

## **Al-Qa'ida and the "Arab Spring": Redefining Its Modus Operandi**

**Esther Webman**

In May 2012, al-Qa'ida's most prominent ideologue, Mustafa Setmariam Nasar, a.k.a. Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, who was released from a Syrian prison in December 2011, redefined the strategy, goals and targets of global *jihad*. In *Inspire*, the electronic mouthpiece of al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Suri reiterated the views he had expressed in his 1,600-page book, *A Call to a Global Islamic Resistance*, published on the internet in 2005 (shortly before he was captured in Pakistan and transferred to Syria). Combating western and Jewish interests, he asserted, continued to be the main goal of global *jihadi* struggle, and individual *jihad* the main course of action. However, in view of the weakness of al-Qa'ida's central command, al-Suri left the decision of when to act and choice of target to individual initiatives.

Al-Suri suggested that potential *jihadis* work from within their home environment. Further justifying individual, local operations such as that by Muhammad Merah against Jewish school children in Toulouse in March 2012, and the turning of al-Qa'ida into a primarily ideological inspiration, he wrote,

The Islamic *ummah* is vast and so are the arenas in which targets and interests of the invader enemy are present. It is furthermore impossible for all the youth who want to participate in the Resistance to travel to the arenas of [open] confrontation. It is even unlikely that such Fronts should emerge in the foreseeable future. Hence, our method should therefore be to guide the Muslim who wants to participate and resist, to operate where he is, or where he is able to be present, in a natural way. We should advise him to pursue his everyday life in a natural way and to pursue *jihad* and Resistance in secrecy and alone, or with a small cell of trustworthy people, who form an independent unit for Resistance and for individual *jihad*.<sup>1</sup>

He then listed the priority arenas, stretching from Pakistan and South East Asia, through the Middle East and North Africa to European countries allied with America and “the heart of America.” The goal of the operations would be “to inflict as many human and material losses as possible upon the interests of America and her allies, and to make them feel that the Resistance has transformed into a phenomenon of popular uprising against them.”<sup>2</sup> Among these targets are “places where Jews are gathered, their leading personalities and institutions in Europe.”<sup>3</sup>

This redefinition of its *modus operandi* came in response to al-Qa’ida’s current state of weakness. Yet it also constituted a return to the original platform issued by Usama Bin Ladin in February 1998, when he announced the formation of the Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders,<sup>4</sup> and seems to coincide with Bin Ladin’s views, reflected in the documents seized from his compound during the US commando operation which killed him in May 2011.

From these documents Bin Ladin emerges as having been a very pessimistic person. In an April 30, 2012 speech marking the first anniversary of Bin Ladin’s killing, John Brennan, Assistant to the US President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, revealed Bin Ladin’s disappointment that his most skilled and

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<sup>1</sup> *Inspire* 8, May 2, 2012, retrieved from [www.ict.org.il/NewsCommentaries/Commentaries/.../2/Default.aspx](http://www.ict.org.il/NewsCommentaries/Commentaries/.../2/Default.aspx).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *Inspire* 9, May 2, 2012, *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> *Al-Quds al-‘Arabi*, February 23, 1998.

experienced commanders were being killed or captured, and that members of his organization were on the run. Bin Ladin was worried about the rise of inexperienced leaders who “would lead to the repeat of mistakes”; his isolation and poor communication with subordinates and affiliates; and especially al-Qa‘ida’s tarnished reputation. He apparently confessed to “disaster after disaster,” and “agreed that ‘a large portion’ of Muslims around the world ‘have lost their trust’ in al-Qa‘ida.”<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, al-Qa‘ida today is not the al-Qa‘ida it was on the eve of September 11, 2001. Then it acted as a centralized hierarchical organization that considered options and targets of operation on the basis of cost, available teams, and expected damages. Due to the war on terror launched by the United States and its allies, al-Qa‘ida’s members left Afghanistan and were scattered, its central command’s control and activities were undermined, and many of its senior leaders were killed. Most of its subsequent initiatives to carry out operations in the West were foiled. The organization lost its international momentum, its power and luster. Today al-Qa‘ida is in a chaotic state. In order to remain relevant, it has been compelled to cooperate with other groups, which has meant evolving into an ideological movement whose main function is to provide overall guidance, and tactical and strategic assistance.

Bin Ladin was aware of the changes that his organization was undergoing. He regarded the turning of al-Qa‘ida into an “ideological umbrella” for a network of independent organizations as harmful to his original vision and message, leading to terrorist activities in Muslim countries and causing Muslim civilian casualties. He wanted to stop the bloodshed against Muslims, and to re-prioritize the fight against Americans. He was critical of al-Shabaab in Somalia for its inflexible interpretation of Islamic law, and refused to officially recognize them as an al-Qa‘ida affiliate. (After his death, Ayman al-Zawahiri reversed that policy and officially recognized al-Shabaab.)<sup>6</sup> He was urged by some members to reconsider the issue of *takfir* (excommunication of fellow Muslims, which renders them unbelievers liable to be

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<sup>5</sup> Transcript of Remarks by John O. Brennan, "The Ethics and the Efficacy of the President's Counterterrorism Strategy," April 30, 2012, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/the-ethics-and-ethics-us-counterterrorism-strategy>.

<sup>6</sup> Tristan McConnell, “Al Shabaab and Al Qaeda co-produce video,” *Global Post*, February 10, 2012, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatches/globalpost-blogs/africa/al-shabaab-and-al-qaeda-post-joint-video>

killed), and to take a clear position on the interpretation of Islam to avoid being associated with “narrow-minded” interpretations touted in the organization’s name.<sup>7</sup>

After the peak of Bin Ladin’s activity on 9/11, and his failure to carry out another such spectacular act, Bin Ladin’s stature as a global *jihadi* was diminishing. Even so, his demise dealt a hard blow to the organization; his successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, has so far not succeeded in filling the vacuum he left.

Analyzing the decline of al-Qa’ida, in December 2010, the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point pointed to two categories of endogenous problems plaguing al-Qa’ida and the *jihadi* movement proper: internal divisions and “fault lines dividing the *jihad* movement from other Muslim and Islamist actors.”<sup>8</sup> Internal divisions revolved around the crucial issues pertinent to the strategy of struggle, such as what the focus of activity should be against the ‘near enemy,’ i.e. Muslim regimes, or the ‘far enemy,’ i.e. the United States and its western allies; and the issue of *takfir*, which alienates fellow Muslims. There are also rifts between pragmatists and doctrinarians, between Arab and non-Arab members and between al-Qa’ida’s central command and its local affiliates. But despite the constraints, these divisions also leave a degree of flexibility in defining goals and modes of operation. Its leaders easily move from one place to another, target failed Arab states or conflict areas, and fight against autocratic regimes as well as encourage terrorist acts against the West.

Three factors challenge the organization:

- Lack of funds. Bin Ladin invested a huge amount of his wealth and managed to raise money from wealthy Muslims in the Gulf, but nowadays, al-Qa’ida encounters great difficulties in raising similar amounts.
- Lack of experienced commanders.

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<sup>7</sup> Robin Sincov, "Analyzing the Bin Laden Documents," *World Affairs Journal*, May-June 2012, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/analyzing-bin-laden-documents>.

<sup>8</sup> Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman (eds.), *Self-Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within al-Qa’ida and its Periphery*, (Combating Terrorism Center at West Point), December 16, 2010, [www.ctc.usma.edu](http://www.ctc.usma.edu).

- The “Arab Spring,” which presented a model of regime change that dealt a blow to al-Qa’ida’s theory that *jihad* was the only way to topple autocratic Arab regimes.

As Hassan Mneimneh, an expert on extremism and insurgency in the Arab and Muslim worlds, observed, “Three decades since the onset of the anti-Soviet Afghan Jihad and the emergence of a Jihadist *internationale*, more than two decades after the Saudi monarchy had sought western protection, against the loud objections of the Jihadists, and almost a decade after the Jihadist ‘raids’ of September 11, 2001, ... Jihadist mobilization in Arab and Muslim societies has still not managed to ignite a revolution.”<sup>9</sup> Being part and parcel of the Islamist movements, al-Qa’ida shares with them the same basic tenets and hostility toward the West and Israel, yet competes with them. It does not enjoy the broad social basis and financial resources of the Muslim Brothers, Hizballah or Hamas, but it has sometimes enjoyed an underdog status.

The “Arab Spring” caught al-Qa’ida by surprise. Its attitude toward the revolutions was initially ambivalent; after all, such revolutions meant a tacit rejection of the organization’s ideology. Nevertheless, the demonstrators succeeded in realizing the goal that *jihadis* had failed to achieve. Eventually, al-Qa’ida’s leaders supported the demonstrators and, once the success of Islamist parties became apparent, they even tried to appropriate some of this success. Al-Zawahiri broadcast an appeal to the Egyptian people on January 29, calling upon all Islamist movements to unite and, anticipating the return of all *jihadi* Islamists who left Egypt, for a comprehensive Islamic revolution. In another appeal he encouraged opposition to the Syrian regime and warned against relying on the West for intervention into the civil war.

The “Arab Spring” challenged the ideology of all Islamist movements and forced them to adjust themselves to the new circumstances. Most of these movements, first and foremost the formerly a-political *Salafis*, have forsaken their trans-national agenda in favor of particularist, national ones. Even the Egyptian *jihadi* movements, such *al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya* and the Egyptian *Jihad*, formed parties to run for

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<sup>9</sup> Hasan Mneimneh, “The Spring of a New Political Salafism?” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 12 (October 19, 2011).

parliament. In view of the fact that the Islamist movements chose the political path in the framework of the nation state, which only a few years ago was fighting for its survival, they reinforce the legitimacy of the individual states, although they did not give up their ultimate goal of one united Islamic *umma*.

Al-Qa'ida, on the other hand, ceased its activities intended to change or overthrow corrupt regimes in Arab countries in the 1990s and directed its attention toward the West and Jews. With the disintegration and weakening of its central command, the global movement relies heavily on individual initiatives, mainly Muslims and converts to Islam living in the West, in its struggle against the West. The "Arab Spring," however, also provided al-Qa'ida with new opportunities. By exploiting its ties with its affiliate local, autonomous or semi-autonomous movements, it expanded its activities in failed states and ungoverned regions, further undermining their stability and cohesion. Militant groups affiliated or identified with al-Qa'ida continue to haunt Iraq and to fuel conflict in Yemen, Sinai, and Syria as well as in Somalia, Nigeria and North Africa. The most recent example is the success two splinter groups of al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar al-Din, and the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), which gained control over northern Mali after joining the Tuareg rebels in March 2012, and established a strict *shari'a* rule. Today, despite the organization's weaknesses, the idea of al-Qa'ida remains potent and, as Pakistani journalist Hamid Mir asserted, "Bin Ladenism is still a source of inspiration for the militants fighting from Afghanistan to Yemen and from Iraq to Palestine."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *The News* (Pakistan), April 30, 2012, via Memri, special dispatch 4684, May 1, 2012.

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