RAND CORPORATION

TESTIMONY

THE ARTS
CHILD POLICY
CIVIL JUSTICE
EDUCATION
ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENT
HEALTH AND HEALTH CARE
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
NATIONAL SECURITY
POPULATION AND AGING
PUBLIC SAFETY
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
SUBSTANCE ABUSE
TERRORISM AND HOMELAND SECURITY
TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
WORKFORCE AND WORKPLACE

This PDF document was made available from www.rand.org as a public service of the RAND Corporation.

Jump down to document

The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world.

Support RAND

Browse Books & Publications

Make a charitable contribution

For More Information

Visit RAND at www.rand.org

Explore RAND Testimony

View document details

Limited Electronic Distribution Rights

This document and trademark(s) contained herein are protected by law as indicated in a notice appearing later in this work. This electronic representation of RAND intellectual property is provided for non-commercial use only. Permission is required from RAND to reproduce, or reuse in another form, any of our research documents for commercial use.

TESTIMONY

Understanding Terrorist Ideology

KIM CRAGIN

CT-283

June 2007

Testimony presented before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on June 12, 2007

This product is part of the RAND Corporation testimony series. RAND testimonies record testimony presented by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.
RAND® is a registered trademark.

Published 2007 by the RAND Corporation
1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138
1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202-5050
4570 Fifth Avenue, Suite 600, Pittsburgh, PA 15213
RAND URL: http://www.rand.org/
To order RAND documents or to obtain additional information, contact
Distribution Services: Telephone: (310) 451-7002;
Fax: (310) 451-6915; Email: order@rand.org

Statement of Kim Cragin[1]
The RAND Corporation

Understanding Terrorist Ideology[2]

Before the Select Committee on Intelligence
United States Senate

June 12, 2007

I would like to thank the Chair and Ranking Member and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence for inviting me to testify on the subject of terrorist ideology and also to take this opportunity to commend the Committee for recognizing the importance of understanding terrorist ideology as part of the global war on terrorism.

Over the past twelve years, during the course of my research on terrorism and insurgency, I have explored the topic of terrorist ideology as it relates to what motivates individuals to become terrorists, as well as what influences communities to sympathize with terrorist groups. This research can be found in a number of RAND publications, including *Terrorism and Development,* and more recently, *Dissuading Terror*.

Both issues – individual motivations and community support – are important to understanding the challenges that extremist ideologies pose to US national security. For example, potential exists for terrorist groups to use various ideological arguments to persuade individuals to 'pick up a gun' or become terrorists themselves. Potential also exists for terrorist groups to use ideological arguments to garner financial or other support from local communities. And yet, despite this potential, it remains uncertain to what degree *ideology* actually influences individual motivations or community support. Indeed, our research suggests that the impact of ideology tends to vary country by country, community by community and often individual by individual.

This variation, by its very nature, makes it somewhat difficult to identify overarching patterns in how terrorist ideologies might motivate individuals and sympathetic communities on a global level. Having said that, I am going to attempt to generalize the findings from our research as much as

---

[1] The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of RAND or any of the sponsors of its research. This product is part of the RAND Corporation testimony series. RAND testimonies record testimony presented by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.
[2] This testimony is available for free download at http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT283.

possible, while still providing examples of nuances in the messages and appeal of terrorist ideology whenever appropriate.

For the remainder of my testimony, I will address two basic questions. First, how have al-Qa'ida leaders and other likeminded ideologues reached out to individuals and communities? And, second, how have individuals and communities responded to this appeal?

How have al-Qa'ida leaders and other likeminded ideologues reached out to individuals and communities?

As you know, the al-Qa'ida worldview has its roots in Maktab al-Khidamat (Office of Services, MAK), which was begun in 1984 by the Palestinian scholar Abduallah Azzam with financial support from Osama bin Laden. MAK was created to support Arab fighters or *mujahideen* as they traveled to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviet forces there.[3] One aspect of this 'support' was the publication of *al Jihad* magazine. This magazine was distributed throughout the Muslim world in an effort to raise the awareness of *jihad* in the minds of Muslim youth.

In the early 1980s, Abdullah Azzam also published and distributed a leaflet entitled, *Defense of Muslim Lands*. This leaflet argued that it was an individual religious duty (*fard ayn*) for Muslims, as well as the Muslim community as a whole (*fard kifaya)*, to support the Afghan jihad, because the Afghans were helpless in the face of invading forces. Often referred to as an argument for defensive jihad, Abdullah Azzam's ideas apparently influenced numerous mujahideen to travel to Afghanistan. Indeed, one of those fighters, Abdullah Anas, subsequently wrote of his experiences in an autobiographical book entitled *Birth of the Afghani Arabs*. In this book, Abdullah Anas testified that Azzam's religious argument played a significant role in his own decision to travel to Afghanistan.[4]

Beyond providing shelter and support to the Arab fighters, MAK also offered classes on political Islam to new recruits, essentially in an attempt to indoctrinate them in what some refer to as the violent Salafi jihadi movement. Today, when people refer to "terrorist ideology" or "extremist ideology," they mostly mean the ideas articulated by violent Salafi jihadists.

---

[3] For more information on the emergence of al-Qa'ida, see Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader* (New York: Free Press, 2006); see also *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, August 2006).

[4] *Abdullah Anas, The Birth of the Afghani Arabs: A Biography of Abdullah Anas with Mas'oud and Abdullah Azzam, trans. Nadia Masid (2002).*

At the core of this movement is a rigid assertion of monotheism, a literalist reading of the Qu'ran, and an opposition to innovation, which often yields discussion of attempts to establish a society (or Caliphate) built on Islamic law. Too many Salafis, this view of monotheism means a non-democratic system of government, because legislatures enact laws, placing lawmakers in a position of improving upon God's laws, in their minds an impossible undertaking. Many Salafis also are critical of existing forms of government in the Arab world, arguing that leaders have succumbed to Western, secular, influences in their application of the law. This misapplication or absence of Shariah law, in many minds, accounts for the evident problems in society, such as poverty, injustice and corruption. Traditionally, most Salafis have eschewed nationalism in favor of a Caliphate that crosses national boundaries.

Of course, not all Salafis are violent, which is why scholars often distinguish between the wider Salafi movement and violent Salafi jihadists. The primary difference between al-Qa'ida and most Salafis is that al-Qa'ida leaders advocate the use of violence to bring about this Caliphate and a religious revival in the Muslim world. In this sense, al-Qa'ida and likeminded organizations hold a certain appeal, because sympathizers see them as at least doing something to resolve society's problems, even if they disagree with al-Qa'ida's violent methods.

Osama bin Laden split with Abdullah Azzam in the late 1980s to join with Egyptian fighters, such as Ayman al-Zawahiri, now Osama bin Laden's second in command, to form al-Qa'ida. At this point, al-Qa'ida's attention strayed away from repelling the foreign invaders, such as in Afghanistan, towards overthrowing so-called corrupt Arab regimes. For example, al-Zawahiri published his own leaflet, *Bitter Harvest,* in 1991, in which he argued,

> The Islamic movements must answer the questions: are the governments in the Muslim countries true Muslims or are they *kuffar* [infidels]? These rulers are obviously *kuffar* and *murtaddeen* [apostates] because they rule with a law other than that of Allah. Therefore it is a *fard ayn* [individual duty] to wage jihad against them and remove them from their positions.[5]

In *Bitter Harvest* al-Zawahiri argued for an offensive jihad against what he felt were corrupt regimes in the Muslim world, in contrast to the defensive jihad articulated by Abdullah Azzam in 1984. And, in fact, this worldview appears to have guided al-Qa'ida's activities in Sudan during the 1990s, as they reached out to other militant groups to train and indoctrinate them on the al-Qa'ida worldview.

---

[5] Ayman al Zawahiri, *Bitter Harvest: The Muslim Brotherhood in Sixty Years,* trans. Nadia Masid, (Egypt, 1991).

Indeed, during the 1990s, al-Qa'ida leaders often combined ideological appeals with political objectives.[6] For example, al-Qa'ida established the Advisory and Reformation Committee as its mouthpiece in London. This Committee issued a series of leaflets in addressing key political issues of concern to al-Qa'ida, including the presence of US forces in the Arabian Peninsula after the first Gulf War, the arrest of certain religious leaders in Saudi Arabia, civil war in Yemen, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.[7] The layering of ideological and political objectives in al-Qa'ida's rhetoric suggests that its leaders viewed the two as interconnected.

Internal al-Qa'ida documents reinforce this hypothesis. The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point recently released a series of al-Qa'ida documents captured in Afghanistan by US forces under the title *Harmony and Disharmony*. Amongst these documents is a letter written in 1993 by an al-Qa'ida member in Somalia to the leadership in Sudan. The author complained that Somali fighters were caught up in tribal squabbles and could not be convinced to adopt the al-Qa'ida ideological worldview; thus, the author argued, al-Qa'ida's objective was not being achieved in Somalia.

Al-Qa'ida leaders responded to this complaint as follows,

> When you entered Somalia, the Somali arena was barren and futile. The situation changed, however, after the intervention by America and the Knights of the Cross. You most resembled a hunter aiming his rifle at the dead branch of a tree, with no leaves or birds on it. Suddenly, a bald eagle lands on the branch of the tree, directly in line with the rifle. Shouldn't the hunter pull the trigger to kill the eagle or at least bloody it?
>
> The American bald eagle has landed within range of our rifles. You can kill it or leave it permanently disfigured. If you do that, you will have saved Sudan, Yemen, Bab al-Mandab, the Red Sea, the Arabian Gulf and the waters of the Nile. Could you want more magnificent objectives of war than those?[8]

This reply is particularly interesting, because it demonstrates that al-Qa'ida leaders were willing to accept short-term political objectives at a local level. In addition, it demonstrates another layer of

---

[6] Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[7] *Letters from bin Laden,* al-Qa'ida Advice and Reform Committee, US military document number AFGP-2002-003345, available in *Harmony and Disharmony*: *Exploiting al-Qa'ida's Organizational Vulnerabilities*, (New York: West Point Combating Terrorism Center, 2006).

al-Qa'ida rhetoric that emerged in the 1990s – anti-Americanism. Given the ascendancy of al-Qa'ida and its worldview in the 1990s, I think it is important not to underestimate the appeal of this entire package: violent Salafism, local political objectives and anti-Americanism. Indeed, the confluence of all three appeals laid the foundation for al-Qa'ida's war against 'Jews and Crusaders,' declared in 1998.[9]

In a post 9/11 world, al-Qa'ida leaders have attempted to position themselves at the forefront of the violent Salafi jihadi movement. This approach can be seen in statements issued over the past six years by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, as well as other ideologues. While Abdullah Azzam mobilized the youth for jihad in the 1980s with leaflets distributed throughout the Muslim world, al-Qa'ida leaders and likeminded ideologues have used the internet, and to a certain extent mainstream media, to articulate their ideas.

An examination of jihadi websites reveals some emerging trends in the Salafi jihadi movement. For example, a new generation of strategic thinkers and ideologues has emerged in this movement, including Abu Musab al-Suri, Abu Bakr Naji, Yusuf al-Ayyiri, Saif al-Adl and Louis Atiyatallah. Indeed, Will McCants, from the West Point Combating Terrorism Center, recently published a report entitled *Militant Ideology Atlas*. In this study, McCants observed that these thinkers are cited and referred to more often in jihadi chatrooms and on websites than Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. These thinkers appear more willing now than was evidenced in the past to make tactical concessions on the issues of local Muslim practices, tribal politics and even nationalism to win over the 'hearts and minds' of local communities.

It's worth noting, however, that hardcore al-Qa'ida leaders, such as al-Zawahiri, still evidence reticence to make tactical concessions. Moreover, it is possible that they feel threatened by the legitimacy garnered by other ideologues and terrorist groups. As an illustration of this point, al-Qa'ida leaders have criticized the leaders of other terrorist groups in their bid to remain at the forefront of this wider ideological movement. A recent example is the ongoing debate between al-Qa'ida and Hamas. Immediately following the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in January 2006, al-Zawahiri rebuked Hams for participating in these elections, stating,

> The leadership of the Hamas movement has trampled on the rights of the Muslim ummah [community] by accepting what it calls - in a mockery of the intelligence and feelings of the Muslims - respect for international accords. It is with regret that I confront

---

[8] *Five Letters to the Africa Corps,* September 1993 - May 1994, US military document number AFGP-2002-600053, available in *Harmony and Disharmony*.

> the Muslim ummah with the truth, and tell it: my condolences to you over the loss of the leadership of Hamas, for it has sunk in the swamp of surrender.[10]

Hamas leaders, in turn, have responded to al-Zawahiri's statements quickly and with equal venom. For example, an initial response was posted by Hamas on the same night as al-Zawahiri's audio-taped release this past March. In this statement, Hamas asserted that al-Zawahiri had worked to undermine Palestinian jihadists for over 15 years in his attempt to take control over al-Qa'ida.[11] Hamas leaders continued on to argue that al-Qa'ida used indiscriminate and unjustifiable attacks against innocents and so was not in a position to pass moral judgment on Hamas,

> The [Muslim] people loved al-Qa'ida because it declared war on the American enemy who supports the occupation of Palestine and is the occupier of Iraq and Afghanistan; however this love was taken out of people's chest when they hit the innocent. The victims of the Amman wedding and their families, of who we see and console them even today, are proof of the blind use of weapons which tainted al-Zawahiri and his group.[12]

The two examples that I have provided – Somalia in the early 1990s and the Palestinian Territories today – illustrate the diversity within the wider Salafi jihadi movement, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of al-Qa'ida's ideological appeal. Al-Qa'ida leaders have tried to harness mutual feelings of a shared ideology, anti-Americanism, and frustration with 'corruption' in the Muslim world in an effort to keep these diverse groups moving in the same direction. This strategy has succeeded to varying degrees over the years, but evidence suggests that other terrorist groups mostly pursue their own parochial interests.

Indeed, al-Qa'ida leaders have had the greatest effect in translating their ideological appeal into action when they can marry their global worldview with anti-Americanism and local political objectives. And fissures have occurred when this marriage goes bad.[13]

---

[9] Bruce Lawrence, ed., *A Declaration of Jihad against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Sanctuaries*, *Messages to the World" the Statements of Osama bin Laden* (New York: Verso, 2005), 23-30.
[10] Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Palestine is our Concern, the Concern of Every Muslim," translated by SITE Institute, 11 March 2007.
[11] "Hamas Issues Statement in Response to Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri's Accusations of Abandoning the Jihadi Resistance for Palestine," translated by SITE Institute, 12 March 2007.
[12] General Manager of Hamas-Affiliated Forum Criticizes Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri for Comments Regarding Hamas, Prejudice Against Palestinians," translated by SITE Institute, 13 March 2007.
[13] Kim Cragin and Scott Gerwehr, *Dissuading Terror: Strategic Influence and the Struggle Against Terrorism*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, MG-184, 2005.

How have individuals and communities responded to al-Qa'ida's appeal?

Up to this point, I have focused on the evolution of al-Qa'ida's ideological arguments, as well as how it has appealed to potential recruits and sympathizers. But the most important question for US national security, in my opinion, is how have audiences responded to al-Qa'ida's appeal? And, for the purposes of this hearing, to what degree has ideology contributed to the audiences' responses? To answer these questions, it is useful to explore the radicalization processes that individuals and clusters of individuals have gone through as they progressed from being sympathetic to the al-Qa'ida worldview to being willing to 'pick up a gun'.

Note that most research suggests that one single pathway to terrorism does not exist.[14] And my comments should be taken in that context. Thus, when I discuss 'radicalization processes' I mean to imply multiple processes with variation along the way.

These processes can be understood as having three separate and distinct phases. In the first phase, termed 'availability,' environment factors make certain individuals susceptible to appeals from terrorist groups.[15] Of course, these factors are likely to vary according to location, but they might include being brought up in a family that articulates a violent Salafi worldview, frustration with local government policies, peer group influences, or frustration with foreign policies.

For example, in his research on suicide bombers in the Palestinian territories, Ami Pedahzur has noted that one particular cell played soccer together prior to their recruitment into Hamas.[16] Shazhad Tanweer, one of the 7 July 2005 London bombers, apparently had expressed frustration with UK foreign policy, particularly the conflict in Iraq.[17] Of course, that is not to say that all soccer players or individuals frustration with the conflict in Iraq are potential terrorist recruits, but rather, at the "availability" stage multiple factors can make al-Qa'ida's appeal attractive.

The second phase, termed 'recruitment and indoctrination,' occurs after initial contact between individuals and the clandestine groups. In examining the recruitment phase, it is useful to focus on 'nodes' or gateways through which individuals come into contact with terrorist leaders, members or

---

[14] Andrew Silke, ed., *Terrorists, Victims, and Society: Psychological Perspectives on Terrorism and its Consequences* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2003)

[15] Kim Cragin and Peter Chalk, *Terrorism and Development,* Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2002.

[16] Ami Pedahzur, "The Culture of Death: Terrorist Organizations and Suicide Bombings," presented at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington DC as part of the Eisenhower Speaker Series, 17 February 2005.

[17] Paul Temelty, "An In-Depth Look at the London Bombers," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 3, No. 15, July 28, 2005.

recruiters.[18] Some potential recruitment 'nodes' include prayer groups, sports clubs, charitable organizations, or even criminal gangs. For example, in December 2001 Singaporean authorities disrupted a plot to attack Western as well as local targets in that country. According to a White Paper released by that government, some of the arrested individuals had been recruited through religious study groups in Singapore.[19]

Importantly, these nodes vary according to country and community. So it is difficult to identify a laundry list of potential recruitment nodes worldwide. If any commonalities exist in recruitment nodes, they appear to be best grouped into 'diaspora communities' versus 'majority Muslim communities.'[20] But al-Qa'ida and its affiliates have demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt to different recruiting environments, adjusting both message and method of recruitment.

The third phase of the radicalization process yields a commitment to action on the part of certain individuals. To be honest, this final step has been the most difficult to isolate during the course of our research, because it seems to vary the most individual by individual. In some instances, a specific grievance appears to have acted as a final trigger. So, for example, Galib Andang aka Commander Robot, a former member of the now defunct Moro Nationalist Liberation Front in the Philippines, was motivated in part by the death of his grandmother and the hands of the Filipino Army.[21] Another common factor, at least for diaspora communities, appears to be participation in a foreign jihad.[22] Somehow the process of fighting overseas seems to make individuals more willing to engage in terrorism back home as well.

I should say, at this point, that my description of radicalization processes for individual terrorists and sympathizers is not particularly unique. That is, Philip Zimbardo, who is probably best known for his Stanford prison experiment, has observed similar processes with the recruitment of high

---

[18] This concept also was used by Javed Ali, Senior Intelligence Office, Department of Homeland Security, in his testimony before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs entitled, "Prison Radicalization: Are Terrorist Cells Forming in US Cell Blocks?", 19 September 2006.

[19] "White Paper: The Jemaah Islamiyya Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism," Singapore Government, 7 January 2003.

[20] For more information on recruitment trends in Diaspora communities in Europe, see Michael Taarnby, *Recruitment of Islamist Terrorists in Europe: Trends and Perspectives*, Denmark: Centre for Cultural Research, January 2005; see also Petter Nesser, *Jihad in Europe: A Survey of the Motivations for Sunni Islamist Terrorism in the Post-millennium Europe*, Norway: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2004.

[21] MNLF leaders negotiated a peace agreement with the Philippines as part of the Davao Accords in 1996.

[22] Ibid, "White Paper;" for more information on recruitment trends in Diaspora communities in Europe, see Michael Taarnby, *Recruitment of Islamist Terrorists in Europe: Trends and Perspectives*, Denmark: Centre for Cultural Research, January 2005; see also Petter Nesser, *Jihad in Europe: A Survey of the Motivations for*

school students into cults in the United States.[23] But I find it a useful construct to understanding all the various factors that motivate individuals to 'pick up a gun.'

So, I am often asked, 'what motivates terrorism? Is it ideology, politics, or poverty?' And my answer is, 'yes, all three, at least to varying degrees.' The key analytical question then becomes what role does ideology play in motivating terrorism, given that politics and poverty also play a part? I am not certain that we truly have the answer to that question.

Preliminary research suggests that extremist ideology shapes how individuals and communities view problems in the world that need to be resolved, be that corruption or injustice or poor governance. But political and economic grievances justify the use of violence to resolve these problems. That is, individuals and communities understand the problems in their world through an ideological lens. But this disgruntlement does not, on its own, motivate violence. That motivation most often emerges in an environment of political and/or economic grievances, which then translate that worldview into action, be it picking up a gun or providing financial and other forms of support.

Which brings me back to the initial question posed in this hearing: do we have an accurate understanding of the ideological dimensions of the global war on terrorism? I would have to say, 'probably not.' But I believe that we have come a long way, especially as researchers have begun to account for debates within the wider Salafi movement, as well as how those debates get translated and applied on a local level.

As we move forward, I would encourage you not to divorce the ideological dimensions of the conflict from the political and economic. Just like it is impossible to divorce military from non-military activities in the GWOT, it is impossible to truly divorce ideological from political and economic motivations. In fact, doing so only addresses part of the problem.

Sunni Islamist Terrorism in the Post-millennium Europe, Norway: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2004.

[23] Philip Zimbardo and C. Hartley, "Cults Go to High School: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis of the Initial Stage in the Recruitment Process," *Cultic Studies Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1985, pp. 91—147.