

Al Qaeda is to terror what the mafia is to crime. But its goal is not making money; its goal is remaking the world—and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere.¹

President Bush, September 20, 2001

The near-term goals of al-Qa'ida today are well known: force the US to withdraw from the Middle East and establish Islamic states in the region. Its general strategy is similarly well known: provoke the US into committing ground forces to the region, thereby exhausting its will to remain. But these goals and strategy have evolved over time and are as much a product of circumstances and al-Qa'ida infighting as they are of deliberate planning.

Drawing on newly-declassified al-Qa'ida internal communications from the Defense Department's Harmony Database, Vahid Brown and his colleagues at the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) have chronicled the emergence of two factions in al-Qa'ida: the planners and the propagandists. Each employed different strategies to achieve their common overarching goals. The first faction was committed to building an effective guerrilla organization and attacking the West in ways similar to other irregular military organizations engaged in asymmetric conflict. In contrast, the second faction wanted to establish al-Qa'ida as a global brand, a battle standard that could inspire and unify groups around the world engaged in violent Islamist resistance.

US policy toward al-Qa'ida after 9/11 placed a premium on diminishing the capabilities of the first faction. Thus, US-led efforts have achieved notable success capturing and killing al-Qa'ida's leaders and operatives, crippling its organizational structure, and degrading its ability to coordinate terrorist attacks worldwide. As this report points out, however, al-Qa'ida's real strength has never been as a guerrilla fighting force; rather its strength comes from its ability to transform the local concerns of Islamist activists into what this report describes as "a unifying vision of apocalyptic inter-civilizational conflict". Because these capabilities and their proponents are still in place, al-Qa'ida continues to achieve success.

Effective counterterrorism must better address these capabilities. The tools and prescriptions needed to do so will fall largely outside the realm of the military options that have done so well against the first faction. Eroding al-Qa'ida's brand appeal—reducing its share of the ideological marketplace—will require innovative and multi-lateral approaches with the US hand rarely seen or suspected. Furthermore, greater efforts have to be made to degrade its media distribution organs. Finally, aggressive targeting of al-Qa'ida's senior leaders must continue and will complement efforts to limit its brand appeal. As this report articulates, Usama Bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri are the incarnation of al-Qa'ida's brand and each new image of them only serves to reinforce the brand's invincibility. Thus, capturing or killing these iconic senior al-Qa'ida leaders

¹ A transcript of the September 20, 2001 State of the Union Address is available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>

will undermine al-Qa'ida's emblematic appeal and help delegitimize the extremist ideology they are selling to the Muslim world.

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