

Al-Qaeda's Media Strategies

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We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. . . . [W]e are in a media battle for the hearts and minds of our umma.

—Ayman al-Zawahiri, July 2005

THE CENTRALITY of the Arab mass media to Al-Qaeda's political strategy has long been evident. From spectacular terror attacks designed for maximal media exposure, to carefully timed videos from Osama bin Laden and his lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri, to the burgeoning realm of jihadi Internet forums, Al-Qaeda the organization has increasingly become indistinguishable from Al-Qaeda the media phenomenon. But the nature of Al-Qaeda's relationship with the Arab media has been poorly understood, and the wrong policy conclusions too often drawn.

For the United States to have any hope of waging a serious "war of ideas" against jihadism, it must better understand a rapidly changing battlefield—which means grasping the realities of the Arab media environment and its complex relationship with the jihad. Bin Laden and Zawahiri's grand strategy of winning over the Arab "median voter" depends on the mass

media, which creates both great power and unique vulnerabilities. Al-Jazeera and other satellite television stations have unleashed powerful counter-forces and political competitors into a once-vacant arena. Indeed, the migration of the jihad onto the Internet associated with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's rise to prominence directly responds to his dismay with Al-Jazeera's challenge to the jihad.

Al-Qaeda's Media Strategy

EVEN BEFORE 9/11, Al-Qaeda adapted with ruthless efficiency to the rise of satellite television and the Internet, grasping before virtually anyone else the political possibilities inherent in new media technologies. Zawahiri and Bin Laden both recognized the revolutionary significance of these developments, with Bin Laden understanding that "rhetoric and satellite propaganda can be on equal footing with unmanned bombers and cruise-missiles."¹

Al-Qaeda, therefore, invested heavily and creatively in propaganda and media from the start. Media became even more central to its strategy after the loss of its Afghan base, when Al-Qaeda metamorphosed into the more virtual, diffuse organization that Peter Bergen memorably

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¹Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

labeled “Al-Qaeda 2.0.” The global arena of contention, the absence of a physical territory, and an environment constricted by Western and Arab counter-terrorism operations made the media the premier site of its political action.

The media have also become a vital forum for internal arguments about the jihad’s direction. Arguments over doctrine and strategy that might once have been private matters, carried out face to face in secretive hideouts, are now by necessity public. The decentralized, diffuse nature of Al-Qaeda, the growing difficulty of private communications, and the goal of persuading mainstream and jihadi publics alike all force these arguments into the public sphere. Some of these arguments are tactical, as in the disputes broadcast on Al-Jazeera between Zarqawi and his jihadi mentor, Abu Muhammad Maqdesi, about the taking of hostages. Still others debate doctrinal issues, such as the Quranic justification for terror or whether Muslim adversaries of the jihad can be declared non-Muslims.

Al-Qaeda’s ultimate goal is to reinvigorate the Islamic *umma* in confrontation with the West and to direct this mobilized Muslim community in a revolutionary transformation of the international order. This means that it must target not simply the small minority of radicalized jihadists, but the “median voters” of the Arab Muslim public—not themselves necessarily Islamist, but deeply concerned about issues such as the Palestinians and Iraq, disenchanting with corrupt and authoritarian Arab regimes, and thus potentially receptive to anti-American politics. Al-Qaeda’s media strategy is therefore inseparable from its political strategy, as its terrorism and rhetoric alike work toward the common goal of heightening Islamic identity and sharpening the confrontation of that identity with the West. The recent controversy over the Danish cartoons portraying the Prophet Muhammad, while not directed by Al-Qaeda,

brilliantly served its purposes in driving both the Muslim world and the West into its desired “clash of civilizations.”

The Arab Media: Double-Edged Sword

THE ARAB media’s coverage of Bin Laden’s videos and the Iraqi insurgency has led influential American officials to denounce it as an effective collaborator with the jihad. But the jihadists in fact find the Arab media an unreliable ally. Bin Laden himself, in a January 2004 statement, identified the Arab media as a primary source of deviation in the Muslim world: “The media people who belittle religious duties such as jihad and other rituals are atheists and renegades.”

Those who make easy connections between the Arab media and Al-Qaeda often fail to recognize the incredibly rapid, even dizzying, changes in the media landscape. Prior to Al-Jazeera’s launch in late 1996, the domestic Arab media was tightly controlled by states, with much of the transnational media owned by Saudis. For half a decade, Al-Jazeera dominated the media landscape. But by 2003 the Arab media had become intensely competitive. An increasingly fragmented Al-Qaeda now confronts a fragmented media environment, complicating the satellite television side of its media strategy.

Al-Jazeera revolutionized Arab politics with daring news coverage and wide-open, contentious talk shows. Its distinctive narrative voice focused intensively on the Palestinian struggle with Israel, the American “blockade” of Iraq and the myriad failures of the existing Arab regimes. Al-Jazeera highlighted the human suffering of Arabs and Muslims around the world, openly identifying with the Palestinians, Iraqis and Afghans whose conflicts it covered so graphically. Because of its region-wide focus, the United States inevitably featured prominently in this narrative, often in the villain’s role.

Bin Laden's speeches carefully tapped into this "Al-Jazeera narrative", striking the themes of Palestine, Iraq and the corruption of existing regimes because, as Zawahiri frankly explained in his 2001 manifesto, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, "The one slogan that has been well understood by the [Muslim] nation and to which it has been responding for the past fifty years is the call for the jihad against Israel. In addition to this slogan, the nation in this decade is geared against the U.S. presence. It has responded favorably to the call for the jihad against the Americans." Working within the Al-Jazeera narrative empowered Al-Qaeda by giving it direct access to the median Arab voter in ways closed off to past Islamist extremists.

Al-Jazeera's mass Arab audience and critical worldview made it the best way for Bin Laden to reach the Arab world. But the antipathy to American foreign policy so prominent in Al-Jazeera's narrative should not be confused with support for Al-Qaeda's violent strategy or extreme Islamist goals.

Al-Jazeera is hardly a paragon of Islamist advocacy: Many of its leading news presenters and talk-show hosts are beautiful, unveiled women, and many of its popular figures are determinedly iconoclastic. Its leading Islamist figure, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, is a fierce critic of Bin Laden's form of Islamist extremism (and is regularly castigated in jihadi circles as a dangerous, misguided American dupe). Nor can Al-Jazeera's narrative be reduced to a simple anti-Americanism. It shows the carnage in Iraq, but it also shows democratic elections and gives ample voice to those who condemn Al-Qaeda's Mesopotamian strategy. In its fervent, sustained criticism of the Arab status quo and its advocacy of democratic reforms, Al-Jazeera can sometimes sound surprisingly like an American neoconservative organ.

Al-Jazeera's approach to these videos has hardly been one of willing propa-

gandist, and it has changed over time. In June, when Zawahiri released a tape condemning Egypt's Kefaya ("Enough") movement—a coalition of liberal, Arab nationalist, and moderate Islamist protesters challenging Mubarak's regime—Al-Jazeera followed each excerpt with discussion by the Islamist lawyer (and Bin Laden critic) Montasser al-Zayat, Jordanian liberal Muhammad Abu Roman and Kefaya activist Ahmed Baha al-Din Sha'aban. This transformed Zawahiri's lecture into a dialogue and denied him the monopoly on political discourse he so craved. In January, Bin Laden released his first message in over a year, and Al-Jazeera invited the able, Arabic-speaking American diplomat Alberto Fernandez to respond.

By early 2003, just as the Iraq War began, the Arab media environment had begun to fragment, becoming increasingly crowded and competitive. The Saudi-financed Al-Arabiya, launched in February 2003, soon ran a strong second in many Arab markets and even supplanted Al-Jazeera in some (such as Iraq). Al-Arabiya branded itself as the liberal alternative to Al-Jazeera, frequently hosting liberal and pro-American Muslim figures, as well as American officials including President Bush (while demonstrating rather greater sympathy to the Saudi royal family and to the ruling Arab regimes than does Al-Jazeera). An ever-growing panorama of satellite television stations now ensures that the norm is diversity and competition. The average Arab viewer routinely channel surfs among competing news stations like Abu Dhabi TV and Dubai TV, the extreme propaganda of Hizballah's Al-Manar, the mixed entertainment and news of Lebanon's LBC and Future TV, the rapidly expanding array of religious programming, and the writhing, barely-dressed music video vixens of Rotana TV. While Al-Jazeera remains the one station watched by virtually everyone, it faces powerful competitors in almost every market. Intense market competition means

that even if Al-Jazeera chose to stop airing Al-Qaeda videos, some other station would most assuredly air them instead. It also guarantees a diversity of opinions on the air that implicitly and explicitly challenge Al-Qaeda's goal of imposing a single political vision on the Arab world.

Zarqawi and the Cyber-Fihad

ABU MUSAB al-Zarqawi's rise from the carnage in Iraq has been accompanied by a palpable shift in focus away from an increasingly hostile satellite television towards the Internet. Certainly, Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda has long used the Internet to disseminate its message, to recruit, to coordinate and to train potential jihadists. But Zarqawi's dismissal of satellite television and his preference for the Internet suggests a profoundly different political strategy. Where Zawahiri and Bin Laden aim to reach out to the vast, uncommitted middle ground of Arab Muslims through tailored rhetoric that is broadcast over the mass media, Zarqawi places far more emphasis on the mobilization of already-committed jihadists.

Zawahiri believes in the need to win mass support; hence, the deep concern expressed in a (presumably authentic) July letter that Zarqawi's gory beheadings and attacks on Iraqi Shi'a were alienating the mainstream Arabs so central to Al-Qaeda's strategy. Zawahiri's response to the democratic protests sweeping from Beirut to Cairo in early 2005 demonstrates his sensitivity to the trends in mainstream Arab public discourse. With political reform and elections and protest rallies dominating Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya alike, Zawahiri attempted to insert Al-Qaeda into those debates with extended discussions of "reform."²

Zarqawi has no interest in such debates and no interest in identifying his movement with "reform" or "democracy." Power, in his view, comes from the

true *mujaheddin*, not from compromise or persuasion of the masses. Zarqawi would argue publicly with other jihadists, such as in his response to criticism by Maqdesi aired on Al-Jazeera or to those jihadists who expressed doubts about the November 9 hotel bombing in Amman, Jordan. But the rest of the political spectrum, from Americans to the Muslim Brotherhood, might as well not exist. Zarqawi persisted in murdering the representatives of Arab states in Iraq, regardless of the outcry in their home countries, because he placed a higher priority on isolating the new Iraqi government from its neighbors (and on killing representatives of what he considered to be apostate states) than on winning popularity among mass audiences.

Zarqawi's message in his continuing attacks on the Shi'a, on Iraqi civilians and on Arabs in Iraq could not be more clear: He simply does not care about Zawahiri's elusive median voter. Instead, he wants to motivate already-committed jihadists to translate their convictions into deadly action. And for that goal, the appropriate media is not satellite television but the Internet. Zarqawi has repeatedly lashed out at Al-Jazeera for its insufficiently supportive reporting, and jihadi Internet forums routinely blast Arab satellite television stations as "crusader media." In December 2004, Zarqawi attacked Al-Jazeera, Qaradawi and the "sultans of the airwaves" for "abandoning the *mujaheddin*."

Zarqawi's moving of the primary terrain from satellite television to the Internet reflects this disdain for non-jihadi audiences. His production of shocking

²At the same time, Zawahiri claimed responsibility for the July 7 terror attacks in London, which could be seen as an attempt to redirect the Arab public agenda in the way it knows best: a spectacular, violent attack to turn the debate back to clashes of civilizations, of an inevitable conflict between the West and Islam, and of war and mistrust and fear.

beheading videos, use of Internet forums and production of Internet news broadcasts all create a virtual media landscape that is virtually impossible for states to control—but it is also restricted to those individuals prepared to seek them out. In the fall of 2005, Zarqawi's organization began releasing regular Internet news broadcasts, which it described as "the sole outlet for *mujaheddin* media." Despite being ignored by the satellite television stations (none of which, to my knowledge, has ever broadcast a beheading), Zarqawi's videos have been, according to Al-Arabiya director Abd al-Rahman al-Rashed, "broadcast directly over the Internet to hundreds of thousands of youth who see and hear and read most of their information from it. . . . [M]ost of the terrorist crimes are tied to the Internet as the preferred theater."

Those who suggest that Al-Qaeda cannot win in Iraq miss the primacy of its media strategy: Every day that the occupation of Iraq generates graphic footage of American occupation and Islamist "resistance", Al-Qaeda wins. Seizing the Iraqi state is hardly necessary, or even desirable, for Al-Qaeda's media-centered strategy. But as the insurgency grinds on—and Arabs and Muslims everywhere question its random brutality, targeting of civilians, intense antipathy towards the Shi'a community and "blind violence"—its political significance begins to diverge in ways aligned with these competing media strategies.

In speeches in 2004 and 2006, Bin Laden has presented himself as an elder statesman, addressing the American public directly with political demands, using the media as a direct avenue of (very public) diplomacy. But among Arab commentators, debates about Al-Qaeda's post-Bin Laden future are well underway. Zawahiri, for all his strategic insights, manifestly lacks Bin Laden's stature or charisma and is ill suited for the role of satellite-television persona. It has become commonplace

among Arab observers to argue for Zarqawi's inevitable ascendance, due to the centrality of the active Iraqi theater. To the extent that Zarqawi hopes to wrest control of Al-Qaeda after Bin Laden, the fact that his brutal attacks cripple Zawahiri's strategy of cultivating the Arab mainstream can only be a plus. The Amman hotel bombings, which killed members of a wedding party and a leading Syrian film director but few Israelis or Westerners, were disastrous from Zawahiri's point of view but may have been a success from Zarqawi's perspective if they mobilized even a small number of recruits to join the jihad.

Changing Discourse and Attitudes

MANY OBSERVERS believe that Al-Qaeda's influence is in steep decline and its ideas are at bay. The quantity and volume of anti-jihadi voices in the Arab media have dramatically increased in recent years, with every Al-Qaeda-linked terror attack now met by a chorus of Arab criticism and condemnation. Public-opinion polls have shown steep declines in support for Al-Qaeda, particularly in countries directly affected by its terror attacks. Last fall's Amman Declaration brought together a wide range of Muslim figures (including Qaradawi) to condemn Islamist extremism. But while these are important developments, we must not fall victim to the perennial problem of blowback: believing our own propaganda.

There is no question that anti-jihadi voices are vastly more prevalent in the Arab media today than four years ago. The July 7 London bombings were routinely described in the Arab media as "a new massacre of innocents." They were roundly condemned by moderate Islamists, such as Qaradawi and the highly influential sheikh of Al-Azhar, Muhammad Sayed Tantawi. Similarly, the Amman hotel bombings provoked tremendous outrage in Jordan and beyond. Hamas and

Jordan's Islamic Action Front condemned Zarqawi for the bombings, as did Egypt's Islamic Jihad and the Gamaa Islamiyya. Terrorist atrocities in Madrid, Sharm el Sheikh, London, Lebanon, Amman (but not, it should be said, Israel)—each has been described by Arab authors as a “turning point”, each greeted by liberal columnists sarcastically expressing thanks to Bin Laden for finally exposing the moral and political failure of the Al-Qaeda project through the latest atrocity.

Without slighting the valor or integrity of any individual writer, it is clear that this upsurge in anti-jihadi discourse reflects official government policies more than changes in public opinion. The Saudi regime has deployed its vast media holdings in its own campaign against Al-Qaeda, initiated after several terror attacks struck the kingdom in 2003. Jordan's King Abdullah similarly declared a “total war” on *takfiri* thought—the denouncing of Muslims as insufficiently pious—after the November Amman bombings and publicly instructed the Jordanian media accordingly.

There is little evidence as yet that this state-directed propaganda will be more successful than the decades of state propaganda against which the new Arab media such as Al-Jazeera rose up. The anti-Islamist campaign may ultimately discredit those outlets more than it does the Islamists it targets. Arabs who have long lived under repressive, authoritarian regimes are well experienced in ignoring state propaganda. While there is little reliable information about the market share of Arab television stations, a December survey found Al-Arabiya losing ground among Arab audiences, even as it adopts a more explicitly anti-jihadi and pro-American editorial line.

Similarly, many Americans have been encouraged by recent surveys, such as one in the Jordanian newspaper *Al-Ghad* after the Amman hotel bombings in which 64 percent of Jordanians said that

their view of Al-Qaeda has changed for the worse. But it is not clear that this visceral, nationalistic revulsion at Zarqawi necessarily translates into a sustained and wider rejection of Al-Qaeda, to say nothing about support for the United States. As recently as summer 2005, a Pew survey had found support for Al-Qaeda in Jordan actually having increased from 2004, with 60 percent of Jordanians expressing admiration for Bin Laden. In a December survey by the University of Jordan's Center for Strategic Studies, three-quarters of Jordanians described Zarqawi's branch of Al-Qaeda as a terrorist group, but less than half considered Bin Laden's Al-Qaeda to be a terrorist organization. While 94 percent saw the Amman bombings as a “terrorist act”, only 63 percent said the same of the July London bombings and less than 40 percent felt the attacks by the Iraqi insurgency on American troops in Iraq to be the work of terrorists. Similar results were seen in a December public opinion survey of Palestinians: Only 12 percent supported the Amman hotel bombings, but 65 percent still supported Al-Qaeda actions, such as bombings in the United States or Europe. Such findings suggest that America should not count on Zarqawi's brutality to alone win the day in the wider war against Al-Qaeda.

The Real War

THE COMMON American conception of the War on Terror generally sees the battle of ideas as a confrontation between the United States and Al-Qaeda. In fact, America is a relatively marginal and often self-defeating player in the real ideological struggle among Arabs and Muslims. American power and policies matter. But direct American interventions, however necessary, tend to reinforce Al-Qaeda's arguments about an Islam under siege. The real battle is elsewhere.

Zawahiri's and Bin Laden's media strategy aims ultimately at a fundamental restructuring of the political discourse and identity of the Islamic world. That battle, for the definition of Islamic identity, is the key one for the future of Al-Qaeda. Unfortunately, those arguing America's case in the region have serious weaknesses. Arab liberals are pushing for more open and pluralistic politics, but they remain an embattled minority and are divided over their attitudes towards the United States. Some Arab states have been using their media as part of a comprehensive struggle against jihadism in their own self-interest, but those dictatorships remain unpopular, and the effectiveness of their propaganda is uncertain.

Perhaps the most important combatants in today's Arab and Muslim war of ideas are popular Arab nationalists and moderate Islamists who generally oppose American policies but also detest Al-Qaeda's tactics and doctrines. Al-Qaeda's reliance on its ability to tap into the symbols, rhetoric and priorities of the Al-Jazeera narrative leaves it particularly vulnerable to the arguments of independent figures prominent within that milieu. Influential figures—such as the Egyptian columnist Fahmy Howeidy (who wrote scathingly about the need to “liberate the Iraqi resistance” from Zarqawi's sectarian brutality) and Qaradawi (who has denounced Zarqawi as a murderer and a criminal)—have done more damage to jihadism than all of America's efforts combined. “God's curse on Qaradawi, the American agent” is standard fare in jihadi Internet chat rooms.

Such figures criticize Al-Qaeda not out of love for America, but because they see the group as hijacking their own Islamist or reformist projects. Their trusted voices have a far greater chance of swaying the median voter away from jihadism than do the propagandists of Arab regimes or marginal pro-American liberals. They therefore pose the greatest

threat to Zawahiri's political vision. And it is Al-Jazeera and other popular satellite television stations that bring their voices to a mass public. Arab satellite television remains the strongest force today pushing for change in the region and one of the biggest obstacles to Al-Qaeda's agenda of imposing a monolithic Islamic identity.

Al-Qaeda understands that its “public diplomacy” is at the heart of its political project; so should America. Unfortunately, American public diplomacy has often seemed designed to confirm Bin Laden's taunt, delivered just before the presidential election, that “it seems as if we and the White House are on the same team, shooting at the United States's own goal.” The U.S. government-financed satellite television station Al-Hurra, which administration officials see as the linchpin of their public-diplomacy strategy, is largely irrelevant—a costly white elephant with few viewers, disappearing with hardly a trace in the turbulent Arab media environment. Its launch has fooled U.S. officials into complacency, by creating a false impression they are countering the jihadi message. Other strategic-information schemes—ranging from propaganda, psychological warfare and the recently exposed payola effort to buy good press in Iraq—inevitably backfire once revealed, discrediting precisely the pro-American voices so desperately needed to argue their case to a skeptical Arab public. Angry denunciations of Al-Jazeera by administration officials make American advocacy of political freedoms seem hypocritical.

American public diplomacy has recently improved under Karen Hughes. The boycott of Al-Jazeera has finally ended, and there has been much greater effort to place senior officials and Arabic-speaking diplomats on the Arab media. The next step is to pay attention to the real arguments Arabs are having among themselves and allow Al-Qaeda's critics the space to win their own war. □