Easy Steps for Defeating al-Qaeda*, Perspectives on Terrorism, Volume I, Issue 5. http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php?option=com_rokzine&view=article&id=18&Itemid=54

3. Prompt mainstream Muslim clerics to issue *fatwas* that incriminate al-Qa'ida actions; deprogram captured religious leaders to encourage them to denounce their former beliefs and followers.
4. Strengthen Islamic movements removed from Jihad, particularly those with a democratic approach; push these groups into ideological conflict with al-Qa'ida in order to keep the jihadist scholars and propagandists busy responding to their criticisms.¹⁸
5. Neutralize or discredit the guiding thinkers of al-Qa'ida.
6. Highlight disagreements among al-Qa'ida leaders as being major doctrinal and methodological disputes.

As many analysts have noted, the West is poorly positioned, organized or legally enabled to implement such an agenda of counter messaging and successful ideological debating. The United States enjoys no credibility when discussing the Islamic faith. Past and future official statements will be largely dismissed as propaganda, which is why al-Qa'ida's narrative failure in Iraq is particularly important.

If Abu Yahya is right, that the best way to defeat al-Qa'ida is to turn its narrative onto itself, al-Qa'ida's experience in Iraq could be the beginning of just that: a showcase for al-Qa'ida nihilism, self-destruction and narrative bankruptcy.^{19 20} The war in Iraq provided that window into al-Qa'ida nihilism and incompetence and illustrated the bankruptcy of much of al-Qa'ida's narrative. Of Abu Yahya's six suggested counter narrative strategies, Iraq provides counter-al-Qa'ida lessons for all of them:

1. Several former al-Qa'ida in Iraq have left al-Qa'ida-in-Iraq (AQI). Many Sunni supporters of al-Qa'ida in Iraq have broken with al-Qa'ida and turned on AQI.
2. There is no need to fabricate stories of jihadist abuse in Iraq. The West just needs to highlight them. And the West needs to remind all Muslims that these abuses are emblematic of the organization – a core part of al-Qa'ida's goals. To support al-Qa'ida, therefore, is to support widespread death.
3. Not only have numerous *fatwas* been issued to denounce 9/11 and suicide bombing, but specifically the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia has denounced al-Qa'ida following years of abuse, particularly in Iraq.²¹ Several prominent, formerly-supportive voices of al-Qa'ida have turned on al-Qa'ida – in large part due to the violence it created in Iraq.
4. Islamic movements now must view violence in Iraq as emblematic of al-Qa'ida and therefore must decide whether that is the activism they support.
5. Al-Qa'ida's intellectual leaders are now on the defensive, given the widespread and wanton abuse perpetrated in Iraq.

¹⁸ Jarret Brachman, *Abu Yahya's Six Easy Steps for Defeating al-Qaeda*, Perspectives on Terrorism, Volume I, Issue 5. http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php?option=com_rokzine&view=article&id=18&Itemid=54

¹⁹ Carl J. Ciovacco, Could Al Qaeda's Own Strategy to Defeat Itself Actually Work?, Naval Post Graduate School, *Strategic Insights*, Volume VIII, Issue 3 (August 2009). <http://www.nps.edu/Academics/centers/ccc/publications/OnlineJournal/2009/Aug/ciovaccoAug09.html>

²⁰ "Handicapped Bombers Kill Dozens in Iraq," MSNBC, February 1, 2008. "US: 'Demonic' Militants Sent Women to Bomb Markets in Iraq," CNN, February 2, 2008.

²¹ <http://facts-not-fear.blogspot.com/2007/11/more-muslim-condemnation-of-terrorism.html>

6. The ideological disagreements among al-Qa'ida leaders are being highlighted by Muslims themselves and debated on militant blogs. Al-Qa'ida is at risk of losing much of its ideological credibility, owing to its failure in Iraq

Conclusion

“Bring it on...” worked by having al-Qa’ida come to Iraq, where it demonstrated what it is all about, which undermined its legitimacy faster than had they bombed shopping malls all around the world for a decade. It was the war with the West in fast-forward. It also disproved Usama bin Laden’s argument to his followers that the United States is a paper tiger.

Al-Qa’ida got the theater it wanted and the world -- especially the Muslim world -- was revolted. Hostility toward al-Qa’ida grew so much that in April 2008 second in command Ayman al-Zawahiri had to defend the killing of Muslims with claims that the West was using Muslims in Iraq as human shields. His online dialogue flooded him with questions regarding the legitimacy of jihad if Muslims are killed. He claimed no innocent Muslims had been killed (it was all ‘Crusader-Jewish propaganda’), but if they had, it was the West’s fault for making them kill them.

Did the liberation of Iraq lead to the violent radicalization of thousands of individuals who might not have become radicalized without the invasion? Yes.

Did the war and the surge lead to the death of thousands of these radicalized extremists? Yes.

Did the war suck these individuals, along with other already-radicalized extremists into Iraq and away from their home theaters around the world? Very likely.

So did Iraq overall hurt al-Qa’ida more than it helped al-Qa’ida? It’s tough to conceive of a methodology to make a definitive assessment, but the lack of sustained al-Qa’ida violence in the United States, Europe and in Asia suggest that, yes, it did hurt al-Qa’ida more than it helped.

One can argue that the war was not worth the enormous cost of life and money, despite the success achieved against al-Qa’ida, but it is hard to deny that any success occurred. It is also possible to argue that Iraq still energized more al-Qa’ida worldwide than it killed and disillusioned – a methodology to prove whether the war was overall a net gain or loss for al-Qa’ida is hard to devise. But an argument can be made that Iraq turned out to be a significant – if not enormous -- physical and ideological loss for al-Qa’ida.

Al-Qa’ida continues to represent a worldwide threat to the United States and its allies. It continues to plot terrorist acts against the West and aspires to acquire or develop weapons of mass destruction, which it very well might use against the West without hesitation.

The ‘center of gravity’ in our war with al-Qa’ida – a group of fringe, non-state extremists who advance a totalitarian and nihilistic message -- is our worldwide fight over al-Qa’ida’s legitimacy and Muslim perceptions of the West. The central ‘front’ in this war remains the worldwide fight over al-Qa’ida’s legitimacy and Muslim perceptions of the West. The goal is to defeat and end al-Qa’ida legitimacy and recruitment, since an insurgency is defeated when no one (or very few) join it. Al-Qa’ida exists and grows on the very narrative that the West is at war with al-Qa’ida. The United States needs to fight al-Qa’ida comprehensively: with force where necessary, but with actions that disprove al-Qa’ida’s narrative that we are at war with all of Islam. If al-Qa’ida helps undermine its own legitimacy ... all the better. There is no clash of civilization; al-Qa’ida advances the absence of civilization.

A better strategy now, given the success in Iraq, is to treat al-Qa'ida's threat as a worldwide counter-insurgency, which requires us to fight with troops, but also aid to allies who compete for Muslim identity, and actions to disaggregate disaffected Muslims from violent extremists.

We must convince potential recruits that violent extremism is counterproductive for followers of Islam. Indeed, violent extremists are worse, more corrupt, more hypocritical and more incompetent than the governments they criticize. We must convince potential recruits that the murder of innocent people is a core part of violent extremism, something that is utterly impermissible under the Koran.

We must convince potential recruits that mistakes committed by al-Qa'ida are emblematic of the entire violent extremist network – they are not isolated incidents, but characteristic of such groups. Al-Qa'ida actions create human victims. In Iraq, like in Afghanistan, extremists kill far more civilians than Western forces do.²² Iraq provided a showcase for al-Qa'ida to develop its own counter narratives to advance all these real, important messages.

To be sure, al-Qa'ida is not dead. The Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan serve as the safe haven for al-Qa'ida leadership and international terrorist plotting. But al-Qa'ida has failed in Iraq. The US confrontation with radical, violent extremism in Iraq may have helped reveal al-Qa'ida in a way that is crucial to its global demise. If this proves true, American sacrifice there was not only not vain, it was historically decisive.

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No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be drawn without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment.



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²²Ben Arnold, "In Afghanistan, Taliban kills more civilians than US," *The Christian Science Monitor*, July 31, 2009. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2009/0731/p06s15-wosc.html>