

The Future Leadership of the Global Jihadist Movement

Jason Burke, *The Observer*

Introduction

When looking at extremist movements such as 'global jihadism', 'leadership' is naturally a key focus of research and analysis for intelligence professionals, for academics and for journalists, specialists or otherwise. 'Leadership' or rather 'the leadership' as in the title of this paper is almost always taken to refer to the collective senior ranks of a given organisation. This serves a number of purposes: providing academics with a useful analytic tool allowing often diffuse associative rather than organisational structures to be condensed into something clear and cogent; allowing resources available to intelligence agencies, whether they be human or technological intelligence assets or armed drones, to be efficiently used against specific 'high-value' targets; giving journalists the chance to deploy an easily communicated well-worn conventional narrative comprising discovery of a new threat incarnated in a particular individual, a description of the terrifying potential consequences of failing to eliminate this new character, the exciting description of the 'hunt for X', the vivid denouement involving the capture or death of X and finally the analysis of how the elimination of X may have some short-term effects but in the long term will achieve little. Recent examples of this would be the deaths of both Baitullah Mehsud in Pakistan and Nooruddin Top in Indonesia.¹ However there is a second understanding of the word 'leadership': the act of being a leader, what it means to be a leader, what it means to influence, to inspire, to command, to instigate, to develop, to initiate, to conceive, to communicate, to choose subordinates and to execute. Though in general conversation it is more often than not this second definition which is understood by 'leadership' in the world of analysis of 'al-Qaeda' and related groups, cells, affiliates etc it is usually the former.

This paper aims to suggest some ideas, as departure points for further discussion, about the evolution both of 'the leadership' and 'leadership' of the global jihadist movement in the classic sense and in the sense just outlined.

'Leadership' at all levels

'Leadership' is present at all levels not just among those well known figures on the FBI most wanted list or its various counterparts around the globe. Without plunging into the familiar and complex debate pitting Hoffmannists vs Sagemanists, 'led' vs 'leaderless' Jihad, 'top down' vs 'bottom up' models of activism, we should nonetheless stress that leadership matters as much in a small group of extremists such as those uncovered almost every month across much of the Islamic world, in Europe or the US as it does at the top levels of major organisations such as al-Qaeda itself, Pakistani militant groups or the various groupings that make up the Taliban. To focus on the UK for a moment, Omar Khayyam who pulled together the Ammonium Nitrate plot of 2004, Mohammed

¹ Declan Walsh, 'With Baitullah Mehsud dead, what now for Pakistan's militant groups?', *The Guardian*, 7 July 2009,

Sadiq Khan who led the 7/7 bombers in a very real sense and Rashid Rauf, connected to a number of plots in recent years, have all showed very real 'leadership' qualities. In my own interviews with low-level militants, captured or otherwise, over recent years in Afghanistan and Pakistan, it is absolutely and immediately clear who is a 'leader' within a group and who is not. There are 'leaders' at all levels of matrix which is the Global Jihadist Movement.

A second point is that, as the physical composition of the 'leadership' evolves as individuals are killed, captured, are promoted, argue with their superiors or colleagues and so on, so, in this dynamic environment, does 'leadership' understood as the task, role and qualities of those leaders also evolve. Different environments make different demands of leaders and mean that individuals with different qualities emerge. Starting with those with the highest profile, it was Osama bin Laden's supreme talent as a propagandist as well as his image as a wealthy man who had renounced everything for the cause which helped ensure his place among the senior leadership of the global jihadi movement in the 1990s. Though devoid of any personal magnetism, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's combination of extreme brutality and understanding of the power of the spectacle was exactly what was required in the chaotic environment of post-invasion Iraq and ensured his fleeting primacy from 2004 to his death in 2006. Currently Abu Yahya al-Libi enjoys the considerable advantage of being relatively young and thus in a position to appeal to a new generation of potential recruits.² He may be able to convert his current notoriety into genuine influence. It is too early to tell. Nooruddin Top was said to have a genuine 'quiet' charisma which drew people to him and ensured, crucially for a man continually on the run, that he had a network of trustworthy supporters who were resistant to penetration. He was convincing and capable.³ In the tough operating environment of the Sahel,⁴ Mokhtar Belmokhtar has shown a pragmatism, ideological flexibility and extreme tactical sense in prioritising the flow of resources to his followers on which his continued survival depends.

'Leadership' qualities thus evolve and in so doing determine who are the leaders of tomorrow. An understanding of what leadership elements will work best in any given environment would thus be a useful predictor of who might be in line to become senior commanders. To predict which leadership qualities will be most effective in future environments would be even more useful though naturally very difficult.

One point worth underlining is that the different qualities may be necessary at a lower level than at a senior level. Indeed, there are often more demands made on the more junior leaders than on their theoretical superiors. A recent court case in Indonesia exposed the process of radicalisation of a fairly amateurish cell known as the Palembang gang. This depended to a very great degree on the continued leadership of a Singaporean, Fajar Taslim, described as a 'large, good-humoured, bushy-bearded man of unlimited self-confidence', an Afghan veteran who demonstrated an astonishing talent for goading less motivated fellow veterans into action all while enthusing novice militants who kept having second thoughts.⁵ Keeping potentially recalcitrant members of a cell inline is a key task for most low level leaders though not necessarily for their more high-profile, higher placed comrades in arms who can largely take the motivation of

² Jarrel Brachman, 'The Next Osama,' *Foreign Policy*, 10 Sept 2009; Michael Moss and Squad Mekhennet, 'Rising Leader for Next Phase of Al Qaeda's War', April 4, 2008

³ According to at least two senior Indonesian investigators anyway.

⁴ Mokhtar Belmokhtar, 'The Algerian Jihad's Southern Amir,' *Terrorism Monitor* Volume: 7 Issue: 12 May 8, 2009,

⁵ International Crisis Group, *Indonesia: Radicalisation of the 'Palembang Group'*, May 2009. Author interview with Sirhoy Jones.

their associates for granted. Omar Khayyam was forced to threaten one member of the Operation Crevice cell with sentiments familiar to many organized criminals: 'If we go down, you'll be going down with us. You're in too deep.'⁶

Current challenges for leaders of the global jihadist movement

So what are the current challenges facing current or potential jihadi leaders? These naturally vary according to role, seniority and location though many are shared. The future leadership of the global jihadi movement will in part be determined by how those challenges are met.

For the 'al-Qaeda hardcore leadership', largely located in the Pakistani FATA, there is one very obvious challenge: staying alive. Recent testimony from detained Europeans as well as the American convert Bryant Neal Vinas reveals the degree to which those currently sheltering in the tribal areas are worried by the constant menace posed by missile strikes from unmanned drones.⁷ The future evolution of the al-Qaeda leadership will in part simply be the result of who survives the currently relatively high attrition rate. It seems logical that those who avoid the drone attacks and thus constitute the hardcore central leadership elements in the future are likely to be those whose strengths lie in survival rather than, for example, strategic thought. They are also likely to be those who escape the focus of security agencies, perhaps by keeping a lower profile, perhaps by successfully hiding their true role and significance within a given organisation.

The second currently element posing a challenge to the leadership is operational. Clearly for those in the isolated valleys or hill villages of the FATA, communications are key. Successful communicators have always done well in al-Qaeda and successful communication is essential to its survival as an organisation and as a project. In 2007 a message from bin Laden was simultaneously uploaded in a coordinated operation on several hundred servers.⁸ The contrast with the relatively haphazard distribution of recent communications is sharp. In June, a bin Laden video was distributed 'the old way', in a physical copy delivered by courier to the al-Jazeera office in Islamabad. Moreover, the absence of references to recent events suggested the tape had been recorded several weeks previously.

One possible development in the future might be the development of regional or local communication nodes – decentralised agencies of al-Qaeda devoted to propaganda. This has already been seen at various moments in al-Qaeda's history and in various forms, often with self-starting individuals setting up as communication relay points. An example would be the activities of Younes Tsouli or Irhabi007 in the UK, the man who facilitated the downloading half a million times within the first twenty-four hours of its debut of the now-infamous video of Nicholas Berg's beheading.⁹

Another critical challenge facing communicators and strategists amid the al-Qaeda leadership in FATA is strategic: how to maintain credibility without a major attack? It is now over four years since a significant strike and eight years since 9-11. For many aspiring activists, 2001 is a childhood memory. In the fragmented world of global

⁶ Transcripts of Operation Crevice trial.

⁷ Document: Consultation du dossier Hicham Beyayo le 22 juillet 2009.

⁸ Seth Jones, *The graveyard of empires*.

⁹ Author interviews with British investigators. See also: Abigail Cutler, Web of Terror, *The Atlantic*, June 5 2006.

jihadi militancy, where groups compete for scarce resources such as donations and for air-time on al-Jazeera, bin Laden and his immediate entourage run the risk of becoming, for new emerging jihadist activists, not so much the 'godfather' figure with the respect and authority such a role implies but the ageing rock star.

This relates to a second and even greater strategic challenge for jihadi groups in general and for al-Qaeda central in particular: how to deal with the growing rejection of violent jihadi activism across the Islamic world. I do not need to go over the statistics again here – the reader will no doubt have already been through the Pew global attitudes survey published in July this year – but almost all polls point to a phenomenon that was anecdotally evident to anyone travelling and working in the Islamic world as early as 2005: that the jihadists' call to arms had largely fallen on deaf ears.¹⁰ There are complicating elements – such as the Bush/Obama factor – but the decline in popularity of bin Laden specifically and jihadist thought and activism more generally appears intimately linked to the moment when the violence 'came home'. When communities see at first hand what violence means, they tend to turn away from it very quickly. Two good examples of this are Jordan, where in the aftermath of the double hotel bombing perpetrated by al-Zarqawi at the end of 2005, support for jihadi figures and ideas decreases very rapidly and Pakistan where strong levels of support start to drop fast from around 2007 and the start of significant violence within Pakistan itself. This is of course potentially fatal to the entire project of al-Qaeda as conceived back in Peshawar at the end of the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan. It is unclear to what extent the senior leadership have grasped the problem but they are sufficiently concerned to experiment with new ways of engaging with their potential support base, the most notable being al-Zawahiri's distinctly tetchy internet question and answer session of last year. The degree to which questions focussed on the issue of civilian casualties/collateral damage was striking as was al-Zawahiri's difficulty in providing a comprehensive, clear and cogent answer to them.

Such issues are as important – if not more so – for lower level leaders. As stressed above, it is men like Fajar Taslim of the Palembang gang who are in the front line of convincing and motivating potential recruits. This is made much harder if volunteers feel that the community will not approve of their actions. Operationally too, the environment becomes much more difficult as jihadists become more ideologically isolated from populations around them. By one calculation, though only a few dozen were actively involved in the bombings in Istanbul in 2003 around 400 people knew of the plot but said nothing.¹¹ Such silence is clearly much less likely in an environment where such tacit consent is absent.

The future evolution of the leadership of the global jihadi movement will be local

As mentioned above, the environment often defines the leaders as much as vice versa. In the future it is likely that this environment is going to be more and more constrained in terms of size. Other contributors to this workshop are to talk later about the global and the local and the jihadist movement but it appears clear from a brief survey of its current leadership – in both terms of the world – that the local is likely to dominate in coming years. The key issues of strategic communication and operational capability and security for jihadi leaders will therefore play out at local levels. Successful leaders – Abdelmalek Droukdal of al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, Abu Basir Nasir al-Wahishi in the

¹⁰ Pew Global Attitudes, July 2009.

¹¹ Edmund F. McGarrell, Joshua D. Frolich, and Steven Chermak. 'Intelligence led policing as a framework for responding to terrorism,' *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, Vol. 23, No.2, 2007, pp. 142-158.

Yemen - are local men with largely local agendas. If they are not local to start with, such figures have shown an understandable desire to develop the deepest local ties possible in as short a time as possible, often by marriage. There is also a clear effort to appropriate local grievances or historical dynamics in a very direct way - such as a recent AQIM appeal to Algeria's berbers 'our brothers, the free kabylie, the descendants of Tariq bin Ziyadh' to stand against 'the traitorous rulers'.¹² The key for leaders here will be to develop more than organisational links but genuine coincidence of interest and ideas. This is no simple task, particularly after nearly a decade of violent activism. Those who successfully achieve this are significantly more likely to survive. Top, killed recently, was fighting an avowedly internationalist campaign in an environment where his erstwhile comrades of Jemaa Islamiya had rejected local activism against local targets on the basis that the justification, strategic and theological, for such actions no longer exists. His actions were deeply unpopular within Indonesia. Though personal charisma and his connections in the pesantren religious school network and in Jemaa Islamiya helped, it was a matter of time before he was finally apprehended and eliminated.

Top is interesting for a further reason. One possibility, linked to the further delocalisation of the global jihadi movement, is the development not just for the dissemination of propaganda but veritable nodes of a least ad hoc tactical organisation. Investigators looking at the most recent Indonesian bombings, against hotels in Jakarta, are piecing together potential connections from the Yemen through Pakistan - but not al-Qaeda central - to Indonesia. Should we perhaps be thinking about new international networks emerging which perhaps might have nothing more than a single attack as a goal and that do not have any connection at all with the al-Qaeda central leadership. The latter's role has often largely been coordinating resources, strategic direction and motivating activists. If the hardcore al-Qaeda leadership were no longer in a position to fulfil those roles to the same extent what alternatives will emerge? Is the activism of someone like Khaled Sheikh Mohammed in the early 1990s a potential model? Currently FATA provides an almost unique safe haven for militants. But that may not last forever. Indeed as the drone strikes and the reported activities of key activists have shown the relative advantages of the tribal zones have been significantly degraded in recent months. It is worth at least considering what the implications might be for the global jihadist movement's leaders and leadership if or when FATA genuinely becomes insecure for international jihadists?

The answer is, I would suggest, to be found in the dynamic already underway. A cycle of simultaneous globalisation and centralisation within the global Jihadist movement appears to be ending with a dynamic of localisation and decentralisation becoming more dominant.

But to go further would be to pre-empt the contributions of other better qualified participants in this workshop.

¹² Andrew Mack, 'Al-Qaeda Operations in Kabylie Mountains Alienating Algeria's Berbers', Jamestown Terrorism Focus Volume: 5 Issue: 16, April 23, 2008,