

# The Future Leadership of the Global Jihadist Movement

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More than anything, al-Qaeda is an idea. The notion that Osama bin Laden's terror network is an organisation with a centralised command and control structure and formal membership quickly unravelled in the years following 9/11. Instead, what emerged was a picture of a patchy and fluid terrorist network, with actors united through their belief in an overriding ideological vision – the revival of Islam as a political force. The ability of otherwise disparate Islamist groups to align themselves with that cause and aggregate their grievances through the al-Qaeda franchise is one of the factors that has afforded the movement an unusually high degree of institutional resilience.

Yet, despite the nebulous composition of al-Qaeda there is still a small nucleus of key leaders in the global jihadist movement that matter. Their real significance derives not from the strategic or tactical advice they lend the movement – but from the ideas they disseminate through it. Beyond that, al-Qaeda is not sentimental about its leadership. After all, following the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan the leader of the Arab mujahideen, Abdullah Azzam, was assassinated in Peshawar in 1989. He was the forerunner to bin Laden and the first to encourage the idea of a global jihadist campaign waged by religiously-inspired volunteers. Azzam's death was a blow to his followers, but the group of Arab fighters who had followed him through the Khyber Pass and into Afghanistan were far from reticent. Indeed, they quickly regrouped and carried on without him. This trait is not limited to al-Qaeda. Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb ut Tahrir have also managed to overcome the loss of their charismatic leaders with minimal fallout. These seamless transitions are borne out of the ideological nature of those organisations. Members are united only by the belief that they are serving Allah – an imperative to which everyone, including leaders, is subordinated. Where jihadist leaders do matter is in their ability to shape and direct the theological framework that binds their members.

In this respect, al-Qaeda is at a crossroad. In recent months its ideological framework has been unpicked by a number of its former leaders prompting some observers to conclude that bin Laden's network might even be on the verge of collapse. The most significant denunciation of al-Qaeda's ideology has come from Sayyed Imam Al-Sharif – better known as Dr Fadl. In November 2007 he rocked the jihadist movement by issuing a series of letters from his jail cell in Egypt which re-evaluated the entire strategic and tactical basis of jihad. Fadl's critique was invested with huge significance because he had been the first to theorise and codify the rules of jihad, ultimately providing the theological basis for al-Qaeda's campaign against the West.

Fadl has not been alone in criticising the current modus operandi of al-Qaeda. Other clerics including Salman al-Awdah, a once firebrand Saudi preacher who was very close to Osama bin Laden also issued a stinging denunciation of 9/11 on the sixth anniversary of the attack. Yet, the nature of this newly emerging debate within al-Qaeda remains poorly understood. Ultimately, is the criticism levelled against al-Qaeda seeking to cease – or merely control – the jihad? And what are the implications and likely fallout from it? What, if anything, can the West do to shape the course of these events?

Dr Fadl was the first major figure to establish a framework for the jihad through two books. His first, *The Essential Guide for Preparation* (henceforth referred to as 'the Guide') was written in 1988. It begins with the premise that jihad is the natural state of Islam and that Muslims must always be in conflict with nonbelievers. Fadl reasoned they should only ever resort to peace in moments of abject weakness.

However, writing this book in 1988, Fadl's ideas were constrained by the leadership of Abdullah Azzam who was doctrinaire and disciplined in his outlook. Having achieved victory over the Soviet Union he wanted to remain focused on Afghanistan, developing its industry and turning it into a model Islamic State. But Azzam could no longer have things his own way. A massive influx of Egyptian fighters who arrived in Peshawar after Egypt's most prolific terrorist group, al-Jihad, had assassinated President Anwar Sadat meant his authority was now markedly weakened. Dr Fadl and Ayman al-Zawahiri were among the new arrivals. I have previously interviewed some veterans of the Afghan war who told me these Egyptians were 'harsh and relentless. From the moment they arrived, the fanaticism in the Arab camps began to rise'.

The al-Jihad members urged Arab fighters to wage jihad against their own governments in the Middle East, arguing that their deviation from literalist interpretations of Shariah law made them apostates. Instead, of focusing on Afghanistan they wanted to revive a Caliphate in the Arab world which would then destroy Israel and subjugate the West. Azzam disagreed. He did not just want to concentrate on Afghanistan for purely tactical reasons but also believed that Arab rulers, though decadent, were still legitimate. Attacking them was a violation of Shariah law in his view. It was just one of many points of rupture.

From these disagreements a bitter feud erupted about the future of the Jihad. Despite bin Laden's increasing infatuation with the members of al-Jihad - and with Ayman al-Zawahiri in particular - he was loyal to Azzam and would not undermine him, despite Zawahiri's best efforts. Thus, the Guide produced by Fadl was a unique product of the climate in which it was conceived - a climate in which a battle was emerging between doctrinaire and pragmatic jihadist leaders. In many respects the Guide is a continuation of the intellectual tradition Abdullah Azzam outlined in his seminal text, *Join the Caravan*, which implored Muslims to the virtues of jihad. These works focus more on jihad as a conceptual entity, rather than on the minutia of its rules and regulations.

They stress that mujahideen should only fight uniformed soldiers - not ordinary civilians. Of course, the definition of 'civilian' for al-Qaeda can be rather broad and abstract. However, Azzam and Fadl took a more conventional understanding of 'civilians' and did not consequently envisage the kind of indiscriminate nihilism we have seen orchestrated by al-Qaeda and, more significantly, its offshoots in Iraq.

When I interviewed Jalal Abu alrub, a Palestinian-American who helped Abdullah Azzam fundraise for the mujahideen in the 1980s and who fought with him in Afghanistan, he reaffirmed that commitment to not targeting civilians. He even extended this principle to Israel where he condemned Hamas for its strategy of bombing busses and pizzerias. Yet, Abu alrub is no pacifist. He remains a committed jihadist but believes it must be guided by a clear framework of rules and regulations. 'In Afghanistan we fought with honour against the uniformed soldiers of the Soviet Union. We can fight Israeli soldiers with the same honour' he told me. That idea of the 'principled jihad' espoused most vehemently by Azzam died with him in Peshawar.

After Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990 and the Gulf States turned to the West for help, there was no holding back the Egyptian members of al-Jihad. It confirmed their suspicions about the corruption of the Arab regimes and Fadl set to work on a new book: *The Compendium of the Pursuit of Divine Knowledge*, (henceforth referred to as 'the Compendium') which was finally published in 1994.<sup>2</sup> More than a thousand pages long, it rivals only *Mein Kampf* in terms of the sheer destruction it has spawned.

The Compendium reveals a significant departure from the ideas expressed in the Guide. Fadl took the ideas of global jihad further than anyone had previously considered possible -

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<sup>1</sup> Author interview with Jalal Abu alrub

<sup>2</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri renamed it: 'Guide to the Path of Righteousness for Jihad and Belief' and it is sometimes referred to by that name. For the sake of clarity I have used Fadl's title, particularly as he disapproved of Zawahiri's decision to edit his manuscript.

even among those who first launched al-Qaeda in Afghanistan six years earlier. It heaps the customary encomium on jihad as the pinnacle of Islam and apogee of faith. But, significantly, it goes further and begins theorising the limits of that faith, rationalising the killing of Muslims deemed too impious. To achieve this Fadl defined Islam in the narrowest of terms and painted a picture of apostates – and the punishment they deserved – in broad brush strokes. This was necessary to validate Zawahiri's desire to attack Arab governments, a process in which Muslims would inevitably die. Now, Fadl decreed that all Arab rulers, those who obeyed them, and those who participated in democratic elections were apostates. 'The infidel's rule, his prayers, and the prayers of those who pray behind him are invalid,' Fadl argued. More worryingly, he reasoned: 'His blood may be shed legally by true Muslims'.<sup>3</sup> This also applied to Muslims who are employed by the government, the police, and the courts, and anyone who chose peaceful political activism instead of violent jihad. Finally, Fadl reasoned that anyone who disagreed with his ideas was rejecting certain truth. They were also heretics deserving of death. He also made the case for targeting non-Muslim civilians, allowing al-Qaeda to enter an operational phase that was virtually unhindered by any meaningful constraints. The Compendium was therefore more concerned with the strategic development of the global jihad than it was with its tactical evolution.

Zawahiri was naturally ecstatic with the completed Compendium, hailing it as a 'victory from God'.<sup>4</sup> It provided the springboard al-Qaeda needed to move into the next phase of its activity. Bin Laden immediately seized the initiative by issuing his now infamous fatwa: 'Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places' in 1996.<sup>5</sup>

The 1998 twin embassy bombings in East Africa were the earliest physical manifestation of the doctrine outlined in the Compendium, and was a natural outgrowth of bin Laden's 1996 fatwa. The attack was significant for three reasons. Firstly, this was the first time al-Qaeda targeted a non-military western symbol in the Muslim world. Prior to that the group had carried out smaller bombings in Riyadh, but these remained directed against very specific military installations housing American military personnel. Secondly, the twin embassy bombings reveal just how willing al-Qaeda had become to kill fellow Muslims in the pursuit of taking non-Muslim lives and harming Western interests in the Muslim world.<sup>6</sup> Thirdly, al-Qaeda realised that targeting American interests in this way necessitated a response. Suddenly, America was taking notice of them. President Clinton was stirred into action and ordered a series of cruise missile attacks against suspected targets in Sudan and Afghanistan. Osama bin Laden and Ayman Zawahiri had finally achieved what they craved – a direct confrontation with the United States. It was a deadly forerunner of what was to come.

The publication of the Compendium therefore heralded a watershed moment in the development of modern Sunni terrorism. Prior to its release, the only real instance of an ideologically inspired anti-western attack in the Muslim world was the 1983 bombing of the American embassy in Beirut. Significantly, its perpetrators were Hezbollah – a Shia movement. Now, for the first time, Fadl placed Sunni terrorists on an equal theological footing to their much loathed Shia counterparts.

### Debate and dissent: the al-Qaeda letters

Yet, just over 18 months ago Dr Fadl published a series of letters declaring an apparent volte-face of the opinions he had previously expressed in both the Guide and Compendium. These letters are collectively known as *Rationalizing Jihad in Egypt and the World*.<sup>7</sup> The Rationalising letters attempt to reconcile Fadl's already well established views with a range of sweeping modifications. In a series of long, arcane and often verbose treatises Fadl offers

<sup>3</sup> Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, *The Compendium of the Pursuit of Divine Knowledge*

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Wright, *The Rebellion Within: An Al Qaeda mastermind questions terrorism*, *The New Yorker*, June 2, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> It was reissued in 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Of the combined total of 223 deaths only 12 were from the intended target: America.

<sup>7</sup> The author is in receipt of all these letters.

a thorough reassessment of the strategic and tactical view outlined in his previous works – recognising that the two are inextricably intertwined.

Revising the rules of engagement for legitimate jihad Fadl declares most of al-Qaeda's modern tactics as impermissible, thereby restricting both the nature and form of jihad as it is currently understood. He stresses rules, regulations and permissions – all of which he insists al-Qaeda has failed to acknowledge in recent times; an aberration of the discipline Azzam implored them to display against the Soviets.

Whereas most members of al-Qaeda ignore the reality of the world around them and rely instead on providential assurances of victory for their motivation, Fadl is more attuned to the practical challenges facing them. Because sporadic terrorist attacks and a lengthy insurgency in Iraq failed to defeat American and allied power, often at the expense of many Muslim lives, Fadl argues it is permitted to suspend the jihad with the aim of preserving the lives of Muslim civilians. 'God permitted peace treaties and cease-fires with the infidels, either in exchange for money or without it- all of this in order to protect the Muslims, in contrast with those who push them into peril', he writes.<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere he asks: 'What good is it if you destroy one of your enemy's buildings, and he destroys one of your countries? What good is it if you kill one of his people, and he kills a thousand of yours?'<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps most dramatic was Fadl's declaration that jihad against Muslim rulers is illegitimate. Whereas he previously argued that their failure to implement a strict and puritanical version of Shariah law automatically made them apostates (and therefore legitimate targets for attack), he now insists the rulers must be explicit non-believers. Even then, they should only be fought if there is a high chance of success. Otherwise, Fadl contends it is better to leave them in place.

This cursory examination of Fadl's letters reveals the growing sensitivity of al-Qaeda's once chief ideologue to the interplay between theory and practice. A premium is placed on preserving life (particularly of Muslims) and war is only to be waged when it can be won. Jihad, in Fadl's mind, is no longer purely for its own sake.

The question remains: is Fadl seeking to end the jihad or merely regulate it? Certainly, the letters do not appear to reject the notion of jihad as a necessary component of faith. Instead, Fadl seems motivated by more practical concerns: the bloodshed of fellow Muslims, the sectarian fratricide in Iraq, and the response al-Qaeda activity inevitably provokes (i.e. the deaths of yet more Muslims at the hands of a more powerful foe – the West).

Fadl's letters are therefore significant, but even respected commentators on al-Qaeda have sometimes been tempted to see them as going further than they actually do. Lawrence Wright described them as having 'undermined the entire intellectual framework of jihadist warfare'.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank have described the letters as marking the 'unravelling' of al-Qaeda and the global jihadist infrastructure that it inspired.<sup>11</sup> Such triumphalism is not borne of the facts.

The Rationalising letters are largely a return to first principles. Therefore Fadl holds that 'terrorising the enemy is a legitimate duty' but only when it follows a series of scrupulous rules.<sup>12</sup> As such, he continues to affirm support for the jihad in Afghanistan which he hopes 'will lead to the creation of an Islamic state with the triumph of the Taliban'.<sup>13</sup> Similar support is forthcoming for Palestinian terrorist groups and for the Iraqi insurgency – but,

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Wright, The Rebellion Within: An Al Qaeda mastermind questions terrorism, *The New Yorker*, June 2, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, The Unravelling: The jihadist revolt against bin Laden, *The New Republic*, June 11, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, *Rationalizing Jihad in Egypt and the World*

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

notably, only in instances where it has concerned itself with fighting American and allied forces. He is also critical of al-Qaeda inspired terrorist attacks in London, Spain and America, regarding them as 'unlawful'.<sup>14</sup>

A Saudi cleric, Salman al-Awdah, has similarly issued an open letter to 'Brother Osama' in September 2007 chastising al-Qaeda for the way it has conducted itself.<sup>15</sup> Al-Awdah was previously so close to bin Laden that when he issued the 1996 fatwa declaring jihad against America it was dedicated to al-Awdah (along with another Saudi cleric). Much like Dr Fadl, Awdah reveals an acute awareness of the perceived harm terrorism has brought on Muslim societies. 'Brother Osama, what is to be gained from the destruction of entire nations - which is what we are witnessing in Afghanistan and Iraq - seeing them torn with plague and famine? What is to be gained from undermining their stability and every hope of a normal life?' he asks.<sup>16</sup> 'The nightmare of civil war which now reigns supreme in Afghanistan and Iraq brings no joy to the Muslims'.<sup>17</sup>

Crucially, neither al-Awdah nor Dr Fadl oppose bin Laden because he is a butcher. Rather, their concern is with his ignorance and apparent flouting of the rules of jihad. This emphasis on legalese explains away the murder of Israelis and perpetuates the notion of an endless war against non-believers when conducted through a sanctioned framework. Therefore 9/11 and 7/7 are condemned not because they are monstrous - but because they are mistaken. The French academic Gilles Kepel explains that such scholars are merely 'cold-blooded ulema' grounded in the body of dogma.<sup>18</sup> Put simply: they are old fashioned fundamentalists.

## Conclusion

The underlying currents of this history offer us a great deal of insight about the future leadership of the global jihadist movement. While both al-Awdah and Dr Fadl reposition themselves somewhere along the Islamist spectrum, it is the actions of the former that offer some clue about where these revisions are headed. Fadl is currently imprisoned and is incapable of engaging in political activity, but in recent years al-Awdah has been aligning himself ever closer to Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the radical Qatar-based cleric and spiritual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood. Over the last eighteen months al-Awdah has worked on a number of collaborative projects with Qaradawi and joined a number of his international fatwa committees.

Herein lies the point. The current wave of recantations within al-Qaeda essentially amounts to an attempt by the Muslim Brotherhood to reassert control over the conceptual framework of jihad. After all, the antecedents of every global jihadist movement currently operating stems from them. They spawned the Egyptian jihad groups whose members later comprised the overwhelming majority of Arab fighters who joined Abdullah Azzam in Afghanistan. Indeed, Azzam was himself a one-time member of the Brotherhood. As all these former graduates and defectors of the movement gathered in Afghanistan, intoxicated by a seemingly impossible victory they took on and developed the ideas of jihad beyond anything the Brotherhood had originally thought possible. What followed has harmed them greatly.

The Brotherhood favour a more slow moving, gradual process of Islamising the public space through political engagement - a process sometimes referred to as 'political jihad'. Yet, al-Qaeda's high profile and gruesome tactics have hurt the entire Islamist cause by turning public opinion sharply against it. As such, events like 9/11 and 7/7 have set back the Brotherhood's overall cause immeasurably, giving them as much of a vested interest in

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Sheikh Salman bin Fahd al-Oadah, *A Ramadan Letter to Osama bin Laden*

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Gilles Kepel, *Beyond Terror and Martyrdom: The Future of the Middle East* (Harvard, 2008)

curtailing the bloodlust of al-Qaeda as any western government – though, of course, for very different reasons.

There is a wider point to consider here too. The Brotherhood is not just motivated to control the jihad solely for pragmatic reasons, but also because it places a premium on ending Western military campaigns in the Middle East and beyond –prompting some jihadists to rethink their methods. This underscores the need for ongoing ‘hard power’ measures which can help bring terrorism to an end by inspiring individuals to change. It is a method with already proven benefits in the case of Northern Irish and Basque terrorism.

Ultimately, what appears to be taking place at the moment is an intellectual struggle for the future of jihad – and the Islamist project to which it relates – between the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda, rather than a battle between radicals and reformers.