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SAHARAN MERCENARY EMPLOYED BY AL-QAEDA FREED IN HOSTAGE EXCHANGE

While mercenaries have played an important role in the war on terrorism from the beginning, the use of private forces has until recently been associated with counterterrorism efforts. However, since al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) began establishing a Saharan front, they have been compelled to hire local guides and suppliers, much like every other non-native interloper in the region. Many of the AQIM leaders in the Sahara are Arabs or Arabized Berbers from the coastal mountains of Algeria, nearly 2,000 miles from their current zone of operations in the desert near the Mali border.

Omar al-Sahrawi (the nickname of Omar Sid Ahmed Ould Hama) is one such employee of al-Qaeda participating in AQIM's lucrative kidnapping operations without necessarily sharing the same ideology. In late August he was freed from captivity in Mauritania as part of a hostage exchange and ransom deal demanded by AQIM in return for the release of two Spanish captives.

Reports from Spain claim the hostages were released in exchange for between \$4.8 million and \$12.7 million as well as the release of al-Sahrawi (*El Mundo* [Madrid], August 23; *ABC* [Madrid], August 23). The two captives, Roque Pascual and Albert Vilalta, were kidnapped in Mauritania on the road from Nouakchott to the coastal town of Nouadhibou (formerly Port Étienne) in November 2009 (*Afrique en Ligne*, August 29). The men are employees of the Barcelona-based NGO Accio Solidaria. A third Spanish hostage taken at the

same time, Alicia Gamez, was released by AQIM in March. It is believed a ransom was paid in this case as well.

In a telephone interview with a French reporter, al-Sahrawi declared, “I have nothing to do with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Me, I do business, and if you sell something to someone who is from AQIM, it does not mean that you are from AQIM. I am a businessman (AFP, August 24). In his homeland of Mali, security sources identified al-Sahrawi as a cigarette smuggler and transporter of illegal immigrants.

Al-Sahrawi had been sentenced by a Mauritanian court to 12 years of hard labor for his role in the abductions. Following his release and extradition to Mali, where the hostages were being held, al-Sahrawi was reported to have been present at the release of the hostages so AQIM could see if he was alive and in good health. Mauritanian TV footage showed al-Sahrawi joking with the hostages (AFP, August 25). On his return, Al-Sahrawi reportedly celebrated his release by declaring, “I have come back free to Mali” (Nouakchott-Info, August 26).

Referring to the failed Mauritanian-French effort to free a French hostage in July that resulted in the death of seven AQIM operatives and later the execution of the hostage, AQIM said the release of the Spanish hostages was a “lesson for the French secret services to take into consideration in the future” (al-Jazeera, August 24). Spanish Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero said the release marked a “day of celebration.” He made no mention of the ransom (*Ennahar* [Algiers], August 23).

Algiers is reported to be displeased with the ransom, some of which will likely be used to buy arms for further attacks within Algeria (*Ennahar*, August 25). Mauritania has also failed to garner AQIM’s good-will through the release; only two days later a would-be suicide bomber was killed by security forces as he tried to ram an explosives-laden truck into the Nema military barracks, 750 miles east of Nouakchott (al-Jazeera, August 25; AFP, August 25).

YEMEN ARMS DEALER FARIS MANNA CLAIMS GOVERNMENT ARMING HUTHIST REBELS

Yemen is not only one of the world’s most heavily armed nations on a per capita basis, but also serves as a regional hub for arms shipments, a lucrative trade

that has the approval of Yemen’s government. One of Yemen’s most prominent arms dealers, Faris Manna, had a falling out with his former sponsor, President Ali Abdullah Saleh, after being imprisoned earlier this year on charges of providing arms to the Huthist rebels of northern Yemen. Manna recently gave an interview to an Arabic language daily in which he claimed Saleh’s government was responsible for arming the Huthist rebellion, a claim supported by his brother, the former governor of Sada’a governorate (elaph.com, August 17).

The 40-year-old Manna, a former organizer for the ruling General People’s Congress, describes himself not as an arms retailer but as a facilitator, arranging deals between Arab and African consumers and foreign suppliers, principally in Russia and Eastern Europe, where he maintains offices. “I conclude arms deals, like other international companies that facilitate deals between states and arms manufacturers... We bring the parties closer together, and help them reach agreements. This is our role, nothing else,” explained Manna. Despite the accusations against him, Manna denies selling arms in local Yemeni markets. “I have never done that. This is what tendentious people say. They spread such rumors. We work in the framework of the Yemeni constitution and law, as well as within the international law,” he stated.

According to the Yemeni arms merchant, who acted as an intermediary in negotiations between the government and the Huthist rebels, it is the state that made room in local markets for the arms trade, which it supplies through stocks discretely removed from military garrisons; “I want to say that there was collusion in certain army garrisons to hand over weapons to the Huthists. It has become clear that their ammunition came from the Army, and all their rifles and weapons came from the Army. There are photographs and documents that prove this. All the proof is available. The matter has become clear and unambiguous.” Manna has useful connections to the Huthists – his brother Hassan Manna was formerly governor of Sada’a governorate, the home of the Huthist rebellion. Faris says his brother resigned as a result of his unjust detention; “How could he go on working when his brother was wrongly and unjustly arrested? He refused to carry on working, but out of respect for the brother president of the republic, may God protect him, and in appreciation of the relations between us and him, we did not publish our resignation.” Several weeks after his brother’s arrest last January, Hassan Manna threatened to reveal the “true source” of the Huthist arms, suggesting that the Ministry of the Interior was

heavily involved in shipping arms to the northern rebels, though this accusation was strongly denied by Brigadier General Muhammad Abdullah al-Qawsi, following which Hassan Manna warned the press against publishing any further comments on the issue delivered under his name (*Yemen Tribune*, February 21).

Manna claims the charges against him were the work of the National Security Agency (NSA), which sought to create a divide between himself and the president, his longtime patron. In June, a supporter of Faris Manna fired on a security convoy carrying him to court from Sana'a rooftops (*Yemen Observer*, May 11). Manna denied allegations that his family was behind the attack (*Yemen Gazette*, July 3).

Al-Qaeda's Sa'id al-Shihri Seeks to Revolutionize the Saudi Military

By *Murad Batal al-Shishani*

Jihadist web forums released an audio recording by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) Deputy Leader Sa'id al-Shihri (a.k.a. Abu Sufyan al-Azdi) on August 9 entitled "Ma'an li khali' al-Sa'ud" (Together to Overthrow al-Sa'ud). The recording came as a response to a correspondence AQAP claimed it "received in the mail, and by other means of communication, from some of the members of the armed forces in the Land of the Two Mosques, and their request for guidance from us on whether they should remain at their jobs or join us in the land of jihad." [1]

Al-Shihri emphasized "the non-belief of al-Sa'ud, their apostasy and their committing [of sins] that contradict Islam," which have led him to the conclusion that it is not permissible to serve the royal family. He warned that the Muslim ummah (community) might engage in a war:

Know...that the upcoming war is a war against Islam and the Sunni Muslims in the Arabian Peninsula and the Sham [Levant]. Treaties and alliances have been formed for that. The Jews want to build the Temple of Solomon and the

state of Israel...The Jews and apostates from the rulers of the Peninsula are in an alliance that was set up by America. Iran and their Arab Shi'i supporters in the region are another alliance... It is expected that the Jews will begin the war against Iran, in which the battlefield will be the Peninsula and its citizens. The Jews are in the Sham and Iran in the Peninsula.

Hence, al-Shihri called on the Saudi armed forces to abandon the Sa'ud family and turn their weapons against Israel:

Disavow your support for the tyrant, the agent of the Crusader campaign in the region, which places you in the realm of non-belief...Declare your rebellion against the orders of the tyrant. Do not turn your guns against Muslims who have rebelled against the tyrant with their tongues, hands, protests and other acts. Aid them, and use your arms against Israel, which is only kilometers away from you, the lights of which can be seen from the al-Haqd region in the north of the Peninsula. Let those of you who are pilots seek martyrdom in the skies of Palestine. Let those of you in the navy aim your weapons at the Jews there, and attain the honor of martyrdom in the cause of God. This is better than the title "a martyr of duty" [the official title conferred upon Saudi soldiers killed in clashes against jihadists].

Al-Shihri provided Saudi armed troops eleven "guides" to implement:

1. "Focus on uniting the ranks and calling for jihad for the cause of God within your administrations, and form cells that will attract anyone who can provide logistic support (military, political, or otherwise), especially those who belong to the Air Force, or others who are in charge of weapons warehouses, officials in the army or Interior [Ministry], or other positions in operations or the media. After that, the collapse of al-Sa'ud will be made easy.

2. Form operational cells to gather information and determine important targets in order to bring down the state. Rely on secrecy in order to accomplish your goals.

3. Those of you who work as guards for the tyrant princes or ministers, or in the compounds that house the Christians, or those among you who can reach them: seek the aid of God to kill them. What could be better than martyrdom in the cause of God in the Land of the Two Mosques and the avenging of the Two Mosques, which have been dominated by the apostate rulers and pagan rejectionists? Do as Khalid al-Islambuli and his cell did in their assassination of the tyrant Anwar al-Sadat. [2]

4. Those of you who work in the Interior Ministry and have access to important information that would be of use to the mujahideen in selecting their targets, like homes, routes, and offices of Interior Ministry officials: send them to us through the organization's military mail.

5. It is impermissible for you to perform any act in support of the tyrant against your mujahideen brothers or faithful monotheist women who adhere to the religion of God. Nor can you enlist anyone with no military experience in the army.

6. Fear God when it comes to the blood of Muslims and do not spill sacred blood, even if it delays one of your goals.

7. Dedicate yourselves to marshalling the lay Muslims, and to distinguishing yourselves in the middle of this state and its corruption.

8. Do your utmost to champion your mujahideen brothers by providing shelter, money, helping them to move about and facilitating their operations.

9. We would prefer that those who work [with us] do not leave the Land of the Two Mosques [i.e. Saudi Arabia] unless they must, for instance to evade capture or if outposts are in need of expertise or cadres.

10. No one should be taken prisoner. Dedicate yourselves to martyrdom and to buying weapons with which to defend your religion, yourselves and your honor.

11. It is impermissible for you to violate the Shari'ah of Allah in your operations for any reason. Nor can you perform any deed without a legitimate fatwa from the scholars of the mujahideen.

Several previous reports mentioned that al-Qaeda infiltrated Saudi security agencies, but it is difficult to measure the real support for jihadists among the Saudi military as well as whether al-Shihri's recording was a response to real correspondence from military members or was just a propaganda recording intended to demonstrate AQAP's influence in Saudi society. [3]

However, al-Shihri's guidance to military and security members coincides with the Salafi-Jihadist aim of turning Saudi Arabia into an open battlefield by revolutionizing society. Such an understanding was seen in the propaganda materials of al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia during their clashes with Saudi authorities (2003-2007) as they described situations closer to armed conflict (chases, confrontations, clashes, training camps...etc) than an environment where a group conducts terrorist acts against a government in peaceful periods.

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Notes:

1. All quotations are from the recording which can be found in full text: <http://202.75.53.220/~atahadi0/vb/showthread.php?p=113519>.

2. Al-Islambuli was an Egyptian Army officer who emptied his rifle into Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat during a 1981 military review. He was executed by a firing squad the following year and has become a hero to the modern Jihadist movement.

3. For al-Qaeda infiltration, see Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (Cambridge Middle East Studies), 2010, p.78.

Floods Wash Out Counterterrorist Operations in North Waziristan

By Arif Jamal

Recent political developments in Pakistan seem to have put a military operation in North Waziristan on the backburner once more. If current political trends continue, the much awaited military operation in the region may not start for a long time, if ever. The recent floods, which have been described as of biblical proportions, have further complicated launching new operations against Islamist terrorists in Pakistan. According to a senior Pakistani official, none of the U.S. officials in meetings with their Pakistani counterparts in recent months have “forcefully stressed the need for a military operation in North Waziristan. It has become even more difficult for Americans to talk about North Waziristan now in view of the floods.” [1]

North Waziristan is a sanctuary for several jihadist groups with close ties to the Pakistani military:

- The most important of these is the Haqqani network. The Haqqani Network is suspected of many deadly attacks on the U.S.-led coalition forces in Afghanistan. The important mujahideen leader is Hafiz Gul Bahadar, a direct descendant of a legendary fighter, Mirza Ali Khan, known for leading tribesmen in a war against the British in the 1930s and 1940s. Hafiz Gul Bahadar’s group defeated the Pakistan Army in 2006 and 2007. Although it signed a peace agreement with the army in 2008, Bahadar’s group broke the agreement in June 2009. However, the Pakistan Army refuses to take action against him and his group because of his potential importance in the looming post-American period in Afghanistan.
- Yet another North Waziristan Taliban group is headed by Maulana Sadiq Noor. Maulana Noor is allied with the Haqqani network and is virtually an uncrowned king in Miran Shah, the capital of North Waziristan. He was one of the Taliban leaders with whom the Pakistan Army signed a peace deal in 2008. Others included the Haqqani Network and Gul Bahadar’s group.
- Several other moderate jihadi groups (from the Pakistan Army’s viewpoint) are also headquartered in North Waziristan. They

include Lashkar-i-Zil, headed by Ilyas Kashmiri, Jaish-i-Mohammad, headed by Masood Azhar, Harakat-ul Jihad al-Islami, headed by Qari Saif Ullah Akhtar, and Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, led by Akram Lahori. Some al-Qaeda militant leaders are also known to be there (*The News* [Islamabad] May 14).

Under intense U.S. pressure, the Pakistan Army launched a military operation against the Taliban in Swat in the spring of 2009. Alarm bells rang around the world when the Taliban entered the District of Buner on April 6, 2009. From Buner, they were merely 100 miles away from Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan (*Daily Times* [Lahore] April 6, 2009). The Swat operation was followed by another operation in South Waziristan (*Dawn* [Karachi] October 17, 2009; October 18, 2009). However, the military refused to launch an operation in North Waziristan on the pretext that the army had been stretched too thin and needed time to consolidate its gains. However, the real reason was that most of the Taliban groups in North Waziristan remain pro-army. On more than one occasion, the military publicly assured those who had taken sanctuary in North Waziristan that it had no intention of caving in to U.S. pressure and launching an operation in North Waziristan. On July 1, 2009, the army dropped pamphlets on Miran Shah, the capital of North Waziristan, which assured the people that it does not want to initiate any military operation in the region, continuing the pattern of previous operations in South Waziristan. The pamphlets stated, “It is your own military; therefore, you are called upon to fully cooperate with it... The army guarantees protection from internal and external enemies and its security is the security of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan; therefore, you should support the Pakistan Army” (Geo TV, July 1, 2009).

The United States increased pressure on Pakistan to launch a military operation in North Waziristan after a suicide bomber attacked Forward Operating Base Chapman in Afghanistan on December 30, 2009, killing seven CIA officials and a Jordanian intelligence operative, the biggest single-day loss for the CIA since the Beirut bombing of 1983 (*Dawn*, January 1). Despite this, Pakistan’s general staff continued to drag its feet on setting a date for a North Waziristan operation.

In the wake of last May’s failed bombing of New York City’s Times Square, the Americans increased pressure on Pakistan once more. After the links between would-be bomber Faisal Shahzad and the Taliban in North

Waziristan were established, President Barack Obama sent National Security Adviser General James Jones and CIA Director Leon Panetta to Pakistan to press for the launch of military operations in the region (*Dawn*, May 19; May 20). Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gillani vowed to launch military operations wherever the government's writ is challenged, including North Waziristan. According to the Prime Minister, the government will not bow down to terrorists and will launch a military operation anywhere that serves as a safe haven for extremists. Gillani stated that Chief of Staff General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani would decide the timeline for such an operation (*Daily Times*, May 30). However, General Kayani did not set a date for operations to begin in North Waziristan.

It is too early to say how the current floods will change the face of Pakistan's war on terror. It is more than certain that the natural disaster has given the Pakistani military one more excuse to use in its reluctance to launch such an operation and to not go after the terrorists who have taken sanctuary in North Waziristan. As one Pakistani politician said, "Allah has done one more favor to jihadists and the Pakistan Army by flooding Pakistan. Floods have brought the war on terror virtually to an end. The military will remain engaged with fighting the floods while terrorists strengthen themselves and build new infrastructure around the country. In a few months, when the military returns from the flood-stricken areas, it would be too late to re-start the war on terror." [2]

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Notes:

1. Author's interview with a Pakistani official, July 2010.
2. Author's interview with a Pakistani politician, August 2010.

Al-Tatarrus: al-Qaeda's Justification for Killing Muslim Civilians

By Jack Barclay

One of the global Salafi-Jihadist movement's most persistent strategic vulnerabilities is its association with terrorist attacks that result in large numbers of Muslim civilian casualties. In jihadist conflict zones from Chechnya to Iraq, Somalia and Afghanistan, armed assaults and suicide bombings have been responsible for thousands of Muslim civilian deaths. [1] In many cases, attacks on foreign military forces or indigenous security force personnel in population centers have led to Muslim civilians being caught in the crossfire. [2]

In some cases these incidences of civilian death have been the result of operational blunders; in other instances attacks appear to have been carried out with little regard for the proximity of Muslim civilians. For example, in October 2009 a wave of suicide bombings in Peshawar killed almost 200 civilians and invoked widespread condemnation both in Pakistan and abroad. On the occasions where the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) claimed responsibility, they claimed the targets had been security force facilities and personnel, not civilians. However the locations of the attacks in busy city center markets made it highly likely from the outset that civilians would be among those killed.

In the wake of such attacks, the jihadists have frequently denied responsibility or have sought to blame security forces, either for situating their personnel in civilian areas or for failing to evacuate civilians from around the target after warnings were given. At other times, the jihadists have used conspiracy theories to shift blame; the TTP and al-Qaeda attempted to blame many of the October 2009 Peshawar attacks on a shadowy cabal of government intelligence personnel and U.S. military contractors.

In instances when jihadists have claimed responsibility for attacks killing Muslims, they have typically attempted to justify them on the basis of strategic and operational necessity as well as theological legitimacy. One of the theological concepts most frequently deployed by al-Qaeda spokesmen and ideologues to support such violence is "Hukm al-Tatarrus." This relatively obscure piece of doctrine has its roots in classical Islamic

jurisprudence and was traditionally used to establish the permissibility of a Muslim army attacking a non-Muslim enemy in situations where one or more of the following has occurred:

- A non-Muslim enemy preparing to resist attack in its fortress is holding other Muslims against their will as human shields.
- The Muslims are attacking the fortress of the enemy, inside which are Muslims who are not being held against their will but who are engaged in legitimate commercial activities with non-Muslims.
- Muslims are attempting to defeat a non-Muslim enemy who has entered Muslim territory and occupied positions around or behind them, and where the Muslims must recapture that territory or fight their way through that territory to defeat the enemy.
- Muslims are attacking a non-Muslim enemy's ship on which Muslims are being used as human shields.

While Muslims engaging in jihad are enjoined to protect the sanctity of Muslim life wherever possible, al-Tatarrus describes circumstances in which the obligation to fight Islam's enemies - and in so doing protect the wider Muslim populace - outweighs the threat to those Muslim civilians unfortunate enough to be caught between the two sides.

It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that Salafi-Jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda have sought to deploy this concept to legitimize terrorist attacks that risk large numbers of Muslim civilian casualties. In 2008, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri referred to al-Tatarrus while discussing the Salafi-Jihadist movement's stance on Muslim civilian casualties. Responding to questions on the issue posed by jihad supporters via web forums, al-Zawahiri said, "We haven't killed the innocents - not in Baghdad, nor in Morocco, nor in Algeria, nor anywhere else," adding, "If there is any innocent who was killed in the mujahidin's operations, then it was either an unintentional error or out of necessity, as in cases of al-Tatarrus." [3]

Al-Qaeda's use of al-Tatarrus

One of the most important contemporary works on al-Tatarrus by a Salafi-Jihadist ideologue is by al-Qaeda

leader Abu Yahya al-Libi. In his 2008 book *Human Shields and Modern Jihad*, al-Libi attempts to reinterpret al-Tatarrus for application in terrorist or insurgent campaigns. [4]

Al-Libi contextualises the issue by stressing that the nature of modern warfare is qualitatively different to that experienced by the Muslims of early Islamic history, or the classical period in which much of the scholarly research on this issue was produced. He claims that in the so-called "War on Terror" there are few front lines, that combat often occurs away from the conventional battlefield in heavily populated areas and that the jihadist movement's enemies exercise little restraint in their tactics or their willingness to pursue the Mujahideen everywhere. Al-Libi thus seeks to condition his audience to accept the basic premise that such conflicts by their nature will result in a high civilian casualty toll.

After surveying some of the work of classical scholars on the concept, and establishing the legal proofs for its use, al-Libi seeks to reinforce the importance of al-Tatarrus in modern jihad by reminding readers of the implications for the wider Muslim ummah if the mujahideen are unwilling to apply it, whether for emotional reasons (an intrinsic reluctance to put Muslim civilians in danger) or because they doubt the legal case for its use. Firstly, he says, if abstaining from operations in which Muslims are being used by the enemy as shields would put the wider community in greater danger than it would be the duty of the mujahideen to mount their attack. Secondly, he warns that the alternative, i.e. abstaining from an attack to spare Muslim civilians, constitutes "a dysfunction in the duty of jihad," which is one of the most important duties a Muslim can perform and an individual imperative if the situation is one in which Muslim land is under occupation. Thirdly, he stresses that if abstaining from an operation under such circumstances leads to a non-Muslim enemy further occupying Muslim land, then the result may be "a spoiling of the religion," as Muslims are forced or induced to adopt non-Muslim beliefs and practices. Thus, he argues that while potentially harming other Muslims during an attack on the enemy is unpalatable, the mujahideen would be "preventing a general harm by doing a specific harm," and thus on balance their actions would be praiseworthy.

One of al-Libi's strengths as an al-Qaeda ideologue is that he is able to take obscure and dense theological concepts such as al-Tatarrus and re-interpret them for a contemporary setting, but does so in a way that makes these concepts more easily accessible to a lay audience.

Unless the audience is well-versed in the jurisprudence of jihad and the work of classical scholars on this issue, they will be none the wiser when ideologues such as al-Libi use the concept inappropriately or out of context.

Though al-Libi makes reference to works of classical Islamic jurists on al-Tatarrus, he cleverly seeks to divert his audience from pursuing their detailed study by suggesting that when they were written the nature of warfare was so different that they now offer only partial guidance for the contemporary jihadist movement. Some analysts have argued that this is partially because were the reader to pursue study of these earlier texts and legal rulings, they would be exposed to the many specific conditions and contexts in which al-Tatarrus must be applied.

Implications of al-Tatarrus

Al-Qaeda leaders and ideologues have repeatedly stressed the importance of using information to shape perceptions. In a letter written by Osama bin Laden to Mullah Mohamed Omar in 2002, Bin Laden reminded the Taliban leader that the “media war...may reach 90% of the total preparation for the battles.”

If garnering the support of the wider Muslim world is indeed the objective of al-Qaeda’s “media battle,” al-Tatarrus may prove to be a questionable mass-market justification for its engagement in violence in which fellow Muslims often bear the brunt of the suffering.

In 2008 a leading Moroccan Islamist cleric and member of parliament, Shaykh Abdelbari Zemzemi, spoke out against al-Zawahiri’s reliance on al-Tatarrus to justify al-Qaeda’s attacks: “The Islamic rule of al-Tatarrus is not at all applicable to al-Qaeda operations, whether they are committed in Morocco, New York, London, Spain or Mauritania. All al-Qaeda operations are unjust and cowardly, as they directly target unsuspecting civilians.” Zemzemi explained that al-Tatarrus applies only in cases where not killing Muslims would result in occupation of Muslim land by the enemies of Islam, which would be the greater evil:

As you can see, this rule is not applicable to al-Qaeda operations, because al-Qaeda is not on a battlefield. They are hiding behind mountains and only send their men out to strike in cities. Only civilians live in cities, not the military. This is impermissible and unjustifiable. Civilians cannot be attacked for no reason. That would be treacherous. You can only fight an enemy that is

confronting you or occupying your land. But to bomb unsuspecting people in their homes, this is unjust and treacherous. It makes no difference whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims. Innocent people must never be attacked. When it comes to innocent people who do not invade your land or attack you, how can you take them by surprise and cowardly blow them up when they are unarmed? This is not permitted in Islam (*Magharebia*, April 18, 2008).

In spite of attempts by al-Qaeda to use al-Tatarrus to reassure potential supporters that Muslim collateral damage has religious sanction, there can be little doubt that repeated incidents such as those in Peshawar and elsewhere in the Muslim world are highly damaging to the image of the Salafi-Jihadist movement. Attacks such as those in Peshawar drew widespread condemnation from the general public and the media, who questioned whether the jihadists placed any value on Muslim civilian life at all. A 2003 suicide attack by members of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) on the al-Muhayah residential compound in Riyadh dealt a serious blow to the group’s domestic credibility when the victims turned out to be Muslims, not the Western expatriates whom the attackers claimed to be targeting. While al-Qaeda supporters attempted to justify the attacks on the basis of al-Tatarrus, the wider Saudi public was successfully convinced by government information campaigns that al-Qaeda now poses a direct threat to Saudi citizens, not just foreign nationals in the Kingdom.

Reality vs. Rhetoric

The Salafi-Jihadist movement’s conduct on the front lines has long been the place where the gap between its rhetoric and the reality of its actions can be most clearly defined. It is therefore a source of some of the most potent material for strategic communication campaigns designed to discredit the image the movement seeks to portray of a pious vanguard fighting in defense of Islam and Muslims.

At the local level, therefore, it can be seen that Muslim civilian deaths frustrate the jihadists’ ability to garner support from the populations among which they operate. In fact, barely a week passes without Muslim civilians suffering at the hands of Salafi-Jihadist operational blunders or excesses in one theater or another. The most ideologically committed supporters of Salafi-Jihadist violence may find al-Tatarrus a sufficient rationale for continuing jihad in virtually any situation where

Muslims are in harm's way. However, the deployment of obscure religious concepts to explain the slaughter of large numbers of their co-religionists is unlikely to convince the wider Muslim public, particularly at the local level where communities are forced to continue their daily lives amid a climate of repeated bloodshed.

There are strong indications that the leaders of al-Qaeda are aware of this vulnerability. Their frequent communications on the issue of Muslim civilian casualties may be indications of an attempt to inoculate the jihadist movement against such criticism – many of al-Qaeda's more experienced leaders share the bitter personal experience of seeing jihadist campaigns atrophy when high-profile Muslim civilians deaths turned public opinion against them. In the wake of the 2009 Peshawar attacks, al-Qaeda and TTP spokesmen, including Adam Gadahn, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, Shaykh Atiyatallah, Tariq Azzam, and Hakimullah Mahsud, all issued statements specifically addressing the issue of Muslim civilian casualties. This unprecedented propaganda campaign was an illustration of the awkward balance the jihadists must strike in such circumstances; on one hand civilian deaths must be seen as regretful, while on the other they must find a way to legitimize these deaths so as not to constrain their ability to conduct such operations in future.

Conclusion

The natural feeling of revulsion felt by many Muslim audiences for what often appears to be indiscriminate violence by the jihadists may create what psychologists refer to as a “cognitive opening” – a moment in which an individual may be comparatively more susceptible to the influence of fresh ideas than under normal circumstances. Strategic communication (in this context, largely information campaigning whether by word of mouth or via a range of media) focusing on the human cost of Salafi-Jihadist violence – particularly the cost to Muslims – not to mention the questionable strategic wisdom displayed by al-Qaeda for permitting such operations in the first place, may help to challenge the claims of the jihadists to be legitimate political actors. [5] If they move swiftly enough, governments can capitalize on the tactical opportunities generated by the frequent jihadist operational excesses, striking first with one interpretation of events before the jihadists have an opportunity to spin the story their way.

However, as the trajectory of previous jihadist campaigns has shown, the Salafi-Jihadist movement's doctrinal rigidity, combined with strategic and operational necessity, means that they will likely continue to bear responsibility for a large proportion – if not the majority - of Muslim civilian deaths in conflict zones such as Afghanistan and Iraq. Therefore, government organizations are likely to be presented with many more opportunities in the years ahead to develop and refine their communications responses to such events.

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Notes:

1. A revealing study of collateral damage resulting from terrorist and insurgent violence was published in 2009 by the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point. “Deadly Vanguard – A Study of al-Qaeda's Violence Against Muslims” claims that only 15% of deaths resulting from al-Qaeda violence were Western nationals – the rest were citizens of various countries of the Muslim world. The study can be found at <http://www.ctc.usma.edu>.
2. Recent UN statistics on civilian killings by both insurgent and NATO / ISAF forces state that in the first six months of 2010, the Taliban and allied forces were responsible for 76% of civilian casualties – up from 53% last year. See BBC, August 10; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-10922405>.
3. “Open Interview with Ayman al-Zawahiri,” Al-Sahab Media Production Organization/al-Fajr Center for Media, April 2008.
4. Tajdeed.net, April 16, 2006. An English translation of this book can be found at: <http://www.thesis.haverford.edu/dspace/bitstream/10066/4607/3/AYL20080410.pdf>.
5. “Strategic communication” is a means of using words, actions, or a combination of both, to promote and sustain changes in a target audience's behavior. It is often preceded by a process of target audience analysis, which profiles an audience to determine what type of communication is most likely to promote and sustain that behavioral change. See *Strategic Communication: A Primer*, Commander S A Tatham, RN, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, December 2008.