

# The Return of the Knights

Bruce Riedel\*

---

## Introduction

Almost six years after 11 September al-Qaeda has spread throughout the Greater Middle East with franchises from Indonesia to the Maghreb. Thanks to the war in Iraq it survived the West's counterattack in Afghanistan. It has a secure sanctuary in Pakistan and it is building avenues of approach to attack Europe and America using the Muslim diaspora community in Western Europe. In Iraq it is the dynamic edge of the Sunni insurgency, albeit only a small minority within the movement and its goal now is to break the Iraqi state apart and create a jihadist state in the heart of the Arab world. Al-Qaeda wants to play a larger role in the Palestinian conflict but it has had a discordant relationship with Hamas. Al-Qaeda has been very critical of Hamas's participation in electoral politics but is now supportive of the Hamas coup in Gaza. As argued below, understanding al-Qaeda's ideology and operations is the key to defeating it.

## 'Greater Middle East'

The phrase, the 'Greater Middle East' enjoyed brief notoriety at the end of President George W. Bush's first administration and the beginning of the second. It became a shorthand expression for the president's idea of transforming the Middle East from its violent and despotic past to a new, democratic and peaceful future. Old conflicts like the Arab-Israeli one would disappear once democracy came to the region. Senior administration officials travelled to Europe and the Middle East to explain the Greater Middle East strategy to allies as a break from the past policy of supporting stability over freedom – a policy that allegedly had failed to deliver either and created the conditions for the 11 September 2001 attack on America by al-Qaeda. The president's second inaugural address after his re-election in January 2005 was the apogee of this movement. He promised support to democratic movements "in every nation and culture, with the goal of ending tyranny in our world".

By the next morning, the administration was 'walking it back'. A senior national security official explained that this was not a new policy, but rather an "acceleration" in long-term US goals. It would not be applied precipitously to US allies in the Muslim world such as Saudi Arabia or Egypt. The next day, the president's father, former President George Bush Sr, was brought out to explain to reporters that they should not over-stress the speech or over-interpret it.<sup>1</sup>

Ironically, the concept of a Greater Middle East also lies at the core of the ideology of America's enemy, al-Qaeda, but of course with a very different emphasis. Al-Qaeda sees the countries of the Greater Middle East as the Muslim community of believers, the *umma*, which has been under attack by the West for the last century or more. Al-Qaeda argues that, thanks to its leadership, the *umma* is now for the first time in more than 90 years successfully resisting the attack of the Crusaders and Zionists on the Islamic world. Not since the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, al-Qaeda argues, has the Muslim world been as successful as it is now in resisting Western and American domination by defeating the West in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

---

\* Bruce Riedel is a Senior Fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. He formerly served in the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Council.

<sup>1</sup> The walk back is laid out by Carla Anne Robbins in "Bush Foreign Policy: Grand Vision and its Application", in John C. Fortier and Norman J. Ornstein (eds), *Second Term Blues: How George W. Bush Has Governed*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Press, 2007, pp. 89–90.

The al-Qaeda leadership proclaims the victory of the jihad and the ‘knights’ who lead it in their propaganda almost every day now. In May, Ayman al-Zawahiri said, “we are going through a historic period of utmost importance...the Empire of Evil is about to come to an end, and that a new dawn is about to rise over a mankind liberated from the Caesars of the White House, Europe and Zionism”.<sup>2</sup> A central key to the success of al-Qaeda’s strategy in its Greater Middle East is the creation of al-Qaeda affiliates or franchises in different parts of the region, each of which operates largely independently of al-Qaeda’s core leadership but proclaims their allegiance to the al-Qaeda emir, Osama bin Laden, and his jihadist principles and ideology.

Indeed, al-Qaeda was established in 1998 as an alliance of several jihadist groups in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Bangladesh as a World Islamic Front to “kill Americans and their allies...in order to liberate the al-Aqsa mosque [in Jerusalem] and the Holy Mosque [in Mecca] from their grip so that their armies leave all the territory of Islam, defeated, broken and unable to threaten any Muslim”.<sup>3</sup> The use of ‘knights’ (*al Fursan* in Arabic) harkens back to the medieval Muslim warriors who fought the Crusaders in Palestine. It also reflects al-Qaeda’s self-image that it is an organisation of elite vanguards who by their acts of sacrifice will inspire the masses to take action. In less than a decade, bin Laden and his movement have established a truly global presence. Since 9/11 al-Qaeda or its affiliates, franchises and sympathisers have carried out terrorist attacks in Algiers, Casablanca, Madrid, London, Istanbul, Riyadh, Jeddah, Karachi, Sharm el-Sheikh, Taba, Mombassa, Kuwait, Mumbai, New Delhi, Bali and many other cities, not to mention the chaos and anarchy they have produced in Iraq and Afghanistan. The breadth and audacity of attacks is a mark of the movement’s success in building its local allies and surrogates throughout the Muslim world from Morocco to Indonesia, and in the Muslim diaspora in Europe.

### **Securing the base in the badlands**

Critical to this success was al-Qaeda’s survival in late 2001 after the American intervention against its host in Afghanistan, the Taliban, on the side of the Northern Alliance forces in the Afghan civil war. Five years after the fall of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the Taliban movement has made a significant comeback with al-Qaeda. Those who placed the Taliban in the “dustbin of history” like former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld have been proven premature. Today the Taliban and al-Qaeda are the prime movers in the insurgency in southern and eastern Afghanistan.

Attacks on NATO forces in the country are a daily phenomenon. British army commanders have said that the fighting in the south is the toughest the British army has faced since Korea. Suicide attacks on Afghan government, NATO and US forces and Afghan civilians have increased dramatically. There were two suicide operations in all of Afghanistan in 2002; today one occurs every three days. And the Taliban leadership, along with the al-Qaeda leadership, is still at large, still planning attacks on its enemies in Afghanistan and globally.

All of this has developed remarkably closely to the script Taliban leader Mullah Omar, the self-proclaimed Commander of the Faithful, outlined in late 2001 and early 2002 right after the fall of Kabul and Kandahar. At the time, Omar lamented the “catastrophe” of the Emirate’s fall but said that his organisation would survive and return to challenge the coalition and its Afghan backers over time.

---

<sup>2</sup> See Al-Sahab Media Productions, “Interview with Shaykh Ayman al Zawahiri”, Open Source Center, 5 May 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Qaeda’s declaration of the World Islamic Front can be found in Bruce Lawrence (ed.), *Messages to the World: The Statements of Usama bin Laden*, London: Verso, 2005, pp. 58–62.

Mullah Omar was also quick to predict that he would not be captured by the coalition and would still be able to lead the Taliban in its war. Here is what he said as early as 26 September 2001:

I am considering two promises. One is the promise of God, the other of Bush. The promise of God is that my land is vast. If you start a journey on God's path, you can reside anywhere and will be protected. The promise of Bush is that there is no place on earth where you can hide that I cannot find you. We will see which promise is fulfilled.<sup>4</sup>

Mullah Omar also put the Taliban struggle after 2001 in a wider context from the start. He associated his movement with other Islamic struggles against perceived foreign occupiers, especially in Palestine, Kashmir and after 2003, in Iraq. In a message in October 2006 at the start of the Eid festival, he praised Muslim fighters everywhere and especially those in Iraq for fighting America.<sup>5</sup> A constant theme in his rhetoric is that the Taliban will defeat the US and NATO just as the Mujahideen defeated the former Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. This history is important. Like most people, Afghans remember who promised what – validation occurs when you are seen to be right.

There are at least three key reasons for the Taliban's resurgence. *First*, the Taliban was never fully defeated in 2001. After a few defeats on the battlefield with the Northern Alliance and coalition airpower, the Taliban dispersed. It did not fight for Kabul or Kandahar; rather it followed classic guerrilla tactics and fled. It was definitely on the ropes, however, by the early months of 2002 and vulnerable to a decisive takedown. That never came.

Instead, the cadres moved to remote areas of Pashtun Afghanistan like Omar's home province of Uruzgan and went to ground. They hid their time and survived. This proved fairly easy as the new government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai and its coalition supporters had far too few security forces to secure and govern the country. And the Taliban adjusted its tactics. It adopted new battlefield tactics such as the use of suicide bombers and improvised explosive devices from the Iraq war. Almost certainly, the al-Qaeda organisation provided key help in transmitting these techniques from Iraq to Afghanistan. Indeed, according to Taliban leaders, Osama bin Laden is actively involved in planning many of their operations, including the attack on Bagram airbase when Vice-President Dick Cheney visited Afghanistan in February 2007, as well as operations in Iraq.<sup>6</sup>

*Second*, the coalition and especially the US took its eye off the Afghan ball when the invasion of Iraq began. Key US military and intelligence assets were diverted from Afghanistan and the hunt for al-Qaeda to the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Gary Schroen, the CIA officer who led the first CIA team into Afghanistan in late 2001 to topple the Taliban, notes that "as early as March 2002 the US military began to withdraw many of the key units involved in the effort [to hunt bin Laden] in order to allow them to regroup and train in preparation for the coming war with Iraq".<sup>7</sup> Schroen notes the same was true for the CIA as well. Afghanistan was put on the back burner and given relatively little reconstruction assistance after the Iraq war began. US aid to Afghanistan, a country devastated by a quarter-century of war, totalled less than a billion dollars in both 2002 and 2003. Compared with other reconstruction efforts, Afghanistan was simply done on the cheap. Lack of security and economic reconstruction fuelled not only the Taliban's revival but also the return of the poppy crop and the drug culture.

*Third*, the Taliban benefited from a safe haven and help in Pakistan. The Taliban of course had long and well-established ties with the Pakistan's intelligence service, the ISI, and the Pakistani army. While these were broken by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf after 9/11, the ties between the

---

<sup>4</sup> See "Mullah Omar in his own Words", *Guardian*, 26 September 2001.

<sup>5</sup> See "Text of Mullah Omar's Eid Message", *Afghan Islamic Press*, 21 October 2006.

<sup>6</sup> See Anna Johnson, "Taliban: Bin Laden Planned Cheney Attack", *Associated Press*, 20 June 2007.

<sup>7</sup> See Gary Schroen, *First In: An Insider's Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan*, New York: Ballantine Books, 2005, pp. 359–60.

Taliban and various militant Pakistani and Kashmiri groups remained very much intact. These ties had developed over the course of the 1990s and were most dramatically illustrated during the December 1999 hijacking of Indian Air flight 814 from Kathmandu to Kandahar, when al-Qaeda, the Taliban and Kashmiris also mixed together with the ISI to carry out the plot.<sup>8</sup>

The Afghan government, of course, goes further and suggests that the Pakistani army and the ISI still actively assist the Taliban. Afghan authorities say Mullah Omar spends a great deal of his time in Quetta. President Musharraf says this is a lie. For his part, Omar has consistently denied any official Pakistani assistance and has called President Musharraf a traitor who should be overthrown and executed.

Where the truth lies precisely in this regard is very hard to know but there is no doubt that the Taliban has used Pakistani territory to regroup and has enjoyed assistance from fellow travellers in Pakistan. Pakistan's own internal fragility, highlighted by a Baloch rebellion in the southwest, only makes the situation more complex. As recently noted by Paul O'Sullivan, chief of Australia's intelligence service, "al-Qaeda is rebuilding both its organisational structures and operational capabilities from bases in the tribal regions bordering Pakistan and Afghanistan, and networks in the Middle East, North Africa and Western Europe".<sup>9</sup>

As he suggests, al-Qaeda has used Pakistan extensively as a fertile recruiting ground to penetrate the large Pakistani expatriate population in the United Kingdom for operations. The 7 July 2005 attack on the London Underground was a dramatic demonstration of this approach to attacking Europe. The British have been remarkably successful in foiling other plots, including the 2004 Operation Crevice plot to use a half-tonne bomb to attack targets in London and the 2006 plot to blow up 10 jumbo jets over the Atlantic. As noted by Deputy Assistant Commissioner Peter Clarke, chief of Scotland Yard's counter-terrorism department,

[T]he fact is there are in the UK many young men who are vulnerable to be drawn into extremism and violence [in the Pakistani community]. In case after case, the hand of core al-Qaeda can be clearly seen. Arrested leaders or key players are quickly replaced, and disrupted networks will reform quickly.<sup>10</sup>

Al-Qaeda has also used the Pakistani connection to attempt attacks in Israel. The captured terrorist leader Abd al Hadi al-Iraq reportedly engineered a plan to use two Pakistanis with British passports to blow up the American embassy in Tel Aviv in April 2003; instead, they bombed a seafront restaurant nearby.<sup>11</sup>

As long as NATO keeps forces in Afghanistan, the Taliban cannot march on the cities and retake the country. But that is not Osama bin Laden's or Mullah Omar's objective at this point. The Taliban leadership has successfully survived the collapse of its emirate five years ago; it now seeks to demonstrate that the Karzai government and NATO cannot govern effectively in large parts of the country. As a guerrilla movement, the Taliban and al-Qaeda win in South Asia by not losing. They want NATO to bleed in Afghanistan just like the Soviet 40<sup>th</sup> army bled in Afghanistan 20 years ago.

---

<sup>8</sup> See Jaswant Singh, *A Call to Honour: In the Service of Emergent India*, New Delhi: Rupa and Company, 2006 is the best source on the hijacking and its perpetrators.

<sup>9</sup> See "Australia's Spy Chief Says Al-Qaeda Appears to be Rebuilding", *Associated Press*, 20 June 2007.

<sup>10</sup> See Alan Cowell, "British AntiTerrorism Chief Warns of More Severe Qaeda Attacks", *New York Times*, 26 April 2007.

<sup>11</sup> See Yoram Schweitzer, "Is al-Qaeda Closing In?", *JCSS Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 10, No. 1, June 2007. This article chronicles al-Qaeda's plots against Israel including the plot to bomb Eilat from Saudi Arabia and the attacks on Israeli tourists in Kenya.

## Creating the franchises in the Greater Middle East

With a strong base of operations rebuilt in the badlands along the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan – 1,500 miles of the most desolate and difficult terrain in the world – al-Qaeda opened its post-9/11 global offensive with a number of local affiliates. Indonesia was an early example of the pattern that would emerge. Al-Qaeda had been training Indonesian jihadists in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan for several years. A close operational link was forged with Jamaah Islamiah (JI), an extremely violent jihadist group. The JI has been responsible for a series of attacks, most notably the 12 October 2002 multiple attacks in Bali that killed over 200 persons.<sup>12</sup> In the last couple of years, the Indonesian authorities seem to have had some success in suppressing the JI but it is far from eradicated.

Another al-Qaeda franchise quickly became active in bin Laden's home, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which has witnessed the longest and most sustained political violence and unrest in the Kingdom's history thanks to al-Qaeda. In a major sermon in early 2003 released as an audiotape, bin Laden extolled "the band of knights" that had attacked America on 11 September and urged his followers to overthrow the House of Saud. A series of attacks followed over the next three years. Western targets including the US consulate in Jeddah and compounds of Western firms were attacked as well as the Saudi interior ministry headquarters in Riyadh and the Abqaiq oil-processing facility (responsible for 60% of Saudi oil).

Al-Qaeda had in mind plots that were even more devastating. According to the testimony of the captured 9/11 mastermind, Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, given on 10 March 2007, one plan was to recruit pilots in the Royal Saudi Air Force to hijack their own fighter aircraft and use them for a bombing attack on Israel's southern city of Eilat in 2003. If successful, al-Qaeda had hoped the raid would spark an Israeli counterattack and start another Arab-Israeli war. In the end, the mission was foiled before it got off the ground. Only after a series of violent gun battles did the Saudi authorities gain the upper hand over the terrorists.

Even with their successes, however, the Saudis keep uncovering new al-Qaeda cells and arresting dozens of cadres, some of whom have been trained in Iraq. In April, the Saudis uncovered several cells planning an operation to use hijacked aircraft to blow up the Saudi oil infrastructure. It is clear that the terrorists have a good understanding of the critical nodes of the system from their attack on Abqaiq. Should they succeed at hitting the vulnerable points in the system, the results could be catastrophic for the global energy market. And that is in fact exactly what Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri are publicly urging their followers to do.

Of course, al-Qaeda's most successful franchise has been in Iraq. Founded by the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia has been spectacularly successful in attacking Western targets and in precipitating the Sunni-Shia civil war that now grips the country. Al-Qaeda in Iraq actually makes up only a small minority of the fighters within the Sunni Arab insurgency. Its extremist anti-Shia views and its brutal violence have alienated it from many Iraqis and even some of its original Sunni supporters. Nonetheless, it shows no sign of changing its strategy, which is designed to create civil war and lay the groundwork for a jihadist state in heart of the Middle East. Given its many enemies inside and outside Iraq its chances of success are probably slim in the long term. But as long as it can portray itself as leading the fight against the foreign occupation in Iraq it is likely to be a deadly and serious adversary. For now it is well funded with the proceeds from ransoms of kidnapped Iraqis and donations from sympathisers, especially in the Gulf States. Thus, despite being only a small minority of the overall Sunni insurgent movement, in Iraq al-Qaeda has been successful in accomplishing its goal of driving Iraqi society into warring factions, creating a quagmire of civil war in which the American and British armies find themselves today.

---

<sup>12</sup> See Sadanand Dhume, "Radicals March on Indonesia's Future", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 2005.

The memoirs of Paul Bremer and George Tenet have dramatically revealed how ill prepared the US was for the post-invasion occupation of Iraq. We apparently had no plan. Al-Qaeda did. As soon as the Bush administration began talking about a showdown with Iraq, al-Qaeda began to prepare. In the autumn of 2002 Ayman al-Zawahiri spoke about the need to be ready to fight in Iraq and reported that Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar were alive and preparing for the next round. He turned US rhetoric about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction on its head and told his audience that the goal of American occupation was to “confirm Israel’s uncontested monopoly over weapons of mass destruction in the region to ensure the submission of Arab and Islamic states”.<sup>13</sup> A few weeks later, bin Laden issued a longer message to his followers urging them to go to Iraq and prepare to fight the invaders who sought a “stooge government to follow their masters in Washington and Tel Aviv”.<sup>14</sup>

Zarqawi prepared the battlefield on the ground and set the trap. On 17 October 2004, Zarqawi formally proclaimed his allegiance to bin Laden and the al-Qaeda group. In his statement of allegiance he said the Crusaders and Jews “have thrown their weight around this Muslim land of Iraq deciding it would be the cornerstone in their plan which they named the ‘Greater Middle East’ in their effort to impose their infidel democracy, transform the peoples of the region and uproot Islam, however, God will shame them and forsake them”.<sup>15</sup> Zarqawi also created a support network in Europe and the Muslim world for his war in Iraq, a network that smuggled money and martyrs to Iraq to join the jihad. According to the National Counterterrorism Centre, Zarqawi’s operational network had extended across 40 countries by 2006 and provided dozens of recruits, many of whom will someday return home with the expertise gained in the battlefields of Iraq.<sup>16</sup>

Since the death of its founder, Zarqawi, the al-Qaeda franchise in Iraq has announced the establishment of an independent Sunni state in western and central Iraq. The Islamic State of Iraq promises to be the base from which additional jihadist movements can grow in the heart of the Arab world. The emir of the new state has an impressive Islamic pedigree, Abu Omar al Qureishi al Hashimi al Baghdadi as he is known, literally means he is a descendant of the prophet’s family. In proclaiming al Baghdadi as the emir of Iraq, al-Qaeda is making a statement about its long-term plan for the creation of a caliphate in the entire *umma*.

One of al-Qaeda’s next goals after Iraq has been to create a franchise in Algeria, which can serve as a node for jihad throughout North Africa and in the Maghrebi diaspora in Western Europe. For some two years or more Osama bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri negotiated with the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) on the terms and conditions for its joining the movement. In late 2006, bin Laden instructed that the group be renamed al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and it began conducting attacks in that name in late 2006 and early 2007, with a series of strikes at police stations and Western oil targets.

On 12 April 2007, ‘Black Wednesday’, the new group carried out multiple suicide bombings (previously unknown in Algeria) in Algiers targeting the prime minister’s offices and police headquarters, killing almost three dozen persons. Another truck bomb was apparently defused. The group later produced a martyrdom video of three suicide bombers who had died in the ‘Badr raid’ (as it was named after the famous early Muslim victory).

Zawahiri has it made clear that France is a major target of the new Maghrebi franchise. In announcing the union with the GSPC and al-Qaeda’s core on 11 September 2006, Zawahiri said it would be “a source of chagrin, frustration and sadness for the apostates [of the regime in Algeria], the treacherous

---

<sup>13</sup> See “Al Zawahiri Says Bin Laden, Mullah Omar Enjoy Good Health”, *Al Jazeera*, 8 October 2002.

<sup>14</sup> The text of bin Laden’s message to Iraqis is in Lawrence (2005), op. cit., pp. 180–85.

<sup>15</sup> See Jeffery Pool, “Zarqawi’s Pledge of Allegiance to Al-Qaeda”, *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, Vol. 2, No. 24, 16 December 2004, pp. 4–6.

<sup>16</sup> See the *New York Times*, 9 June 2006.

sons of France” and urged the group to become “a bone in the throat of the American and French crusaders”.<sup>17</sup> French intelligence officials anticipate the group to stage attacks on French targets in North Africa and probably in France itself sooner or later.

Threats to attack France are not new for the GSPC. In February 2005, for example, press reports said the French domestic intelligence agency estimated that there are about 5,000 sympathisers and militants in France as part of the GSPC, grouped around 500 hard-core individuals.<sup>18</sup> Spanish officials have also expressed concern recently; the intelligence chief of the Civil Guard noted, “there is significant activity in the Maghreb which is most worrying for us”.<sup>19</sup>

Zawahiri’s warning should be taken very seriously. There have been reports of planned Algerian attacks in the past on American and Israeli targets in France and Belgium, as well as on targets such as NATO or EU installations elsewhere in Europe.<sup>20</sup> The interior minister of the German state of Baden-Württemberg summed it up well, noting “the danger is getting more specific, the calm is deceptive”. Finally, one should recall that the first-ever plot to hijack an airliner and crash it into targets on the ground was an Algerian plot in 1994 to crash an Air France jet into the Eiffel Tower – a plot the 9/11 Commission rightly surmised may have been a role model for 11 September.

### **The ultimate franchise is Palestine**

The franchise that bin Laden and Zawahiri would most like to attract and create would be in Palestine. In particular, it is likely they would welcome an alliance with the Hamas movement. Hamas has more credibility as a Sunni jihadist movement than any other organisation with its dozens of martyrdom attacks on Israel and its record of resistance to Israel. Thus, it is interesting to review the record of al-Qaeda’s relationship with Hamas for insights into al-Qaeda’s strategy and vulnerability.

Hamas’s founder and spiritual leader, Sheikh Yassin, said positive things about al-Qaeda during his lifetime. For example, after his release from prison in 1997 following a botched Mossad assassination attempt in Amman, Yassin travelled throughout the region in triumph and was asked about al-Qaeda. His response was “we support and sympathise with any movement which defends the rights of its people to enjoy self governance and independence but we are not prepared to seek an alliance with those movements”.<sup>21</sup>

There is also evidence of operational links between the two groups. Hamas operatives assisted an al-Qaeda cell in the Sinai in 2004 and 2005 to carry out attacks on Israeli and Western targets in the Sharm el-Sheikh and Taba holiday resorts. The Egyptian intelligence service uncovered these connections and was extremely angry with Hamas about this terrorism in Egypt’s booming tourism centres.<sup>22</sup> The extent of these connections is very unclear but some contact is certain, particularly between the military wing of Hamas and al-Qaeda.

Nonetheless, Hamas has always jealously guarded its independence from outsiders as Yassin indicated in his victory tour. It knows all too well the sorry history of Palestinian movements that align themselves with Arab patrons and become pawns in the inter-Arab political warfare of the Middle East. Hamas has only developed close relations with Syria and Iran in recent years, in reaction to the

---

<sup>17</sup> See *Le Monde*, 18 September 2006. The full interview was posted by Al-Sahab Media Productions on 11 September 2006.

<sup>18</sup> See Kathryn Haahr, “GSPC Joins al-Qaeda and France becomes Top Enemy”, *Terrorism Focus*, Jamestown Foundation, Vol. 3, Issue 27, 26 September 2006.

<sup>19</sup> See *El Tiempo*, 24 April 2007.

<sup>20</sup> See *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, 21 April 2007.

<sup>21</sup> See Zaki Chehab, *Inside Hamas, the Untold Story of the Militant Islamic Movement*, New York: Nation Books, 2007, p. 108.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 173–97.

need for a source of military assistance and increased economic aid. In public, most Hamas officials have been careful to distance the organisation from the violence of al-Qaeda, especially when its targets are outside of Iraq or Afghanistan, and it has joined the electoral process in Palestine with great success.

For its part, al-Qaeda has been increasingly critical of Hamas's participation in the electoral process and its success in winning a majority in the last Palestinian parliamentary elections. Bin Laden and Zawahiri have warned Hamas against being seduced by the attraction of political power and government jobs into abandoning or scaling back the jihad against Israel.

Last March, Zawahiri was particularly harsh in condemning Hamas's agreement to form a national unity government with Fatah, especially as the deal was brokered by Saudi King Abdullah in Mecca. Zawahiri, claiming to speak in sorrow and not anger, said Hamas had "fallen into the swamp of surrender" and the leadership had "sold out" to King Abdullah. He concluded,

I am sorry to have to offer the Islamic nation my condolences for the [virtual demise] of the Hamas leadership as it has fallen in the quagmire of surrender. The leadership of Hamas has committed an aggression against the rights of the Islamic nation by accepting what it called respecting international agreements [a code word for the Oslo process].<sup>23</sup>

"Nobody, be he Palestinian or not," Zawahiri said, "has the right to relinquish a grain of Palestinian soil."<sup>24</sup> Zawahiri was particularly upset that Hamas had negotiated with Fatah security chieftain Muhammad Dahlan, who al-Qaeda regards as a spy for Israel and America. In May, Zawahiri repeated these charges against Hamas in another interview, with maps of Palestine shown on the video demonstrating the rise of Israeli control over the country from 1948 to today. According to Palestinian journalists, al-Qaeda is now seeking to set up its own miniature franchise in Gaza and may have been behind the kidnapping of a BBC journalist there. The kidnappers had openly proclaimed their support for bin Laden and Zawahiri and the Islamic State of Iraq.

Hamas's response is to deny any moderation in its commitment to the Palestinian cause. In a formal statement, Hamas said, "we are a movement of Jihad and of resistance... We in the Hamas movement remain loyal to our positions and dream of dying as martyrs. We assure Dr al-Zawahiri and all those who remain unwavering in their attachment to Palestine that today's Hamas is the same Hamas you have known since its founding."<sup>25</sup>

Since this exchange, Hamas has abandoned the Mecca process as al-Qaeda urged it to and broken with Fatah. In a well-planned and executed three-day war in June 2007, Hamas evicted Fatah from Gaza, creating in effect a three-state solution (at least temporarily) to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Outnumbered by Fatah, Hamas fighters used mortars and improvised explosive devices to demoralise their opponents, who had already been abandoned by their leaders including Dahlan, who had fled to the West Bank. How long this solution will last is unclear.

Al-Qaeda responded to the change in Gaza with cautious approval. Zawahiri issued a new statement urging all Muslims to rally behind the Hamas takeover in Gaza and send men and money to help defend it. He reminded Hamas that it had made serious mistakes in the past and urged it not to repeat them by accepting offers to form another national unity government with Fatah.

Al-Qaeda's attack on Hamas before the coup in June reveals important information about what the al-Qaeda leadership really worries about regarding the weakness and vulnerability of its movement. The Palestinian cause is the centrepiece of al-Qaeda's narrative of Western Crusader aggression against the

---

<sup>23</sup> See Al Jazeera, 11 March 2007; the entire text of Zawahiri's message is available from the Open Source Center, "Al Zawahiri Censures Hamas, Discusses Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan, Other Issues", 12 March 2007.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> See YNETnews.com, 14 May 2007.



*umma*. The defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 and the creation of the British mandate in Palestine set in train the events that would lead to the creation of Israel after the Second World War. For Zawahiri this is the West's most evil act because the "Zionist entity is a foothold for the Crusader invasion of the Islamic world. The Zionist entity is the vanguard of the US campaign to dominate the Islamic Levant. It is a part of an enormous campaign against the Islamic world in which the West, under the leadership of America, has allied with global Zionism."<sup>26</sup>

As Zawahiri argues, "after the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate a wave of psychological defeatism and ideological collapse spread" throughout the Islamic world.<sup>27</sup> This defeatism made possible the victory of the Zionist movement in the 1948 war that is considered by Palestinians to be the great disaster of their history, the *naqba* or catastrophe. For Zawahiri the issue is profoundly personal as well, since he began his career in terror as a junior participant in the plot to assassinate Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981 for making peace with Israel.

Understanding al-Qaeda's strategy is the first key to defeating it. The West needs a 'Grand Strategy for the Greater Middle East' that can win the war of ideas away from al-Qaeda's vision of the 'Caliphate of the Greater Middle East'. Fortunately, most Muslims share that goal with us. With new leadership in the West, a more sophisticated strategy has a very good chance of winning the war with al-Qaeda.

A good place to start would be to focus with great energy on the Arab-Israeli peace process. The proposals former President Bill Clinton and his team put on the table in December 2000 can still serve as the basis for an agreement. The next American president should carefully consider the recommendation of the Iraq Study Group chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker, which suggested convening an international conference to resolve all aspects of the Arab-Israeli crisis, perhaps along the model of the Dayton peace summit that ended the Bosnian war.

The West also needs to redouble its efforts in South Asia and in Afghanistan. The stakes in Afghanistan are high. With the growing disillusionment in America and elsewhere with the Iraq war, there is a real risk that Afghanistan will all too easily be branded as just another failed adventure. Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden are doubtless counting on that and thus encouraging the Iraqi resistance. But whatever we do in Iraq, we cannot afford to fail again in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is where al-Qaeda planned and prepared for 9/11, and its leadership is still in the area. Furthermore, Afghanistan is NATO's first significant out-of-Europe operation, and its first-ever land war. Failure would probably consign the alliance to irrelevance.

---

<sup>26</sup> See Ayman al-Zawahiri, "The Emancipation of Mankind and Nations under the Banner of the Koran", an audiotape broadcast by Al-Sahab Media Productions on 30 January 2005 on the website forum [www.almjlah.net/vb](http://www.almjlah.net/vb); also available from the Open Source Center.

<sup>27</sup> See the interview with Ayman al-Zawahiri on 11 September 2006 to mark the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11, Al-Sahab Media Productions.