

Understanding the al-Qaeda Enemy in Three Volumes

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Sun Tzu's admonition to the general that in order to defeat his enemy, he must know his enemy as well as he knows himself was never more true than in the current struggle between the West and the Salafi jihadist organization known as al-Qaida and its allies – hereafter referred to as the al-Qaida Associated Movements (AQAM). Although the war had most certainly begun not later than Osama bin Laden's 23 February 1998 declaration of war on the United States, and probably much sooner, it took the events of 9/11 to ensure the American population and their government were fully aware of their status as a co-belligerent in an armed struggle between the last remaining superpower and a small, fringe element of the Islamic faith. It has been seven years since that fateful attack and many – to include many who are in the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security – are still struggling to understand this enemy and devise a coherent strategy to defeat them.

Three works recently published by the Naval Institute Press provide an outstanding compendium examining AQAM ideology, strategy and doctrine. The first two works, *The Canons of Jihad: Terrorists' Strategy for Defeating America* and *A Terrorist's Call to Global Jihad: Deciphering Abu Musab Al-Suri's Islamic Jihad Manifesto*, both edited by Jim Lacey, afford a superb view of not only who these Salafi jihadists are, but what makes them tick. What makes these works so important in the war against AQAM is that it affords the West a means to understand our enemy by examining the evolution of their own ideology and strategic thought through their own words. The third work, entitled *The Terrorist Perspectives Project: Strategic and Operational Views of Al-Qaida and Associated Movements*, edited by Mark E. Stout, Jessica M. Huckabey and John R. Schindler with assistance of Jim Lacey, is an assessment of AQAM ideology and strategic/ operational views with recommended countervailing strategies for the U.S. and the West to adopt to defeat AQAM in the cognitive domain of war. Each of these three works will be examined more closely below.

The Canons of Jihad begins with a translation of Osama bin Laden's declaration of war against the U.S. in its entirety, but then walks the reader through the evolution of Salafi Jihadist thought, beginning with Hasan al-Banna, the founder of Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, who published "Jihad" shortly before he was assassinated in 1949. It is in "Jihad" that the ummah (community of Muslim faithful) are reminded that, "Allah associates warfare with prayer and fasting, establishing it as one of the pillars of Islam."¹ Al-Banna is followed by Sayyid Qutb's "Milestones" which exposes the corruption and decadence

offered by the West as a dead end, and calls for the ummah to embrace their true heritage which is embodied in Islam, and which must be restored to its original form. What is fascinating in Qutb's discourse is his acknowledgement that "the leadership of mankind has long since passed to other ideologies and nations . . . [an] era during which Europe's genius created marvelous works in science, culture, law and material production . . .".² But he then quickly notes that despite these accomplishments the West is spiritually dead and devoid of the Divine guidance. It is this rejection of God that Qutb perceives is the West's undoing and offers the Islamic faithful their best hope to once again emerge as the true leaders of the world. Moreover, for this transition to be possible requires a dedicated vanguard to set the ummah on the right path.³ That path demands strict adherence to Sharia Law as opposed to laws made by men, and which ultimately calls for the replacement of nation-states and other forms of human governance with the Caliphate.

Other works examined in *The Canons of Jihad* include, Muhammad al-Salam Faraj's "Neglected Obligation," Abu Bakir Naji's "The Management of Savagery," and General S.K. Malik's "The Qur'anic Concept of War," to name but a few, each offering critical insights into who is being called to jihad, for what purpose they are being called and how they are expected to act upon accepting that call. Clearly, each of these elements is crucial to satisfying Sun Tzu's admonition to understand our enemy.

The second volume, *A Terrorist's Call to Jihad: Deciphering Abu Musab Al-Suri's Islamic Manifesto*, also edited by Jim Lacey, condenses al-Suri's original 1,600 page tome into a more accessible 195-pages of hard-hitting text. Lacey acknowledges that in condensing the 1,600 page original, he runs the danger of leaving out much that might have meaning to the target audience, though he endeavored to delete only the several thousand quotes from the Qur'an and medieval Islamic scholars as well as the many places wherein al-Suri became repetitious. What emerges is a fascinating and illuminating glimpse over the other side of the hill – into the enemy's camp and indeed, inside the enemy commander's tent. The writings of al-Suri, touted as al-Qaida's foremost strategic thinker, affords a Salafi-jihadist perspective on this war, emphasizing how Islam has weathered centuries of assaults from the West and offering Sharia rulings that not only justify the war, but how it is to be conducted.

Perhaps most important of all in this work is that al-Suri not only explains the normative values and purported strengths of the jihadists, he also laments how, when and where the counterterrorist efforts by the West have done great damage to the AQAM, compelling most of the groups who might wish to join AQAM to think instead to their own survival and creating conditions in which less than one in one million Muslims are willing to become jihadists. He then goes into some detail outlining the mistakes that jihadists have made in prosecuting this war – first among them is shedding the blood of fellow Muslims when attacking the infidels. Al-Suri's admission that the events of 9/11 brought about the American counteroffensive that resulted in the "utter destruction of the jihadist movement in Afghanistan," with fully 75 percent of the jihadists and most of the cadre leadership dead or captured,⁴ makes it clear that Afghan national and Coalition counterterrorism efforts have not been in vain nor as ineffective as is largely believed by Western media and pundits.

Still, despite the defeats and setbacks, al-Suri remains hopeful of final victory. It is no accident his manifesto ends with a chapter on “Media and Incitement in the Call [to Jihad].” Here he offers instruction for four levels of focus – Audience, Message Content, Style of Message, and Delivery System.⁵ He then follows up with 18 recommendations, which might also be considered rules for engagement on the cognitive domain of war. These include “beware of rumors and revealing secrets” as well as “beware not to get caught up in controversies and ideological battles among Muslims.”⁶

It would be difficult to overemphasize how important al-Suri’s writings are to developing a countervailing strategy in the war on Salafi jihadists. If winning the war against AQAM requires the West to defeat their strategy, then al-Suri has offered to us AQAM’s playbook.

The third work is *The Terrorist Perspectives Project: Strategic and Operational Views of Al-Qaida and Associated Movements*, edited by Mark E. Stout, et. al. As stated in the Introduction, the purpose of this volume is to examine the AQAM strategy from the objective outside observer’s viewpoint – what anthropologists call the “etic” perspective – as well as from the point of view and values of the group under study – the “emic” perspective.⁷ What emerges over the next 243 pages is a superb examination of how the Salafi-jihadists perceive themselves, their enemies and their goals and strategies coupled with western analytic methods to define and operationalize the structures, roles and functions of AQAM as a movement and as a network. For example, in chapter 2 the reader is treated to a discussion regarding whether AQAM members perceive their use of violence to be *instrumental*, designed to create certain specific strategic outcomes, or rather is it *existential* – is the violence as a process to prove the individual jihadist’s prowess, courage and conviction? Interestingly, AQAM members differ in their opinions, with the strategists thinking in terms of political outcomes whereas the foot soldiers thinking more in terms of process.⁸

In chapter 6 there is a solid analysis of AQAM’s strategy, again from their own perspective. To begin with, there are two lines of action. The first is to create the model Islamic state. To do this requires attacking the “Jews and Crusaders” and once they are removed, toppling the “Apostate Regimes.” The second line of action requires uniting the ummah under the Salafi-jihadist banner. Only when both are completed does it become possible to create a restored Caliphate. These lines of action require four core missions, referred to as “fronts” by Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden’s most senior lieutenant. The first front is inflicting losses on the Crusader West, especially its economic structures. The second is expelling the Crusader-Zionist enemy from the lands of Islam, not by military defeat, but rather through the collapse of their economies. The third front is toppling the corrupt Islamic regimes that have surrendered to Israel. The fourth front is popular missionary action by scholars, clerics, writers and thinkers motivating a return to Islam.⁹

It is the final chapter of *The Terrorist Perspectives Project* that makes this work a critical contribution to the war on the Salafi-Jihadists. Here the authors recapitulate the AQAM

concerns for the struggle and then, based upon these admitted failings, and barriers the work concludes by offering countervailing strategies for the West to defeat the movement. The barriers and issues identified by AQAM leadership include:

1. The power of apostate regimes and their security services
2. The power of the media allied with the United States
3. The opposition of senior Islamic scholars
4. Lack of “sufficient faith” by other Sunni groups
5. An ummah corrupted by Western influence and distracted by “worldly concerns”
6. Using violence against Muslims
7. The importance of connecting to Muslims by means other than violent jihad, and
8. Agreeing on a strategic focus of jihad¹⁰

Taking these self-admitted jihadist weaknesses and concerns, the authors of *The Terrorist Perspectives Project* then offer a tailored strategy designed to exacerbate these weaknesses through a two-pronged approach. The first is a long-term approach seeking to advance effective democracy in the regions where AQAM is seeking to mobilize a given constituency. The second is a shorter term approach having four aims: 1) preventing attacks by terror networks, 2) denying weapons of mass destruction to rogue states and terrorists, 3) denying terrorists the support and sanctuary of rogue states and 4) denying terrorists control of any nation from which to launch future attacks.¹¹ What is interesting is that a critical tool in achieving these outcomes is affected in the cognitive domain of war through the use of strategic communications. This tool will be essential not only in containing Salafi-jihadist terrorism, but will also have great utility in rolling it back. The authors warn, however, that rollback must be governed by important guiding principles:

1. The aim is to discredit Salafi jihadism so it becomes weak, isolated and a pariah fringe of Sunni Islam
2. The contested ground is the ummah – those Sunni Muslims to whom AQAM is appealing
3. The aim is not to convince the ummah of the West’s rightness, but stop them from supporting and joining AQAM, and
4. The nucleus of the true believer cannot be deterred or converted, but simply killing/capturing them will not alone result in victory.¹²

Any one of these volumes reviewed above would serve as an excellent enhancement to any analyst’s or academic’s bookshelf regarding the topic of Salafi-jihadism. Combined, however, they afford one of the finest, comprehensive and easily approachable treatments of this critical national security issue available anywhere. They are certain to become standard texts in Terrorism and Asymmetric Warfare syllabi throughout the academy.

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¹ Hasan al-Banna, "Jihad," *The Canons of Jihad: Terrorist's Strategy for Defeating America*, Jim Lacey, ed. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 6.

² Sayyid Qutb, "Milesotnes," *The Canons of Jihad*, 13.

³ Qutb, 13-14.

⁴ Abu Musab al-Suri, "Islamic Jihad Manifesto," *A Terrorist's Call to Global Jihad: Deciphering Abu Musab Al-Suri's Islamic Jihad Manifesto*, Jim Lacey, ed., (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 100.

⁵ Al-Suri, 189.

⁶ Al-Suri, 195-196.

⁷ Mark Stout, et. al., *The Terrorist Perspectives Project: Strategic and Operational Views of Al-Qaida and Associated Movements*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008), x.

⁸ *The Terrorist Perspectives Project*, 42-43.

⁹ *The Terrorist Perspectives Project*, 138-139.

¹⁰ *The Terrorist Perspectives Project*, 230-235.

¹¹ *The Terrorist Perspectives Project*, 235.

¹² *The Terrorist Perspectives Project*, 236.

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