

SPECIAL REPORT

A primer on the ideological and
theological drivers of AQ and Daesh:
Al-Qaedaism

Isaac Kfir

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About the author

Dr Isaac Kfir is the Director of the National Security program and Head of the Counter-Terrorism Policy Centre, Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

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Cover image: On 7 May 2011, a member of the banned radical Islamist group *Muslims Against Crusades* protests outside the US Embassy in London against the killing of Osama Bin Laden. Photo: Guy Bell/Alamy Live News

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ASPI

Level 2
40 Macquarie Street
Barton ACT 2600
Australia

Tel + 61 2 6270 5100

Fax + 61 2 6273 9566

Email enquiries@aspi.org.au

www.aspi.org.au

www.aspistrategist.org.au

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s and 2000s, al-Qaeda (AQ) focused on promoting its transnational ideology, which meant that the group was less interested in local issues; the key was to provoke and fight the US (the ‘far away enemy’). In those days, it was clear that AQ was pursuing a war of attrition with the West, as Osama bin Laden recognised that defeating the West would take time.

Since then, the contagion of transnational *Salafist-jihadism* has also affected China and Russia, which both face *Salafi-jihadi*-inspired terrorism.¹ In his famed 2014 ‘Volcanoes of jihad’ speech, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi emphasised the global aspirations of Daesh when he announced that the caliphate had expanded to Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Egypt, Libya and Algeria, and, more recently, the establishment of the Islamic State–Khorasan.²

Clearly, the goal of the ‘war of a thousand cuts’ was to drain the US and its allies through attrition and to encourage states to overreact and commit more acts of violence against Muslims, thus encouraging young Muslims to join the global *jihadi* movement. An important element in the campaign was its focus on economics, which was based on bin Laden’s experience in the 1980s in Afghanistan, where he saw how the *mujahidin* ‘bled the Soviets white’.³ It’s been estimated that when one adds the cost of US military involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Syria to additional spending on homeland security and the departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs the US has spent over US\$4.3 trillion in current dollars from 9/11 through FY2017, which could rise to US\$5.6 trillion by the end of FY2018.⁴

In 2018, it’s more appropriate to see AQ as not only a terrorist group, albeit one that’s less engaged mass-casualty attacks—the last major attack mounted by AQ was the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings in 2015, for which Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula claimed responsibility—but as the progenitor and promoter of a distinct theological–historical–political ideology. Consequently, there has been a focus on AQ’s evolution from a traditional hierarchical terrorist organisation to a franchise or a network.⁵ The key to understanding AQ is to recognise its communication strategy, which interweaves pragmatic and perceptual factors. The pragmatic factors are security, stability and livelihood, whereas the perceptual factors draw on such concepts as ‘the Other’, crisis and solution.⁶ These factors are revealing because they focus on two principal themes: adopting the AQ mantra means participating in a program of action aimed at saving the *umma* (the Muslim community) from those who wish to destroy it, and thus joining a select group of enlightened individuals.⁷

There’s some dispute as to what AQ specifically seeks to achieve in 2018. Some pundits maintain that the group is primarily focused on removing the US (and, by extension, Western influence) from the Middle East (which is seen mainly as a Muslim area and which Muslim empires dominated for millennia⁸) and ending the existence of the state of Israel. Others argue that AQ is an apocalyptic group engaged in a ‘cosmic war’ and holding to an atavistic view of Islam that rejects modernity (although using its tools).

In his eulogy for bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri suggested that AQ is more of a ‘concept’ than a ‘structured group’, emphasising the reality that AQ has accepted its role as an inspirer of action, as opposed to a formal entity, because ultimately bin Laden’s goal was ‘to incite the Islamic nation to holy war and his message had reached all’.⁹ Such a view highlights AQ’s flexibility and opportunism: after all, it had at one point also aspired to hold territory, but the

reaction to 9/11—the ‘global war on terror’—forced it to shift its approach, which in the words of one commentator ‘doesn’t necessarily mean building a caliphate in this lifetime, it’s a perpetual struggle against “infidels”’.¹⁰

This special report aims to explain the persistent and enduring allure of al-Qaedaism as an ideology that is eschatological, apocalyptic, conspiratorial and hagiographical. Those elements, found also in Christianity and Judaism, feed into al-Qaeda’s ‘glocalist’ narrative¹¹ because, as the American historian and professor of the history of Islam, David Cook, correctly notes:

The apocalyptist sees the petty injustices which touch the common people, and responds to them. They are symptomatic of the larger evil of society, in his view, yet he does not know enough about the rulers to even condemn them properly. The higher on the social scale, the less specific he is as regards the evils perpetuated. Without a doubt, in this regard, he expresses in his criticism the feelings of the common people.¹²

The reason why we should describe the precepts and beliefs that drive al-Qaeda as ideological is because ideologies serve a specific function. They raise awareness of the cause, facilitating a narrative based on ‘them’ and ‘us’ in which ‘they’ are held responsible for the suffering of ‘us’. The ideology also provides ‘us’ with an identity and a justification for the plan of action aimed at addressing the wrong that has been wrought on ‘us’.¹³ The eschatological, apocalyptic, conspiratorial and hagiographical elements of the al-Qaeda ideology explain why victory may not happen quickly; it also defends changes in strategy, supports sacrifice and underlines the evil nature of those who oppose the al-Qaedaist mantra.

By understanding al-Qaedaism, we could better counter the violence that it perpetrates, inspires and advocates, as we could then appreciate why individuals are attracted to these movements. It may also help us to understand that we’re engaging in a cosmic, generational conflict, led by individuals who corrupt the key tenets of Islam.¹⁴ Therefore, there’s a need to think not only of the now but of tomorrow because al-Qaedaism constantly proselytises, reaching out to the disenchanted, the angry and the disillusioned, which is why President Obama was undoubtedly correct when he said, ‘This is not simply a military effort, ... ideologies are not defeated by guns. They’re defeated with better ideas.’¹⁵

IS AL-QAEDAISM AN IDEOLOGY?

The theological aspect of AQ's message is based on Salafist-jihadism, which has a particular interpretation of Islam and history that:

- recognises the presence of a clash between Western civilisation and Islam, in which the former is seen as a corrupt force that lacks any moral authority or respect for justice¹⁶
- in the political sphere, wants to place sovereignty in the hands of Allah and not in the hands of people.¹⁷

Several modern documents have helped to distil the AQ ideology, beginning with Sayyid Qutb's *Social justice in Islam and Milestones*. Other seminal documents are the 1996 *Declaration of war against the Americans occupying the land of the two holy places*; the 1998 *Jihad against Jews and Crusaders* statement by the World Islamic Front; Abdullah Azzam's *Join the caravan of martyrs*; Ayman al-Zawahiri's *Knights under the Prophet's banner*; and Mustapha al-Suri's *The call to global Islamic resistance*.¹⁸ Daesh hasn't had the same calibre of scholars or the same scholarly output, as its style and nature call for a different type of engagement; instead, it draws on short sermons by such men as Muhammad al-Adnani, Turki Bin'ali and others, who very often simplify the al-Qaeda ideology or simply build on basic al-Qaedaism.

When it comes to the place of Islam in the world, the al-Qaedaists believe in the need to globalise Islam, exemplified through such Quranic proclamations as 'Unto Allah belong the East and the West, and whithersoever ye turn, there is Allah's Countenance. Lo! Allah is All-Embracing, All-Knowing.'¹⁹ This therefore leads to a paradoxical situation in which, on the one hand, they reject the claim that Islam, like many other religions, has evolved to meet the needs of local communities, while at the same time they exploit local issues to promote their version of Islam and their political goals. That rejection feeds into the claim that because there's a unitary Muslim community (all Muslims must subscribe to the five pillars of Islam), when one part of the community hurts, the whole community is affected. This concept is captured by a hadith: 'The believers are like one person; if his head aches, the whole body aches with fever and sleeplessness.'²⁰ In a recent statement, Zawahiri has said:

In terms of peculiarities, one region may differ slightly from another, but there are obvious common denominators, namely fighting Islam in the name of the 'Fight against Terrorism' and subservience to an 'International System', cleverly crafted by the victors of World War II for the mutual division and theft of the natural resources of the world—specifically the Muslim world.²¹

There's an inherent contradiction in Islamic practice as interpreted by al-Qaedaism, which tends to select sections from the Quran, the hadiths and the Sunnah (traditional Muslim law) and interpret them in a manner consistent with their political goal of fighting the West and returning the *umma* to the 'righteous path'.

The jurisdictional methodology of Islamic law begins with the divine (the Quran), which was revealed only to Mohammed, and moves to the earthly (tribal and cultural practices). Accordingly, al-Qaedaists maintain that the Quran, which consists of the verbatim words of Allah (God) as revealed to the Prophet Mohammed over a period of 23 years, is regarded as *the* authoritative guide, providing knowledge and the tools to live a righteous life.²² This may also explain why many see AQ as a fundamentalist movement.²³

The problem is that within the Quran's 114 *surahs* (chapters) and 6,235 *ayahs* (verses), only around 600 *ayahs* are legal rules.²⁴ Consequently, as the Muslim community expanded, there was a need to develop secondary sources to help explain and interpret the Quran:

- The *Hadith* are effectively canonical collection of traditional stories about or sayings of the Prophet Mohammed. The hadiths provide the biographical background of Islamic jurisprudence. Importantly, the eschatology that's virulent in al-Qaedaism stems in large part from the hadiths.²⁵
- The *Sunnah* (literally, a well-trodden path) is a collection of Islamic law developed during the first three centuries of Islam that came from the *Hadith* and that lays out the obligations of Muslims.

There's also *ijma* (consensus of opinion), which is based on rational proofs and reasonings that come from divine revelation. Over time, Islamic jurisprudence also drew on *qiyas*, which is the use of analogical reasoning to cover the application of sharia law to new situations and ideas, and *urf* (custom), which is the collective practice of a group of people, which complements rules that the Quran doesn't fully explain.

Most practising Muslims tend to combine the divine with the earthly,²⁶ but the al-Qaedaists refuse to combine the two.

The eschatological nature of al-Qaedaism (its concern with death, judgement and the final destiny of the soul) leads its adherents to interpret current events in a manner consistent with several overarching beliefs. First, the world is irredeemably evil and corrupt. Second, the Muslim world is in retreat due to a war of civilisation in which civilisation, particularly Muslim civilisation, is slowly regressing to the time of *jahiliyya* (the barbarism that existed before Islam). Third, redemption is possible, but only through violence. With this in mind, it becomes easier to understand why the *Salafi-jihadis* believe that they must engage in a three-pronged defensive jihad against 'apostate' Muslims, un-Islamic rulers and the West so as to establish an Islamic state. The way to do this is by meeting five conditions: there must be a group, hearing, obedience, migration and jihad.²⁷

AL-QAEDA AND DAESH

The animosity between AQ and Daesh is well documented. The leadership of each group is at odds with the other, specifically on methods and approaches to violent jihad.²⁸ Ayman al-Zawahiri, the AQ leader, has denounced Daesh's use of indiscriminate violence as cowardly and mad (even though AQ emerged through an act of indiscriminate violence—the destruction of the Twin Towers and the attack on the Pentagon). He's also claimed that Daesh is 'misusing the enthusiasm of the youth' and 'exceeded the limits of extremism', which is why Zawahiri emphasised that those 'who seek the truth' should join AQ.²⁹ Conversely, Muhammad al-Adnani, for a time the official spokesperson and a senior leader of Daesh, and Turki Bin'ali, a Bahraini Islamic scholar and senior member of Daesh, have engaged in a battle of words with AQ ideologues such as Muhammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada, who rejected Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's establishment of a caliphate; al-Maqdisi has gone so far as to declare Daesh an extremist sect (*ghulw*).³⁰

Within the *Salafi-jihadi* space, it's obvious that there are those who move almost seamlessly from the AQ to the Daesh camp. For example, al-Shabaab used to be in the AQ space, before shifting to Daesh, before switching back to AQ. Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, a Pakistan-based group, at one point declared allegiance to Daesh, only to change later as it began cooperating with the Taliban. Martin Chulov, a *Guardian* correspondent, recalled his interaction with a Daesh fighter by the name of Abu Ismael who began as a member of al-Qaeda before shifting allegiance to Daesh because he saw the war in Syria as an extension of the war of 2005 and the 2007 conflict in Iraq, which he saw as being between ascendant Shia and vanquished Sunnis.³¹ At this stage, it's unlikely that AQ and Daesh will cooperate by sharing equipment and manpower, but there are commonalities in their rhetoric and online discourse, where ideas and views are dispersed among a community of followers and, more importantly, potential followers who adhere to al-Qaedaism.

Now that the caliphate has disbanded, a key difference between the two groups—the ability to claim the presence of an Islamic state and Daesh's use of and commitment to indiscriminate terror as a way to govern—means that they may find that they have more in common. This doesn't suggest a merger, but rather the possibility that the two will concentrate more on achieving their goal of bringing forth their idealised version of an Islamic state, especially, as will be shown below, since they share an ideology.

This report builds on the work of Western scholars such as Bruce Hoffman, Daniel Byman and others who point out that AQ and Daesh may have differences but also have a lot in common, and Daesh often builds on AQ's ideas.³² The report aims to show that much of Daesh's ideology is based on ideas and views promulgated by such men as Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Abu Musab al-Suri, Abu Yahya al-Libi, Abu Bakr Naji, Abu Khayr al-Masri and Nasir al-Wuhayshi, added to by others over time as Daesh and AQ have sought new recruits.

AL-QAEDA AND AL-QAEDAISM

AQ emerged in the late 1980s in Afghanistan. The Soviet intervention in 1979 attracted young Arab men to help their brethren, who were committed to freeing their country not only from Soviet occupation but also from the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. Towards the end of the conflict, Abdullah Azzam (1941–1989) and Osama bin Laden launched *al-Qaidah al-Sulbah* ('the solid base')—a reference to the training camp that Azzam had established to help support the Arab Afghans fighting the Soviets and the local communists. The aim was to make the base the vanguard for an Islamic revolution, and for the vanguard to be willing to make exceptional sacrifices. Announcing the base, Azzam said:

For every invention there must be a vanguard (*tali'a*) to carry it forward and, while forcing its way into society, endure enormous expenses and costly sacrifices. There is no ideology, neither earthly nor heavenly, that does not require such a vanguard that gives everything it possesses in order to achieve victory for this ideology. It carries the flag all along the sheer endless and difficult path until it reaches its destination in the reality of life, since Allah has destined that it should make it and manifest itself ... This vanguard constitutes the solid base (*al-Qa'ida al-Subah*) for the expected society.³³

In the early 1990s, bin Laden was forced to relocate from Saudi Arabia to Sudan, as the Saudi royal family would no longer tolerate his continuous criticism of the American presence in the Arabian Peninsula, where an international coalition had arrived in 1991 to oppose Saddam Hussein's invasion and annexation of Kuwait. Bin Laden argued that 'his' Afghan Arabs could defeat Saddam as they had defeated the USSR. It was during this time that bin Laden shaped his ideas, emphasising that the only way to restore the *umma* was by defeating the US, which was propping up what he deemed to be corrupt and decadent Arab regimes.³⁴

September 11 ushered in a new wave of religiously inspired terrorism,³⁵ which engulfed the Indian subcontinent, primarily Afghanistan and Pakistan, although *Salafi-jihadi* activity is also found in Bangladesh and India. Bin Laden and AQ also raised the prospect of Southeast Asia becoming a second front, as seen most visibly with Jemaah Islamiyah ('Islamic Group'), which was responsible for the 2002 Bali bombings, the 2003 bombing of the JW Marriott Hotel Jakarta and the bombing of the Australian Embassy in Jakarta in September 2004. Jemaah Islamiyah, which had roots in Darul Islam, adopted a jihadist program of action that was very much linked to AQ's ideology.³⁶

Historically, AQ sought to navigate an Islamist agenda that drew heavily on Salafism, Wahhabism and the Hanbali *madhhab* (school of legal thought). Where al-Qaedaism innovates is in its elevation of jihad as being central to the way a Muslim proves their devotion and commitment to Islam. There are five pillars in Islam: creed, prayer, charity, fasting and pilgrimage, but it seems that AQ raises jihad as being a sixth pillar.

The jihadism of al-Qaedaism focuses on heroism (including martyrdom), the use of violence and the establishment of an idealised, utopian society. For example, Abu Rumaysah al-Britani, a British jihadist, wrote an e-book in English titled *A brief guide to the Islamic State*, in which he described life in the caliphate, including details of topics as varied as food (he noted the availability of cheap candy, ice cream and fruit cocktails to emphasise the affluence of life under Daesh's rule), the weather (noting that 'the Caliphate offers an exquisite Mediterranean climate that has all the making of a plush holiday resort') and transport (declaring that 'there's both public and private, with a new Honda Akkad costing \$US500' and lots of technology).³⁷

This idealised society, the al-Qaedaists want, reflects the way they believe Muslim society was during the period of Mohammed and the four Rashidun caliphs (Abu Bakr al-Siddiq, Umar ibn al-Khattab, Uthman ibn Affan and Ali ibn Abi Talib). Consequently, adherents to al-Qaedaism needn't even understand the Islam that al-Qaedaism advocates, because what's appealing to this cadre of devotees is the action, the romantic heroism infused in their conception of martyrdom, their adulation of death and their fundamental opposition to contemporary society, which they deem unjust, immoral and evil.³⁸

Al-Qaedaism uses language and images that appeal to those looking for action, salvation, or both. It's linked to such concepts as duty, obligation and honour, while at the same time stressing that those who don't accept its message perpetuate Muslim shame, dishonour and abuse. The message is largely directed at two types of individual:

- It appeals to Muslims who live in conflict zones or areas where human insecurity is high, giving them an explanation for their insecurity and for why the international community is ignoring the suffering, abuses and violations that many Muslims experience on a daily basis.
- It appeals to those who experience institutionalised discrimination or state-based violence. If the government is Muslim, the rhetoric is focused on how un-Islamic that government is.³⁹ If the violence is used by a non-Muslim government, the argument centres on the fact that a true Muslim government would not attack the *umma*.

Those Muslims who don't live in conflict zones or in countries with fragile sociopolitical or economic systems may find al-Qaedaism appealing because they're already deeply suspicious of the state and traditional political elites. Similarly, another group attracted to al-Qaedaism comprises people, often from Western European countries, who have internalised the poor condition that their brethren live in, making them more susceptible to a narrative that rejects established authority.⁴⁰

JIHADIST COMMONALITIES

Both AQ and Daesh place enormous focus on jihad. In Arabic, the word, which is a verbal noun, means ‘struggle’ or ‘striving’ (in the way of God). It can also refer to determined work for a noble cause. It doesn’t mean ‘holy war’ (in Arabic, ‘war’ is *harb* and ‘holy’ is *muqadassa*). When it appears in the Quran or Muslim usage it’s usually followed by the expression *fi sabil Allah*, ‘in the path of God’. The intention here is to sacralise a military activity: the early Muslims were engaged in tribal warfare and in expansion, which is why sanctifying military action was important.⁴¹

The al-Qaedaists’ understanding of and approach to jihad involves an expectation (in reality, a demand) that all true Muslims should become jihadists. This was exemplified in bin Laden’s 1998 ‘Declaration of the World Islamic Front for jihad against the Jews and Crusaders’, in which he stated:

And ulema have throughout Islamic history unanimously agreed that the jihad is an individual duty if the enemy destroys the Muslim countries ... On that basis, and in compliance with Allah’s order, we issue the following fatwa to all Muslims ... The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque [Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim.⁴²

The demand stems from the claim that the West, with the help of some Muslims who have been corrupted by the West is assaulting the *umma*. Put differently, al-Qaedaism identifies a small group of individuals who are deemed enlightened, in that they see the corruption and immorality all around, and who are determined (in their view, they’re obligated) to end the corruption and tyranny that prevents Muslims from living as true Muslims. For example, in discussing Pakistan, Zawahiri has said ‘Its government, army, intelligence, police and judiciary act as mercenaries hired to defend the interests of the crusader onslaught in South Asia.’⁴³

The term ‘*jihadi*’ is used to refer to an individual who has chosen to become a holy warrior (*mujahid*). In its contemporary manifestation, the *mujahidin* are enlightened people who have taken on the sacred duty of fighting to purify the world of evil, and are therefore willing to pay the ultimate price. Zawahiri, for example, has declared that:

You must teach the Ummah that death in the way of Allah is better than life in His obedience and that the price of resisting oppressions is cheaper than the price of submitting to oppression. You must teach your Ummah that the one who wants freedom must pay its price, and the price of freedom is death.⁴⁴

This is also why jihadis have often undertaken migration (*hijrah*) to help in the defence and spread of Islam and the conquest of the world by Muslims. Professor David Cook, for instance, emphasises the centrality of migration to those who subscribe to apocalyptic Islam. First, it is understood as ‘a tactical regrouping in a location distant from the enemy, preparatory to the continuation of the attack’.⁴⁵ Second, it also refers to the migration of the Arab tribes, known as *muhajar Ibrahim* (the immigration of Abraham), and a hadith that refers to Palestine and Jerusalem as ‘God’s most beloved places’,⁴⁶ which is why Palestine, Jerusalem and Syria (the location where the battle between good and evil would eventually take place) are so important to apocalyptic Muslims.

A true *mujahid* is someone who expects to die in the campaign because the enemy is more powerful, which is why there's the belief that they will be rewarded after death. To these jihadists, any Muslim who rejects these sacred truths or works against achieving them is subject to excommunication (*takfir*) and becoming an apostate (*murtad*).⁴⁷

The interpretation of jihad as promulgated by al-Qaedaism effectively rejects much of early Muslim history and scholarship because not only did Mohammed reject the idea of forced conversion due to the Quranic principle that 'There is no compulsion in religion' (Quran 2:256) but because the early division of the world was between the polytheists and the 'People of the Book' (*Ahl al-Kitab*)—a reference to Jews, Christians and Sabeans, who had special status when they lived under Muslim rule. However, the medieval legal jurist Ibn Taymiya revolutionised the concept of jihad, declaring that rulers who fail to enforce Islamic law rigorously, which includes the pursuit of jihad, lose their right to govern.⁴⁸

AL-QAEDAISM

Al-Qaedaism is based on four principal pillars, all of which are aimed its goal of establishing a caliphate reminiscent of the 7th century.⁴⁹

1. It aims to educate Muslims about the greatness of Islam and of Muslim achievement by emphasising that it was piety and the acceptance of Islam in its truest form that brought Muslim greatness.
2. It identifies the source of the *umma*'s decline as the emergence of the nation-state and the rise of corrupt Muslim leaders who are willing to work with the decadent West, or at least not challenge it.
3. It develops a transnational consciousness that demands an appreciation of shared grievances.
4. It offers a program of action that permits, if not encourages, violence for the sake of an idealised goal that includes acquiring the status of a martyr and of 'belonging'.

Muslim pride and piety

Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) was one of the main ideologues of contemporary Salafist-jihadism. In emphasising the Muslims' decline, he constructed a narrative that rejects traditional, historical, linguistic and philological interpretations of the past, opting instead to engage in a selective reading of history and, more importantly, of the Quran.

Al-Qaedaism, which is the product of Qutb, Azzam, bin Laden, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, Saif al-Adel, Abu Hafs al Mauritani and others,⁵⁰ is a revolutionary ideology that aches for a return to a golden era. It identifies the world in its present state as hopelessly evil, unjust and corrupt—an idea encapsulated in Qutb's doctrine of *jahiliyya*, which is normally translated as 'the Age of Ignorance'.⁵¹ The only way to end this state of ignorance and address immorality and decadence is by implementing:

the rule of Shari'a [Islamic law], because Shari'a, which was given by God, protects the believers' interests, freedom, honor, and pride, and protects what is sacred to them. The Islamic nation will not accept any other law, after it has suffered from the anti-Islamic trends forcefully imposed on it.⁵²

As it looks back to the golden era, al-Qaedaism's theological roots lie in the Salafist movement of the 7th century and the Hanbali school of Islamic jurisprudence, as developed and interpreted by Taqi a-Din ibn Taymiyyah; and its political goals are linked to the writings of Hasan al-Banna and Qutb, who both wanted to not only end Western influence in Egypt but to unite the *umma* to challenge that influence. In Arabic, the word *salaf* means 'to precede'. The reference is to the companions of the Prophet Mohammed, who were those who the al-Qaedaists claim best understood Islam because they were taught by Mohammed himself, which is why their views and the way they practised Islam are seen as the purest and most correct.⁵³

This neo-normative school, which identifies politics not as a secondary issue (*far*) 'subject to commentary, compromise and legal argumentation, but [rather as] a primary source (*asl*) of faith', emerged in the late 18th century as the Muslim world (mainly the Ottoman Empire) and the West increasingly clashed. The West had the

upper hand, forcing the Ottomans to cede power and territory to the Europeans, which eventually led to the demise of the Ottoman Empire and Muslim power.⁵⁴ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi seizes on this point when he says:

[T]he Muslims were defeated after the fall of their caliphate [*khilāfah*]. Then their state ceased to exist, so the disbelievers were able to weaken and humiliate the Muslims, dominate them in every region, plunder their wealth and resources, and rob them of their rights. They accomplished this by attacking and occupying their lands, placing their treacherous agents in power to rule the Muslims with an iron fist, and spreading dazzling and deceptive slogans such as: civilization, peace, co-existence, freedom, democracy, secularism, Baathism, nationalism, and patriotism, among other false slogans.⁵⁵

The neo-normative interpretation asserts that by the reconstitution of the Muslim world (ending the divisions that emerged, as seen in the way Muhammad Ali Pasha turned Egypt into a semi-independent entity), it would become possible to revitalise the *umma*'s power.⁵⁶ Piety, the al-Qaedaists argue, will also facilitate the emancipation of the *umma* from the corrupting values of the West and Muslim leaders who are seen as undermining true Islam. In the words of Zawahiri:

No reform is conceivable while our countries are occupied by the Crusader forces, which are spread throughout our countries. No reform is conceivable while the Crusader forces are stationed in our countries [where they] enjoy support, supplies, and storage facilities, and go forth from our countries to attack our brothers and sisters in other Islamic countries. No reform is conceivable while our governments are controlled by the American embassies, which stick their noses into all our affairs.⁵⁷

Muslim corruption and Western decadence

Al-Qaedaism identifies the decline of the *umma* with fragmentation and divisions caused by religious innovation that facilitated the emergence of sects such as Sufism and Shiism, and Westernisation, which breeds innovation in religious practices, permissiveness and the weakening of social structures, principally in relation to patriarchy and other social norms.⁵⁸ A key issue for the West is that al-Qaedaism categorically rejects democracy, seeing it as a corrupting influence because it vests sovereignty in the people and not in God. Moreover, the pervasiveness of corruption and immorality feeds into the eschatological, apocalyptic, conspiratorial and hagiographical nature of al-Qaedaism in that it emphasises the need for a revolutionary change, as only through the complete destruction of all that is evil and wrong can one rebuild the promised land.

This view of the corruption of the *umma* and of Islam has allowed Zawahiri to point out how democratic states are hypocritical:

[D]emocracy is a one-way highway that lands you in a position where you can serve the West. But if you try to use democracy to oppose the interest of the West, you are a terrorist. The reality of democracy which its advocates hide, is that it is the despotism of the whims of the majority. In democracy, truth is subject to the likes, desires, and decisions of the majority. The whims of the majority becomes the law; a system of life that must be obeyed. This stems from a very dangerous principle: sovereignty (according to the proponents of democracy) belongs to the people instead of Allah.⁵⁹

Scholars such as Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1839–1897), Muhammed 'Abduh (1849–1905), Abul A'la Maududi (1903–1979), Hassan al-Banna (1906–1949) and others came to associate the decline of Muslim power with modernisation and innovation. For those men, once the Ottoman Empire began to engage in and with the ideas that were emanating from the West, including democracy, its power began to decline, which in turn led to Western penetration into traditional Muslim lands. Those ideas gave birth to the Muslim nation-state—a modern, Western concept that divides the *umma*. Once the *umma* was divided, it became possible for the Christian West to conquer Muslim lands. Zawahiri has said:

After the fall of the Ottomans, ... the concept of nation-states with boundaries demarcated by the infidel occupiers started holding sway, and among Muslims arose some proponents of this notion. This is why the callers of the Islamic revival actively fought against this concept.⁶⁰

The *Salafi-jihadis* claim that there's a need (an obligation, a duty) to respond to the various challenges posed to Muslims by Westernisation, and that the way to do so is through jihad. They point to the way that the West penetrated the Middle East in the past 200 years and how disastrous it has been for ordinary Muslims, as it meant that Muslims are being forced to accept democratic values while they do not they enjoy the wealth that oil has generated. The *umma*'s leaders have embraced Western values, which is why they're traitors.⁶¹ In the words of Zawahiri, although regions differ slightly, the common denominators of the traitors include fighting Islam under the guise of the 'War against Terror' and being subservient to the international system.⁶²

In this narrative, the focus is very much on the violence that's brought upon ordinary Muslims, first by infidel regimes and second by apostate regimes that collude with infidels (hence the accusation of *takfir*). Abdullah Azzam, writing about Afghanistan, emphasised the violence, portraying Afghanistan as a woman who is seeing her children 'being slaughtered, her women are being raped, the innocent are killed and their corpses scattered'.⁶³ Thus, in *Defence of Muslim lands*, Azzam argued that Muslims had an individual duty (*fard ayn*) and a communal responsibility (*fard kifaya*) to assist the Afghans to fight off the Soviet Union, which had invaded their country.⁶⁴ In other words, Azzam's conception of jihad was as defensive and reactive, enabling bin Laden to rationalise 9/11 by claiming that it was intended to 'punish the oppressor [the US] in kind and that we should destroy towers in America in order that they taste some of what we tasted and so that they be deterred from killing our women and children'.⁶⁵

The First Gulf War was a key event that for many *Salafi-jihadis* attested to the demise and division of the *umma* and the corruption of its leaders by the West. Al-Qaedaism largely ignores that the war was initiated by Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, focusing instead on the decision by the Saudi royal family (and others) to permit the US and other Western powers to station hundreds of thousands of troops across the Arabian Peninsula, thereby offending the hadith in which the Prophet Mohammed had allegedly said 'let there be no two religions in Arabia'. Bin Laden was to refer to this in his 23 February 1998 declaration, 'The World Islamic Front statement for jihad against Jews and Crusaders'.⁶⁶

Appreciation of shared grievances

Social identity theory postulates that the more uncertain people are about their lives (specifically, their security), the likelier they are to manifest anger and grievances, especially when they feel they can't change the system through peaceful means. Those sentiments may lead the individual to identify and seek out a group of people that shares their outlook about the environment that they live in. They specifically look for others who share the anger at those they deem responsible for their grievances. Eventually, they find (or form) a group that then provides answers or explanations as to why their lives aren't as they hoped. The group also gives them a sense of security, as their concerns and fears are matched and supported by others. It offers a program of action that permits, if not encourages, violence for the sake of an idealised goal.⁶⁷ In the case of Daesh, the goal is the establishment of the caliphate, which is why its supporters would go to great lengths to describe what life under Daesh was like.⁶⁸

An important element in social identity theory is that it helps the aggrieved person internalise the grievance, which then becomes a shared grievance. That is, even if one isn't experiencing discrimination or violence, the fact that others do feeds one's sense of injustice, which leads to the accusation of moral relativism against the West. In one of his speeches in 2004, bin Laden declared that what moved him to action was the way the Americans aided the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which he used to highlight American hypocrisy and double standards.⁶⁹

Al-Baghdadi has taken a similar stance declaring that 'Muslims' rights are forcibly seized in China, India, Palestine, Somalia, the Arabian Peninsula, the Caucasus, Shām [the Levant], Egypt, Iraq, Indonesia, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Ahvaz, Iran [by the *rāfidah* (Shia)], Pakistan, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria and Morocco, in the East and in the West'.⁷⁰ The internalisation of the grievance leads to an emotive reaction in which the individual becomes angry and demands retribution. Haroro J Ingram indicates that Daesh uses extremist violence to emphasise the West's hypocrisy. Thus, for example, when Daesh burned Jordanian pilot Lieutenant Moaz al-Kasasbeh alive, it not only provided a 'jurisprudential, moral, ideological and political reasoning' for the execution and its method, but included in the video:

graphic images of the burned bodies of children, civilians buried under rubble and the aftermath of air strikes flashed on-screen as the pilot was walked through bomb-ravaged streets towards a cage. Thus, the vast majority of the video was devoted to increasing perceptions of crisis in its in-group audiences and unambiguously constructing the pilot as a symbol of the malevolent Other.⁷¹

Al-Qaedaism draws on social identity theory by helping to create a simple dichotomy of ‘them’ and ‘us’, with us being good and them being evil. The division also feeds into the salvific aspect of al-Qaedaism that demands sacrifice, in that those who are willing to sacrifice for the idealised goal will be rewarded, whereas those who aren’t will suffer defeat and pain. The sacrifice is physical, mental, spiritual and emotional, in that it includes leaving one’s home and family to live under harsh conditions (one need only think about the caves of Tora Bora, where many al-Qaedaists fled when the US launched its military operation against the Taliban and AQ), all of which help to emphasise the commitment of the *mujahid* to the cause.⁷²

The binary division, which emerged out of the works of Abdallah Azzam, led AQ to construct an imagined community among those who are saved (or will be saved), as opposed to those who are damned (this division also appears in Daesh’s narrative⁷³). The key to this imagined community is the ability to construct a distinct reading of history that’s heroic, salvific, romanticised and hagiographical (which is also why it appeals to those in their teens or early twenties, as younger people are more susceptible to such narratives).⁷⁴

Another example of binarism is seen in the way al-Qaedaism divides the world between *Dar al-Islam* (‘the whole territory in which the law of Islam prevails’) and the non-believers in *Dar al-Harb* (the house or abode of war), which is also linked to the concept of *al-wala wa’l bara* (‘loyalty and disavowal’, although the phrase is often understood to mean ‘to love and hate for the sake of Allah’).⁷⁵ The *al-wala* principle emerged in the 7th century with the Kharijites⁷⁶ to show loyalty toward a fellow Khawarij while disavowing outsiders. Al-Qaedaism embraces the concept, as it further emphasises the difference between the West and the Muslim world: the Western world is secular and therefore knows no love (love of God), whereas Islam embraces that devotion. Zawahiri claimed in a 2001 essay that ‘all true Muslims must be in a constant state of *bara*, hating everyone that is not part of the *dar al-Islam*.’⁷⁷ The exposition of the concept of *al-wala wa’l bara* was laid bare in an essay in *Dabiq*, in which Daesh not only laid out why it hates the West but also why it fights the West. The writer provides six reasons for why the West is hated, including ‘We hate you, first and foremost, because you are disbelievers ... disbelief is the primary reason we fight you, as we have been commanded to fight the disbelievers until they submit to the authority of Islam’. The writer also emphasises that secularism and liberalism ‘permit the very things that Allah has prohibited’.⁷⁸

The case of Ashiqur Rahman Jilani, who took the name Abu Jandal al-Banghali, highlights the notion of shared grievances and the internalisation of grievances. In its biography of Abu Jandal, Daesh claims that he had wanted to leave Bangladesh (to make the *hijra* to Syria) and the way that he did it was by forging a letter from his college that permitted him to travel to the Middle East to attend an engineering conference, even though he had abandoned his studies ‘due to the sinful environment that existed’ in the college. Daesh claimed that, because God wanted to help Abu Jandal fulfil his goal of coming to the caliphate, not only did he help Jandal by blinding ‘the eyes of the *murtaddin*, who didn’t notice the obvious signs of forgery in both the stamp and the signature in the reference letter’, but by also providing him with the money to cover the cost in ‘an equally cunning manner’.⁷⁹

Violence to advance the cause

The plan of action offered by al-Qaedaism is one of active engagement by all Muslims, whether through disseminating information, providing financial support or jihad, all of which are aimed at ‘first restoring *Dar al-Islam* where it once was, and then moving onto the *Dar al-Harb*.’⁸⁰ Because al-Qaedaists elevate jihad as a fundamental duty of all Muslims, they assert that it’s an obligation that falls on all Muslim males. This element feeds into and builds on the previous factors in that, because Muslims are humiliated and abused daily, there’s a demand for action. Accordingly, al-Qaedaism not only encourages and permits the use of unrelenting violence, which *jihadis* hope will elicit an overreaction by the enemy, but also takes the view that failure to do jihad may elicit harsh punishment.⁸¹ Interestingly, Anwar al-Awlaki, an important al-Qaeda ideologue, argued that jihad wasn’t only about fighting but about the gathering of the *umma* to defeat the enemy (those who oppose al-Qaeda).⁸²

Al-Qaedaism identifies suicide attacks as the most effective way to gain publicity for the cause but also as a means to highlight the *mujahidin*'s devotion. To support this narrative, al-Qaedaism collects and misrepresents verses from the Quran and hadiths about one's obligation to participate in the external jihad as well as the value of martyrdom, which in Sunni Islam never really existed (such action appeared in the Shia tradition). A common citation used by AQ to defend suicide attacks is verse 2:154: 'And call not those who are slain in the way of Allah "dead". Nay, they are living, only ye perceive not.'⁸³ AQ's manipulation of the Quran and sharia law has led it to formulate a theorem aimed at defending its operations in which Muslims are killed. Zawahiri for example has claimed 'we haven't killed the innocents, not in Baghdad, nor in Morocco, nor in Algeria, nor anywhere else. And if there is any innocent who was killed in the Mujahideen's operations, then it was either an unintentional error, or out of necessity as in cases of al-Tatarrus [taking of human shields by the enemy].'⁸⁴

The concept of *Hukm al-Tatarrus* (the law on using human shields) emerged in the 7th century; Muslim jurists such as Abu Hanifa (699–767), Ibn Hanbal (780–855) and Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) have also written about it. It defends situations in which innocent Muslims are killed by a Muslim army. The concept was designed to address the use of Muslims as human shields by non-Muslim forces. However, Abu Yahya, an AQ ideologue, argues that because the world is in a state of war to bring forth the true interpretation of and adherence to Islam, the threshold for the killing of innocent Muslims has been lowered. Also, Abu Yahya sees the fact that Muslims are living under non-Muslim rule as the reason why they can be used as human shields. Non-Muslim leaders are using them to stop the advance of AQ, so if they die because of an AQ operation their deaths are necessary.⁸⁵ Daesh has also used the concept.⁸⁶

Al-Qaedaism communicates two things about suicide attacks. First, the *mujahidin* will make the ultimate sacrifice because they care about the goal more than they care about their own lives. This is why they will receive extra rewards and need to be treated as a special class of individuals who experience miracles, such as being lifted directly to paradise or being aided by God to achieve their goals.⁸⁷

Second, the enemy will lose because it's next to impossible to prevent suicide attacks by people who are patient and so committed to the cause that they'll sacrifice themselves. The first implication is that the *jihadis* are invincible because their commitment is supreme and ultimate. Abu Rumaysah al-Britani, for example, writes 'I believe wholeheartedly in the prophecies of the final Messenger Muhammad (peace be upon him) that promises Muslims the keys to Europe and the White House, and therefore for me it is only really a waiting game.'⁸⁸ Infused in this is the notion that martyrdom also helps to create a unique sense of belonging (the *jihadi* is a member of an enlightened group that has shed its false consciousness and is ready and willing to serve in the vanguard of the revolution). For instance, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani captured this sentiment when he declared in a speech:

Being killed—according to their [America and its allies'] account—is a victory. This is where the secret lies. You fight a people who can never be defeated. They either gain victory or are killed. And O crusaders, you are losers in both outcomes, because you are ignorant of the reality that none of us is killed but to resurrect the dead amongst us. None of us is killed but to leave behind him a story that awakens the Muslims from their slumber by its recount.⁸⁹

Notably, in defending its decision to declare a caliphate and showing a willingness to fight all who oppose it, Daesh is drawing on what it claims are the experiences of the first Caliph, Abu Bakr, who fought the much bigger Persian Sasanian Empire while also carrying on a campaign (the *Ridda* Wars, or Wars of Apostasy) against Arab tribes that refused to pay taxes to the new caliph. In Daesh's view, victory in those campaigns laid the foundation for the *umma*. The link to the first caliph and to the magnitude of the battle against the Sasanians highlights two things: a commitment to fight against bigger odds and a belief that God won't allow the true Muslim to fail because God is on the side of the true Muslim, which is why Abu Bakr was successful.⁹⁰

DAESH

Daesh embraced Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's innovative approach to al-Qaedaism by developing a simplified theological, messianic message that was theologically light but highly emotive, eschatological and apocalyptic drawing and expanding on Azzam's hagiographical narrative that led to a genre of martyrdom that seems to appeal to many young men and women.⁹¹ This is expounded upon by Daesh's very effective propaganda campaign.

What added to Daesh's initial success was that it had vast material resources that came from controlling territory with oil fields and from engaging in kidnappings for ransom, extortion and looting. It was therefore unsurprising that soon after Daesh captured Mosul, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appeared in the Great Mosque of al-Nuri to announce not only the establishment of the caliphate (Islamic State) but also that he is the new Caliph, stating 'If you see me on the right path, help me. If you see me on the wrong path, advise me and halt me. And obey me as far as I obey God', which is something that the first Caliph, Abu Bakr, allegedly said.⁹²

The third pillar in Daesh's success is its media campaign, which was headed by Abu Amr al-Shami, the commander of Daesh in Aleppo. Daesh has created a media council through which it controls:

an army of writers, bloggers and researchers who monitor global media, in particular, social media. Most of these helpers are anonymous and are widely spread, with many in the Gulf and North Africa. These bloggers tweet links to videos, generally with high production values, which are then further distributed.⁹³

Daesh's media army has developed a unique brand that essentially 'offers an alternate way of living' consisting of six different narrative elements: brutality, mercy, victimhood, war, belonging and utopianism.⁹⁴ Umm Khalid al-Finlandiyah, a Finnish woman who converted to Islam, captured all those sentiments in a 2016 essay in which she recounted her conversion and progress towards adopting the Daesh Islamic interpretation. She noted that Christianity didn't make sense to her, whereas Islam did, but what pushed her over the edge was the arrest of her husband on terrorism charges. She emphasised how unjust this was, how her house was raided, and so on. However, she said, 'it was probably the best thing that happened to me because it opened my eyes to the importance of *hijrah*, but the whole ordeal made things difficult.' She also wrote:

I can't even describe the feeling of when you finally cross that border and enter the lands of the Caliphate. It is such a blessing from Allah to be able to live under the Caliphate. There are so many people who made several attempts to come but just haven't been able to make it yet. Of course, when you come to the Caliphate, after sacrificing everything for the sake of Allah, you'll continue to be tested. You're going to see hardships and trials, but every day you're thankful to Allah for allowing you to perform *hijrah* and to live under the Shari'ah. Life in the Islamic State is such a blessing. You face difficulties and hardship, you're not used to the food or the change of life, you may not know the local language, you hear bombings and the children may get scared, but none of that takes away from the gratitude you have towards Allah for allowing you to be here.⁹⁵

A cosmic battle

Salafi-jihadis assert that the West is engaged in a total war against Islam. They maintain that the West, with the US as the leader, is seeking to weaken the religious identity of Muslims by encouraging Muslims to embrace Western values, behaviours, values and ideas that lead them astray, causing them to lose their humanity and salvation.⁹⁶ This is why, for them, the conflict with the West is cosmic and salvific.

Abu Ayyub al-Masri, Zarqawi's successor, steered the movement towards a more apocalyptic stance, using end-of-time language and imagery that emphasise a cosmic battle in which only the chosen will be saved. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had been a member of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, but differences with bin Laden, mainly over Zarqawi's bloodlettings, led to a schism between him and AQ. Al-Baghdadi took on al-Masri's apocalyptic messaging, ideas and language. This is why Daesh named its online magazine, *Dabiq*: the name refers to a town in northern Syria that was the location of a famed battle between the Ottoman Empire and the Mamluk Sultanate in 1516. Daesh sees Dabiq as the location of the final battle between true believers and infidels that will usher in the apocalypse. Daesh supporters tend to refer to a hadith in which the Mohammed said that 'the last hour will not come' until the Muslims defeat the Romans, whom which contemporaries equate with 'crusaders' and non-believers at either Dabiq (in Syria) or al-Amaq (in Turkey). Once those battles are won, the Muslims can then conquer Constantinople. Zarqawi allegedly said, 'The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify ... until it burns the Crusader armies in Dabiq.'⁹⁷

The outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011 gave al-Baghdadi an opportunity to pursue his agenda of territorial expansion, and his cadre crossed the border to support those resisting the Assad regime; however, it also fed the apocalyptic character of Daesh. In other words, Daesh concatenated events and facts for its salvific message of an end-of-day battle that resonated with many (in some ways Daesh's success is reminiscent of the Taliban's success in the early 1990s, when Mullah Omar led a rag-tagged, poorly disciplined and trained religious students (talibs)). By 2014, Daesh, just like the Taliban and Afghanistan, came to control vast territories in eastern Syria and in northern Iraq. Conquering Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, was a game changer as it netted Daesh a large cache of weapons and cash, enabling it to claim that the prophecy is slowly taking shape.⁹⁸

Daesh's narrative, which is structured and is disseminated through various online sources, targets alienated, aggressive and socially and politically alienated individuals (primarily young men) who are unlikely to find meaningful employment, who have poor mechanisms for coping with the pressures of the 21st century, and who are angry. They are also likely to find solace and comfort online, as on the internet they're more likely to find explanations for why they're unsuccessful, discriminated against and so on, as well as a cadre of people who share their frustrations and will give them the tools to take action. The key to this narrative is to portray the world as being divided into two camps: the believers in *Dar al-Islam* and the non-believers in *Dar al-Harb*.⁹⁹ By using more imprecise terms, Daesh justifies its butchery of Muslims, claiming that it had to take such measures because those Muslims are *kufr* (disbelievers). In the words of al-Baghdadi:

[T]he world today has been divided into two camps and two trenches, with no third camp present: The camp of Islam and faith, and the camp of kufr (disbelief) and hypocrisy—the camp of the Muslims and the mujahidin everywhere, and the camp of the jews [*sic*], the crusaders, their allies, and with them the rest of the nations and religions of kufr, all being led by America and Russia, and being mobilized by the jews [*sic*].¹⁰⁰

In building its messaging strategy, Daesh cast its net globally, using emotive and iconoclastic language, as opposed to the merely religious, as the aim was to evoke a 'sense of emotional and moral outrage' at what was occurring to Sunni Muslims in Iraq and later in Syria.¹⁰¹ Syawaluddin Pakpahan is a case in point. Pakpahan, an Indonesian who had walked into a police station in northern Sumatra with the intention of killing a police officer, testified in his trial that his radicalisation occurred not by listening to clerics but by watching the news, which inspired him to travel to Syria in 2013.¹⁰²

Moreover, in its rhetoric and action, Daesh presents itself as engaging in an iconoclastic cultural war aimed at destroying iconic symbols. This is why Abu Rumaysah al-Britani not only argues for the destruction of capitalism as an abusive system that cripples developing countries but also that when Daesh ‘descend on the streets of London, Paris and Washington ... not only will we spill your blood, but we will also demolish your statutes, erase your history and, most painfully convert your children who will then go on to champion our name and curse their forefathers.’¹⁰³

Over time, as travel to the caliphate became difficult and as states adopted a swathe of legislation prohibiting and interdicting such travel, Daesh doubled down on its online presence. Its aim was to inspire more homegrown activism, which culminated in the San Bernardino attack, the Paris nightclub bombing, the Brussels Airport bombing, the Orlando shooting and so on. The common denominator was that the perpetrators were inspired by Daesh to commit their attacks.¹⁰⁴

Linked to the emotive language is the fact that Zarqawi and later on Daesh gave their male recruits a free hand in what they could do in and around the battle zone, as well as encouraging them to be as violent as possible.¹⁰⁵ Simply put, Zarqawi and al-Baghdadi recognised that emotional anger without freedom of action is insufficient, which is why they encouraged young men to travel to Iraq and later to Syria under Daesh, deeming it legitimate to harm, abuse, exploit and violate those deemed not to be Muslims.

A post-caliphate reorientation

The loss of the caliphate has posed several challenges for Daesh. First, the group has to explain why it has lost its territory; second, it has to reorient itself from being a group that’s territorially based to one that needs to operate in a more confined physical space as it continues to battle the Assad regime and the Iraqi Government.

With the loss of territory and the fact that Turkey has made it exceptionally hard for people to cross over into Syria, Daesh is reorienting itself along both lines. First, it dismisses the territorial losses as irrelevant to the bigger goal of defeating the West.¹⁰⁶ Free of its territorial link, which been a pull factor for thousands of men, Daesh is adopting attrition tactics, with the goal being to continue to fight in order to tire the enemy, which is what AQ has been doing for over a decade now. This is, after all, a cosmic, millennial war—and it’s also what its predecessor, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, did between 2009 and 2013 when US and Iraqi forces had either killed or arrested 32 of its 42 leaders. The group reverted to a campaign of violence that included a policy of targeted assassinations of tribal leaders who cooperated with the Iraqi Government. An integral part of its war of attrition (*nikaya*) was the order by Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s immediate successor, that the group’s remaining fighters shift their training to focus on using improvised explosive devices so as to cause as much damage, violence and terror as possible. The campaign left more than 1,300 Iraqi leaders dead.¹⁰⁷

That had the effect of highlighting to many Sunni Iraqis that their government lacked the capabilities to protect them (what further alienated Sunni Iraqis was their perception that their government was Shia-led). Accordingly, what Daesh is doing is moving into spaces where it can exploit an aggrieved population by offering a salvific explanation for people’s suffering, an outlet for their anger and a program of action, based on attrition, aimed at depleting the enemy’s resources and encouraging it to adopt more oppressive tactics—which feeds the al-Qaedaist narrative that salvation from oppression, misery and poverty will occur only with victory over the enemy. Second, Daesh is devoting more time, money and effort to its virtual capabilities, with the aim being to inspire its followers to commit acts of violence across the world. In establishing its virtual footprint, Daesh is relying on the *munasirun*—‘online supporters-cum-volunteer media operatives’ who aren’t officially part of Daesh.¹⁰⁸

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The 11 September 2001 attacks initiated the ‘Global War on Terror’, which has become one of the longest military campaigns in modern history and certainly the most expensive. The international community has shown a determination to defeat AQ and its derivatives. However, the decapitation and military campaign has had limited successes, as the removal of leaders and ideologues hasn’t stemmed the tide. It’s estimated that Daesh has lost around 60,000 fighters, and most of the AQ leadership has been eliminated, and yet threat levels in many countries remain high, and both AQ and Daesh appear to be making inroads into Central Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and even Latin America and the Caribbean.

As AQ and Daesh transform, there’s a need for a recognition that hard power has limited value and efficacy. First, because al-Qaedaism exploits grievances, encourages social divisions through overreaction and unrealistic demands, and provides a program of action, policymakers must become more conscious that their actions and words will become tools used in the radicalisation process. Second, we need to recognise that AQ and Daesh have identified a large group of people who are in their teens and twenties and are presenting them with an ideology that explains to them why they aren’t benefiting from globalisation or why they’re experiencing discrimination and hardship. Ultimately, what al-Qaedaism offers is a binary choice: join us, the enlightened, and be willing to sacrifice everything, and in return we shall give you a purpose (including retribution and salvation); or oppose us and die. Such a message, agenda and ideology raise serious doubts about the efficacy of counter-messaging campaigns—a point made by Professor Peter Neumann, who has pointed out that ‘there isn’t one counter narrative and there isn’t one counter narrator.’ He added:

Even if we found the perfect message, the perfect messenger—even if we managed to produce the perfect video, it would still be a drop in the ocean. There still wouldn’t be enough oomph ... To get your message through, you need to be loud, you need volume and you can’t be on your own.¹⁰⁹

Accordingly, if we are to challenge al-Qaedaism, we must remove many of the conditions that fuel the narrative, which means properly and honestly addressing allegations of moral relativism and expanding our investment in people and development, primarily in spaces where human insecurity is pervasive. This is because, if we won’t the *Salafi-jihadis* would.

We need to recognise that al-Qaedaism provides a coping mechanism because it presents the world and issues through a simplified binary lens of ‘them’ and ‘us’, ‘good’ and ‘bad’, the exploited and the exploiter. Simply, we need to come up with better ideas if we are to win the ideological war.

NOTES

- 1 Reportedly, of the 4,957 foreign fighters arrested in Turkey, Russia tops the list with 804. Cindy Wockner, 'Indonesia in number two on worldwide list of foreign Islamic State jihadists arrested in Turkey', *News.com.au*, 14 July 2017, [online](#); Dawn Murphy, 'China's approach to international terrorism', Peace Brief no. 235, US Institute of Peace, September 2017, [online](#); Oved Lobel, 'Islamic State and low-tech terrorism in Russia', *The New Arab*, 5 September, 2017, [online](#).
- 2 David D Kirkpatrick, Rick Gladstone, 'ISIS chief emerges, urging "volcanoes of jihad"', *The New York Times*, 13 November 2014, [online](#).
- 3 Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, 'Bin Laden's "war of a thousand cuts" will live on', *The Atlantic*, 3 May 2011, [online](#).
- 4 Neta C Crawford, 'United States budgetary costs of post-9/11 wars through FY2018: a summary of the \$5.6 trillion in costs for the US wars in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and post-9/11 veterans care and homeland security', *Cost of Wars*, Watson Institute, Brown University, November 2017, [online](#).
- 5 See, for example, Barak Mendelsohn, *The al-Qaeda franchise: the expansion of al-Qaeda and its consequences*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2016; Marc Sageman, *Understanding terror networks*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2004; Marc Sageman, *Leaderless jihad*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2008; Shaul Mishal, Maoz Rosenthal, 'Al Qaeda as a dune organization: toward a typology of Islamic terrorist organizations', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 2005, 28(4):275–293, [online](#).
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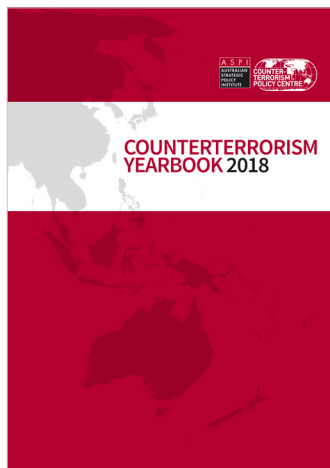
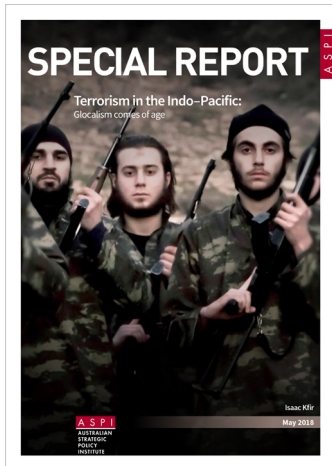
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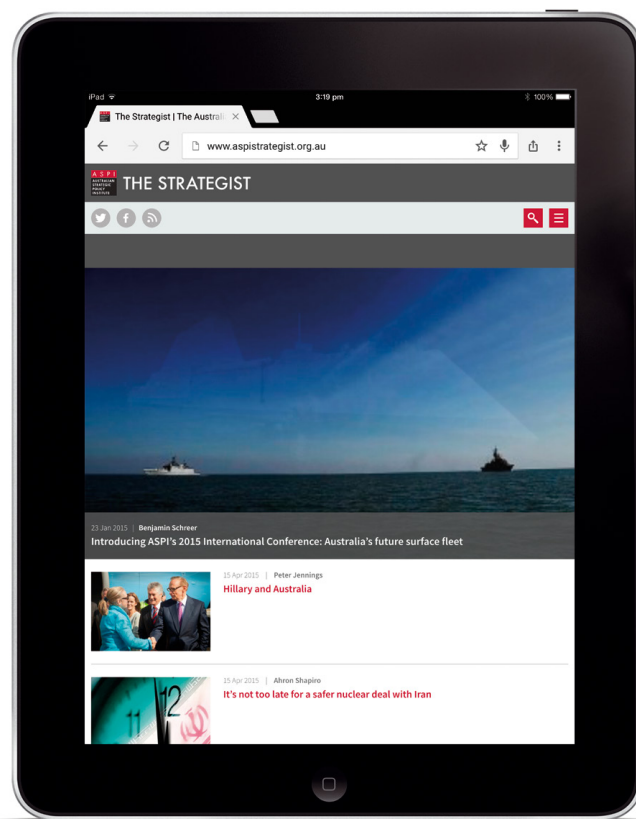


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