



Foreign Policy Research Institute

FOOTNOTES

Vol. 14, No. 25

The Newsletter of the Wachman Center

October 2009

TEACHING THE LONG WAR AND JIHADISM

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This presentation will address ways to understand the war on terror, or as I will be calling it, the “long war”; as well as jihadism; and also how to teach these issues to high school students. There are many landmines in teaching this subject, and navigating them can be tricky.

It is important to first introduce students to the ideology of the people who attacked us on 9/11, so that they can differentiate them from ordinary Muslims and ordinary Islamic beliefs. Islam is an ancient religion of 1.5 billion people. It is an entirely separate subject from the jihadis that this presentation will discuss, and comprises a diversity of beliefs, practices, and ways of thinking about the religion.

A large number of Muslims are Islamists (also called fundamentalists), perhaps 15-20% of the Muslim-majority world. This is the Islamic current that is growing the fastest. The main difference between Islamists and other Muslims is that they believe one must have political power and an Islamic state in order to correctly practice Islam. They see a government dominated by Islamic law, or sharia, as necessary.

There is, however, no unanimity among Islamists about many other issues. For instance, some Islamists are open to democracy and participate in elections; the current government of Turkey calls itself Islamist, and there are Islamists who have run for office from Jordan to Indonesia. Other Islamists do not support elections as the way to transform their societies and instead believe that through preaching and social work they can change their countries from below.

Within the Islamist movement, those who subscribe to jihadism (jihadiyya) and argue that violence is necessary in order to achieve a perfect Islamic state, are a tiny minority—less than 1 percent of that 25 percent. This implies that perhaps a few thousand people—out of 1.5 billion—believe in using violence to create that state. The rest of the Islamists are willing to work through some gradual social or even democratic process.

The jihadis also have a notion about what this Islamic state will look like that most Islamists do not share. They generally call it the caliphate; it will be ruled by their version of Islamic law only; and no democratic process will be able to overturn it once installed.

But it was not just jihadis who carried out the 9/11 attack: the global jihadis who decided to attack the U.S. of that day are an even tinier minority of a minority of a minority. They were a few hundred—today a few thousand—people who did not even agree with a majority of the jihadis, who argued that they were not extreme enough. It was not just violence that was the only way to create this caliphate, but violence specifically directed at the U.S.

Before 9/11, most jihadis thought they should work in their local country, province, or region. But the global jihadis (al Qaeda and affiliated groups) argued that forty years of jihadi action around the world had gotten them nowhere. The only way to succeed would be to attack the head of the snake, as they like to call the U.S., to remove the support for all the local governments with one blow. This would allow them to create an Islamic state that would cover the entire world. Their vision of this caliphate is really a totalitarian dictatorship that is implacably hostile to democracy or democratic methods. Indeed, a

fight broke out between the Palestinian movement Hamas and al Qaeda over Hamas's decision to participate in elections. Al Qaeda immediately threw them out of the global jihadi fraternity.

In its ideology, global jihadism defines many terms--at least 25--completely differently from the vast majority of Muslims around the world. Of these many terms, the two most important aberrant definitions are of jihad and tawhid: we'll discuss these two in greater detail in just a moment. They also believe that only they are the true believers (the saved sect); all other self-professed Muslims are only "so-called" Muslims who do not practice their religion as they should. The global jihadis believe as well that hostile unbelievers control the world and desire the destruction of Islam. To do this, the unbelievers have created an international system to impose their principles, including Christian ideas about human rights, on the Muslim-majority world. Therefore war against them and their puppets is justified—not because the global jihadis desire war, but because the hostile unbelievers have imposed their ideas on them. The global jihadis often invoke the concept of a defensive war—they are never on the offensive or committing aggression. To them, 9/11 was a just response to ongoing attacks by the U.S. and the rest of the international community on Muslims.

Thus, for the global jihadis, an Islamic state is necessary not only to implement Islamic law correctly, but also to wage eternal war with the unbelievers. When the war ends, time will come to a close and paradise on earth will ensue.

Tawhid and Jihad

This ideology has been rejected by the vast majority of the Muslim community. An examination of global jihadis' definitions of tawhid and jihad illustrate just how different their views are from those of the rest of the Muslim-majority world. The global jihadist definition of tawhid in particular is central to understanding them. In mainstream Islam, tawhid means that there is only one God, that he has no partners; he is the only one who should be worshiped. Anyone who worships another god is sinning, and after death, he will be judged by God. God is compassionate, and he might be merciful, but it is not for Muslims to make any determination about the ultimate fate of other human beings.

Global jihadis also believe that tawhid means there is only one God, the only one who should be worshiped, but to them, worship includes obedience to all of his commands. If one is not perfectly obeying him, they argue, then you are not really a Muslim. Their definition of tawhid also implies that only God can make laws. Anyone who claims to have sovereignty or who makes laws is making himself into a god and must be killed. This is how they arrive at the conclusion that democracy is a foreign religion. The reasoning here is rather complex – one has to go through a number of steps – but it is logical to them, if not to other Muslims. And this is one of the biggest problems that al Qaeda and other global jihadis have: that this line of logic does not make sense to the vast majority of the Muslim-majority world.

One encounters the same contrasting definitions for the term jihad: most Muslims say that jihad is a peaceful, internal struggle to follow God, but that the word can also refer to a defensive war if the community is attacked. The jihadis, on the other hand, argue that jihad is about fighting alone.

Jihad actually means struggle, not war or killing. When Muhammad or early Muslims used the term, they were talking about something beyond killing or fighting. Within the Quran, the term (and its derivations) is used only 4-5 times, and then generally meaning a struggle to follow God and to understand the Quran. Muhammad's life shows that he began preaching peacefully to the people of his hometown of Mecca. For thirteen years he preached in the streets, telling people they needed to turn away from their idols to the worship of the true God. During this time, he consistently used the term jihad in terms of understanding him and God's message, and controlling one's own desires.

But then something terrible happened. He and his small group of followers were persecuted. Seeking a place of safety and security, he eventually found refuge at the nearby town of Medina. As Muhammad began to win over more followers in Medina, he began to receive revelations that struggling was more than just struggling to understand how to follow God—it was about self-defense. One could struggle by protecting the community from attack, and that also would be blessed by God. Then jihad became about taking Islam back to Muhammad's hometown, back to Mecca, and that also was blessed by God.

At the very end of his life, Muhammad returned from his final battle and said to his followers, "We have returned from the lesser jihad to the greater jihad." When asked what this "greater jihad" was, he explained that it was to follow God and create a just society. Most Muslims take that as a circle--Muhammad's life began peacefully, he had to defend himself, and eventually he was allowed to struggle to bring Islam back to his hometown. But at the end of his life, the greater jihad was about self-control and internal struggle.

Most Muslims today say that jihad is foremost an internal struggle; only secondarily is it about self-defense if the community is attacked. And always in Islamic history jihad was a matter for the state to decide.

The global jihadis have a vast disagreement with this view of history and this definition. They say jihad is fighting. They say that the Hadith, or saying of Muhammad, about the greater versus the lesser jihad was made up by the Sufis because they are

cowards. Near the end of his life Muhammad struggled to bring Islam back to Mecca and to other nearby countries through fighting, and it is therefore as fighting that jihad must be understood. For them, jihad can be both a defensive and offensive fight, but there has been no evolution since Muhammad's death; there can be no change.

This can be a persuasive argument to some young, untutored Muslims. And those who are most attracted to the global jihadi message are not those who have the most knowledge about Islamic history or theology. At the same time, the jihadist argument refuses to take into consideration the way the ulama or clerics, have worked with the Islamic definition of jihad and how it was especially transformed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The global jihadis claim that jihad can be either an "individual duty" or a collective duty. Jihad is an "individual duty" whenever the Islamic community is attacked; the entire community must come out to defend itself. And that is what has happened today they say: we have been attacked. The entire international community wants to destroy Islam.

The term "individual duty" is very powerful in Islam – it is applied to the basic duties of the religion which no one else can do for another. Thus, one cannot pray, fast or pay charity for any other person. The jihadis say that—just as with these other duties—no one else can wage jihad for any other individual. If a Muslim does not take part in our jihad, they argue, he or she will go to hell. But if they join us, at the first drop of blood, all their past misdeeds are done away with and they go to paradise. For young idealists, this can also be appealing.

So today, jihad is an "individual duty," they say; but tomorrow, once the invaders have been repelled from Muslim lands—which the global jihadis define to include Spain, southern France, much of Italy, and Sicily, eastern Europe, Russia, India, Central Asia, most of China, and the vast majority of Africa—in a defensive jihad, then there will be a collective duty to have an army to carry out an offensive jihad.

The most important point about global jihadist ideology is that it clearly shows that most of the current conflict is about the jihadis' war with other Muslims—it's not about us at all.

Ideologically, their preaching is aimed at converting other Muslims to jihadism or to supporting their wars.

Politically, they are attempting to create a Caliphate on the backs of other Muslims, persecuting those who are not dressed "correctly" or do not have a beard or are listening to music. This is why they lost Iraq, and why they had problems in Somalia the first time they sought to win over that country. They were trying to impose their vision of an Islamic state on Muslims who did not want it.

And militarily, they are killing about 100 Muslims for every non-Muslim.

Global jihadism's founders—the eighteenth-century Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, Hasan al-Banna, and Sayyid Qutb—demonstrate this in action. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab was an itinerant preacher in what would later become Saudi Arabia, whose main notion was that everyone had left true Islam. He decided to preach and try to get them to return to true Islam. When people did not listen to him, he said he had the right to declare a violent jihad against them. Al-Wahhab would go on to found Wahhabism, the sect of Islam that holds sway not only throughout much of the Arabian Peninsula but in many other places in the world as well. The only part of the Saudi version of Wahhabism that has changed from its founders' teachings is that it no longer calls for violence against wayward Muslims – they just use preaching to convince Muslims to join their version of Islam. And it is this part that the global jihadis disagreed with. They would use violence.

Hasan al-Banna (1906-49) grew up in a very different time and place—Egypt when it was occupied by the British—yet he too believed that the entire Islamic world had fallen away from true Islam. But feeling that the community had been led astray by the occupying British, with their wily control of Egypt's educational system, he would change this reality by preaching, not violence. To do this, he created the Muslim Brotherhood to reach out to Muslims through social work and preaching. But the Muslim Brotherhood also had a secret armed section that prepared for jihad against the occupiers. As it happened, the British gave up power peacefully, putting in place a Muslim Egyptian king. Al-Banna, however, saw this king as nothing but a puppet, used by the occupiers to maintain their ideological control over Islam. He turned to violence against this "agent ruler," who finally assassinated him, but not before his movement had caught on. Off and on throughout the 1950s-60s, Gamel Abdul Nasser and others suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood militants. Most of those who remained gave up on violence and/or fled to countries like Syria, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia, but a remaining hard core continued its mission.

Sayyid Qutb, one of al-Banna's most famous disciples, wrote a 30-volume commentary on the Quran, later condensed to a short manifesto called *Milestones Along the Way*, in which he added a twist to the ideas of al-Wahhab and al-Banna. He agreed that the entire Islamic world had left true Islam, and that he and his co-believers were the only ones who understood Islam. But he felt the target of the struggle should be the U.S. and Britain, whose notions of democracy directly contradicted his definition of tawhid. Qutb was among those executed in one of Nasser's crackdowns, but his brother Mohammed Qutb fled to Saudi Arabia and became a university teacher; among his pupils was Osama bin Laden.

For the few thousand global jihadis today, this appears to be authentic Islam. Especially for young men who feel alienated in Europe or in large cities like Cairo or Istanbul, the attraction of authenticity cannot be overstated. They believe that they are sacrificing their lives for the good of the community while avoiding hell. They are taking a stand against evil societies, many of which in fact are corrupt—they indeed face governments that are not responsive to their needs and economies that are not producing jobs. Finally, there is an appeal for revenge and retribution for such things as Abu Ghraib and purported American rapes of Muslim women. Considering how strong some of these appeals are, it should be reassuring to us that only a few thousand people have answered this call.

To help students see these ideas in action, they can be shown images of global jihadism: Hamas, for instance, which is the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood. They believe that they should be attacking the occupiers, who in this case are the Israelis.

Al-Jihad/Egyptian Islamic Jihad, on the other hand, was a splinter group of the Muslim Brotherhood which would not follow the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood and their renunciation of violence against the regime. They helped carry out the assassination of Sadat, who they saw as a puppet of the Americans for signing the Israeli peace treaty.

Jama'ah Islamiyah made a slightly different argument. These are the terrorists in Indonesia who carried out the October 2002 Bali attack. They saw even tourists as occupiers. One sees this thread also in Egypt, where groups like Gama'a al-Islamiyya attacked tourists in Luxor and elsewhere.

But it was Al Qaeda that took on the U.S. directly, first seeing Americans as occupiers in Saudi Arabia after the 1991 war for Kuwait, and then as the leaders of an offensive ideology that, they argued, contradicted true Islam.

The above should help students place this evolution of global jihadi thinking into some kind of framework, within Islam in general and within jihadism. Then one can talk specifically about global jihadism's war with the U.S. Al Qaeda justified its attack on the U.S. because it regards America as the "greater unbelief," the eternal enemy. I think that it is also important for students to see that the global jihadis achieved none of their strategic goals on 9/11. The U.S. did not leave the Islamic lands; in fact, we got more involved. Other Muslims were not convinced to join up with al Qaeda; there was a trickle of support, but now there has been a huge backlash. Nor have any apostate puppets fallen, except in Iraq and that was done by an American invasion.

Al Qaeda is still continuing its war. They have convinced the diverse groups involved in local jihads on various levels—in North Africa, Egypt, Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, Indonesia--that they have failed in their struggles, and gotten the remaining believers to join with them. There are now far more people involved in Al Qaeda than there were before 9/11, but only because the number of jihadis in general has shrunk considerably. Their post-9/11 strategies include information operations (exploiting the media), using oil as a weapon, and guerrilla warfare.

The global jihadis see this as a two-hundred year war. One way you can help your students think about the U.S. in this war is the fact that the global jihadis are now very unified, whereas the U.S. is very diverse. There is very little unity on what we think happened on 9/11 and where it is all going. You can present models for understanding the war and talk through the differences among these models, without emphasizing or giving priority to only one.

(1) **Crime:** A crime was committed on 9/11. A group of criminals decided to murder Americans. This pinpoints al Qaeda as the main problem, not blaming the entire Islamic world; but it refuses to recognize the deeper roots and global nature of the conflict.

(2) **Clash of civilizations:** Going from the very small to the very big, the "clash of civilizations" model emphasizes the cultural/religious roots of the conflict. Unfortunately, this conflates most Muslims with the radicals.

(3) **Global Insurgency:** Our military sees the conflict as a global insurgency. This provides a global vision that gives us strategies for fighting the war, but downplays the role of nations.

(4) **Islamic Reformation:** The Islamic Reformation model suggests that it is not about us at all; it emphasizes the role of religion, culture, and history and downplays the economic/social issues, leaving us without a model for the war.

(5) **World War IV:** Finally, there is the Long War or World War IV model. This emphasizes nation-states and the lengthy nature of the global conflict. However, it does not deal well with non-state actors. No nation-states openly support the jihadis.

For each of the above models, one can ask questions like when did the war start? If it was a crime, the war started on 9/11, 2001. If it is a clash of civilizations, it started in 622 C.E. If it is a global insurgency, the military usually cites 1993, when Al Qaeda-trained soldiers in Somalia killed American military personnel. If it is a reformation, it started either with Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab in the eighteenth century or in 1928, with the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood. If it is a long war, then it started

in 1979, with the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The models also answer the question of “who is the enemy” differently. If it is a crime, then obviously it is bin Laden et al. If it is a clash of civilizations, then it is the entire Arab/Muslim world. If it is a global insurgency, it is Al Qaeda and affiliated groups. If this is a reformation, then it is the Islamists and/or the jihadis. If it is a long war, then the problem are nation-states: Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, et al. One can see why a government might prefer this vision.

What are our objectives in this war? If it’s a crime, then it would be to arrest or kill Bin Laden et al. If it’s a clash of civilizations, then it’s to achieve the transformation of the Islamic world. When Samuel Huntington talked about a clash of civilizations, he was not talking about all-out war between Islam and what he called western Christianity. He was arguing that what was needed was modernization. If it’s a global insurgency, the goal would be to suppress or kill al Qaeda while preventing other Muslims from joining the fight. If it’s a reformation, then an “enlightenment” is needed. If it’s a long war involving nation states, then we need to achieve regime change.

How do you operationalize all these models? If it’s a crime, one arrests people – it’s a law enforcement problem. If it’s a clash of civilizations, then you need diplomatic pressure and international institutions. If it’s an insurgency, then you need counterinsurgency tactics, which are military but also include society, culture, and economic measures. If it’s a reformation, there’s very little we can do. It all has to be done internally by legitimate Islamic clergy. Finally, if it’s regime change that’s needed, then we would be invading and state-building.

Presenting the war this way can help students understand, for instance, how the Bush administration thought about the war, how the military thinks about it, how diplomats think about it, and how different people within our society think about this controversial issue. The Bush administration thought about it in terms of nation-states and in its last years as counter-insurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Obama administration seems to see it as a law enforcement and counter-insurgency problem worldwide. We will likely see them downplaying the military while offering advice and aid to individual states, leaving to them the main burden.

Of Related Interest

The World of Islam, a 10-volume series of books for middle and high school students put out by Mason Crest Publishers (with FPRI as Editorial Consultant) in 2009. For information, visit:

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