Q&A with the authors of *Islamic Radicalism and Global Jihad*

Q: What were you able to get out of the original Arabic language sources that you would not have been able to get from other sources?

Authors: There’s no doubt that relying on primary sources makes a real difference. For our book, using the original Arabic was a necessity. Much of the material we used for our research was taken from militant websites and is not available in translation to the public. Accessing the original language material allowed us to not only get a look at the original Arabic but also allowed us to get a feel for how certain messages are absorbed by the community of jihadi supporters. Working in the vernacular also allowed us to capture the real meanings of the authors’ words and not just rely on a translation that potentially loses some of the subtext. This greatly increased our ability to capture nuances in the meaning of messages unlike those scholars forced to work exclusively with translations.

Q: How do you feel that your different respective backgrounds helped to shape the book?

Authors: Our varied backgrounds brought a real synergy to writing this book. Collectively, we have broad-based experience in Arabic language media exploitation, analytic research, and intelligence operations. We believe the combination of our backgrounds forced us to look critically at the evidence and our interpretations of the evidence which strengthened the analysis presented in our book.

Q: In the book, you say that Al'Qa'ida and its jihadist contemporaries have been oversimplified in the West's understanding. How so?

Authors: There has been a tendency on the part of public officials to portray al-Qa’ida and its contemporaries in the jihadist movement broadly, demonizing them for the reprehensible acts they have committed, but totally ignoring the intellectual content of their message. This is ironic because much of the larger battle—fighting this particular worldview—is being played out in the media which al-Qa’ida relies on to maintain its support base in the larger Muslim community. And, intelligence officers and diplomats know that you can never succeed in dealing with adversaries unless you understand their underlying motivations and aspirations. This underscores the critical need to understand the nuances of jihadist militants to better exploit potential wedge issues. We believe our book makes a serious attempt to explain the thought processes that underlie the global jihadist message and to describe the differing ideas, goals, and vulnerabilities of the movement as it has evolved over time that might prove exploitable against them.

Q: How have groups like Al'Qa'ida been able to recruit so successfully?

Authors: A major reason for successful recruitment and radicalization has been that al-Qa’ida is able to propagate a message designed to be applicable to a broad audience in various parts of the world and in various socioeconomic or political situations. Al-Qa’ida drives a global ideology and really strives to relate to its audience of followers and sympathizers with a message that resonates in portions of the Muslim population around the world. American foreign policy blunders have often unknowingly served to “confirm” the al-Qa’ida message that the U.S. is anti-Muslim. If that false message is unopposed in the world of ideas, it can be persuasive among people who have been oppressed or denied freedom.
Q: Islamic radicals often mention their desire for a return to the golden age of the caliphate. What was the caliphate, and what does it signify to today's Islamists?  
Authors: Although the caliphate actually existed in history, it really serves as a symbol for the modern jihadist who may know very little that is grounded in facts about the past. For today’s jihadi, the caliphate is a mythic goal of a world under Islamic law. Al-Qa’ida intentionally does little to explain what the caliphate would actually entail or where it would be located in an attempt to broaden the movement’s appeal.

Q: How do you see the movement of Islamic Radicalism evolving in the coming decade?  
Authors: Any good analyst knows it’s very problematic making projections about the future, especially ones going out beyond a few years. It’s also true that ideas and movements certainly wax and wane over time. However, given the tenacity of al-Qa’ida and its followers as well as other adherents to the jihadist worldview, it is important to face the reality that Islamic radicalism is not likely to go away. Because radicalism grows out of ideas, it can only be rendered unmarketable by positive actions to counter its message. In essence, its appeal can be greatly muted by the actions of the West and Muslim governments, especially in the core Arab countries of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and North Africa. It’s also likely that national differences and rivalries in the Muslim world – that is, local or regional concerns – may become more salient within the movement mirroring what happened with the secular pan-Arab movement of an earlier generation. And, it remains to be seen how well the ideology behind the radical movement travels if Muslims actually become more integrated into Europe.

Q: How are we most vulnerable to these terrorist attacks?  
Authors: Perfect security is not possible. There’s always going to be some chance of a terrorist attack happening. So, we need to distinguish between vulnerability abroad and vulnerability at home. It’s inevitable that using our military forces in Muslim lands will make those forces and the people around them targets because they are close to the attackers and launching terrorist operations against these forces requires minimal logistical preparation. After 9/11, carrying out a successful terrorist attack inside the U.S. has become much harder but not impossible. We will always have some vulnerability to an attack from a disciplined, determined group driven by religious zeal. Unlike some portions of the Muslim population in Europe, however, there’s no real evidence that radical Islam is a potent force among American Muslims and travel restrictions have been tightened so launching an attack in the U.S. is much more difficult.

Q: What is the most important thing we can do to protect ourselves from the threat of the global jihadists?  
Authors: First and foremost, it is essential to isolate the jihadists from their support base by moving aggressively to implement policies that dampen their appeal to the population. We also need to employ classic intelligence techniques on a multinational basis to penetrate the jihadist groups, provide warning of their plans, and neutralize their operations. The bottom line is that undermining the jihadist message—through both overt and covert means—can have a substantial impact on its ability to inspire individuals to make the jump to becoming al-Qa’ida sympathizers, or to becoming active combatants.

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Original Paperback ISBN 9781589012530 $26.95/£15.95
Library Bind ISBN 9781589012523 $49.95/£29.50
Publication date: February 2009