

Talk or fight? Al Qaeda from centre to periphery¹

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This paper begins with a description of the stalemate between Al Qaeda (AQ) and the United States, and the two broad responses that have been proposed to deal with it: fighting AQ more effectively versus talking to it. It then describes the rationale for shifting attention away from Osama Bin Laden and the centre of AQ to the multiple groups and problems found at its periphery. Devolving engagement in this way requires disaggregating demands, evading global divides, and multiplying local and regional responses.

Once we shift attention from the centre of AQ to its periphery, engaging AQ becomes comparable to engaging other kinds of armed groups, regardless of how connected they may be to AQ itself.

The stalemate between Al Qaeda and the United States

On September 11, 2001 AQ conducted an attack that 'shocked and awed' the United States. The US responded by focusing its massive military might on destroying AQ by attacking it at its centre, Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, bolstered by support it had secured with its considerable diplomatic capital from an international coalition and the United Nations. It also pursued a further strategy of tightening the noose around AQ's funding, arms supplies, recruitment, ideologues, and supporters. Notwithstanding the overthrow of the Taliban regime and the expulsion of AQ from its base in Afghanistan, five years on the US war against AQ has reached a stalemate: despite these unprecedented intelligence, security, financial, and diplomatic efforts on a global scale Osama Bin Laden remains at large, AQ has not been defeated, and there is growing speculation that it possibly cannot be defeated, at least in the near term.

AQ has adapted successfully to the changed circumstances (brought about by the closure of its base in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime) by decentralizing and dispersing its operations, permitting the hostilities against the US and its allies to continue.³ At the same time, the failures of the US war on Iraq – including the failure to find weapons of mass destruction and the failure to build a post-Saddam order – have permitted the opposition against it to continue, if not grow.

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Contradictory responses: to fight smarter, or to talk more?

The stalemate against AQ has prompted two types of responses. The first deplors the distraction of Iraq and the diversion of US national security attention away from the focus on Bin Laden and AQ. This response argues that the current US approach, especially on Iraq, has multiplied the number of enemies poised against it, weakened its position in the world, and undermined its own citizens' security (by invading Iraq instead of focusing its military and intelligence apparatus on AQ). The second type of response urges recognizing AQ as a rational actor with clear political demands, and calls for negotiations with the group over these. The argument here is that such political engagement offers more promise than a prolonged military standoff.

While these responses appear to contradict each other, they share a common premise: both assume that the US (and its allies) should focus its attention primarily on Osama bin Laden and AQ, whether to defeat it by force or to bring the current hostilities to an end through political engagement. This paper challenges this assumption. The same factors that have allowed AQ to survive militarily and to bring the conflict to its current stalemate – namely, the group's ability to adapt to changing circumstances by decentralizing its operations – essentially moot political engagement with it at the centre. If the centre of AQ has less control over its periphery, the focus of engagement should increasingly be on the periphery instead of on Bin Laden and the centre.

Before assessing the comparison between and possible effects of these differing approaches, it may be useful to remind ourselves why states are interested in talking at all. In essence, they are the primary, though not the only, political entities challenged by armed groups. States become legitimate in part by being able to maintain political stability within a given territory. If a state cannot effectively police its internal borders and prevent threats from armed groups, it loses legitimacy. Moreover, because states mostly reject armed groups' legitimacy, they are unlikely to engage with them in any but coercive terms (through military or police forces). Here it matters little whether the state is capitalist, socialist, liberal or authoritarian, or whether the armed group is rightist, leftist, nationalist or religious. All states normally seek to suppress armed groups within their territory. Some states will succeed in these efforts, others will fail. It is only when they fail, that they will seriously consider the option of talking.

We turn back now to two of the possible responses to the AQ threat: the first – which can be labelled 'fight smarter' – argues for getting military and counterinsurgency operations right. This involves pulling out of Iraq, and sharply refocusing American strategies and tactics toward the original objective of defeating AQ⁴. While this position has much to be said for it (and there can be no disagreement about its assessment of the current predicament or about its calls for a more intelligent use of military and diplomatic resources), its principal shortcoming is that it may be too late to implement. Opposition to the United States and support for AQ have both increased in the region over the past several years. Moreover, AQ has already learned how to disperse and survive in response to US military pressures,

and it is arguably a more formidable adversary, and harder to annihilate, than in the past. To be sure, the possibility of a military defeat cannot be discounted outright (and the determination of whether it can or cannot be defeated are ultimately empirical questions beyond the scope of this essay), but it is not the only possible response to the current stalemate.

The second existing response also recognizes AQ as a formidable adversary, yet it comes to the opposite conclusion than the 'fight smarter' option. It reasons that because AQ eschews the framework of traditional military conflict, and because it has decentralized its operational structure, it will be very difficult to defeat militarily. Instead of a more intense military approach, this view (which might be labelled 'talk to them') argues for engaging AQ and Osama Bin Laden politically⁵. Contrary to common dismissals of it as an irrational and apocalyptic death cult that cannot be engaged, this view argues that Al Qaeda is a rational actor with clear political demands that it has articulated on repeated occasions⁶. These demands, the argument goes, boil down to ending the US presence in the Middle East, as well as its support for Israel's occupation of Palestine and its sponsorship of corrupt regimes in the region. This position suggests that if some of its grievances were met, AQ would cease its hostilities against the United States and other Western powers. The alternative – continuing the current course of action focusing on military defeat – is likely to perpetuate this conflict indefinitely.

What should we make of these contradictory alternatives? The 'fight smarter' option, as suggested above, ignores the increased difficulty of military operations against a durable AQ that has adapted successfully to attacks against it. This context appears perfectly to justify the oft-repeated axiom that an insurgent wins if it does not lose, and that a state loses if it does not win. The 'talk to them' option suffers from a different problem. Let us set aside the possible (and not inconsiderable) political obstacles to granting AQ the concessions necessary for ending its hostilities, which might include, for example, the US demand for oil, the difficulty in reforming entrenched authoritarian regimes in the region, and the pro-Israeli lobby in the US. But even without these obstacles, there is a powerful organizational problem: the very strategy that AQ has used successfully to survive – namely, disperse, diversify, and devolve – complicates its internal command and control operations: it is not clear in the "new" AQ in which the centre has devolved so much power to its periphery, that the centre could still deliver the periphery even if it were engaged to do so.

Curiously, while both the 'fight smarter' and the 'talk to them' positions may share the view of AQ as a much more diffusely networked organization, the success of their approach rests on AQ remaining a single entity, capable of commanding and controlling most of its peripheries. By contrast to both of these positions, this paper argues that we need to take AQ's dispersion more seriously as a political, military, organizational and analytical challenge. Paradoxically, the same dispersal strategies that have allowed the centre of AQ to survive by making it harder to target militarily, make it easier to ignore politically. In other words, the very adaptation that has led to the calls for talking to AQ – its flexibility and persistence – is also

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the strongest reason for not doing so. As the relationship between the group's centre and its peripheries becomes less vertical and more horizontal, efforts to engage it at the centre become less relevant, while efforts to engage its periphery become more so.

Seen this way, the conflict between AQ versus the United States and its allies begins to look less like a global clash between two formidable, even if asymmetrical, opponents, and more like a series of overlapping local, national, and regional conflicts with multiple players, some more connected than others. Similarly, AQ begins to look less like a single "transnational" terrorist organization capable of carrying out devastating attacks anywhere in the world, and more like a number of armed groups that are more or less allied to one another (and to some states), confronting and combating a number of states that are more or less allied with one another (as well as to some armed groups). These conflicts are more numerous than the single contest of the US against AQ, but they are also possibly more amenable to resolution, in part because some of these armed groups may be themselves, and also because we are more familiar with the tools – security, military, political, humanitarian and economic – that can be used to engage them locally, nationally and regionally.

In other words, the focus of our attentions should not be a single AQ centre, albeit with many peripheries. It should be a network of multiple centres and peripheries, with varying degrees of attachment to AQ and to Osama Bin Laden, and with varying degrees of commitments to political, ideological, or social projects espoused by AQ in each of their contexts. Each of these problems can and should be disengaged from the single divide between Islam and the West that the conflict with AQ suggests, and addressed autonomously, on their own terms.

Horizontal distinctions

The challenge this approach provides is to show how particular conflicts seen as sites of political and ideological contestation on a global scale could be recast as conflicts with their own dynamics that require a particular set of solutions⁷. This entails resisting the pressure to choose sides in the divide between the West and Islam; and thus refusing to fight it out politically, ideologically, and militarily, in Iraq, Israel-Palestine, Afghanistan, Syria, Lebanon, Indonesia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and even Europe, among many other places, as sites of great contestation between these two competing value systems. Instead, the argument goes, without engaging in the debate about whether or not there is a global divide, it is possible to tackle each problem in each of these areas (and others) separately.

In this sense, Iraq then becomes less a place where the best of the West is contesting the worst of Islamic radicalism, than a country undergoing a triple transition – from Saddam Hussein's Baath party dictatorship to multiparty democracy, from a Sunni dominated state to a multiethnic one, and from US occupation to self-government. Addressing each of these transitions has less to do with where we

stand on the Islam-West divide, than with what techniques we can use to address them and lessons we have learned from other places that can help us do so.

Similarly, the Israeli-Palestinian problem becomes a challenge of ending the occupation of a people, and installing a functioning democracy to permit them to govern themselves, while developing a viable economy that will sustain their lives. It is not a place where an outpost of the West is facing Islamic hostility. Saudi Arabia can be viewed as the challenge of transitioning from a theocratic kingdom to a more plural state. Also, under this prism, Afghanistan concerns the challenge of restoring basic institutions that can function in a country that has been ravaged by war and flattened by bombs for more than twenty-five years. Syria and Egypt are by contrast comparatively more straightforward, requiring essentially a process for electing a representative government. The issue of Islam in Europe is ultimately about including marginalized immigrant communities who first came as guest workers but who now feel that they are neither guests nor workers – into the socio-economic and political mainstream of a number of countries.

All of these challenges are familiar to us, not because we have always been successful in addressing them (we have not), but because we have dealt with them before in other parts of the globe. By dealing with the parts (democratic transition, immigration, pluralism, and institution-building) of the divide between Islam and the West, we need not deny that there may be a whole to it as well. We need only deny that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. There is not one global divide between Islam and West (or between its purported interlocutors, AQ and the United States), where sides are chosen and concessions made among these two competing agendas across a number of cases. Instead, there are a number of political, military, and humanitarian challenges in different places, which should be addressed as such. And, it is not always necessary to address the whole in order to tackle each part.

Vertical distinctions

Turning from the conflict contexts to the armed groups themselves, we cannot assume that even the groups at the AQ periphery necessarily share the centre's intentions and agenda. A number of groups are affiliated with AQ to different degrees, but even these have their own dynamics and agendas, with often little connection to the centre. For example, groups like the Abu Sayyaf (which appears motivated by combination of clan warfare and kidnapping for money), the Taliban (fighting against NATO occupation and for Islamic codes), and the AQ groups in Iraq, all have very different agendas and structures, which are not always or necessarily determined by Osama Bin Laden and the AQ centre.

These groups may well be interconnected, and share similar goals, across a range of different locations, though the extent to which they do is unknown. Yet notwithstanding these connections, for each region or state or actor, the local parts are sufficiently important to be worth tackling on their own terms. Furthermore,

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communicating directly with these ‘peripheries’ may help isolate and neutralize the centre, and make it more amenable to political or humanitarian concessions, or perhaps even make it irrelevant. It seems in the case of AQ that, though it may have started life in a different, perhaps more classically bureaucratic form with tight controls and information flow management, its centre may now have very little information about the operational details of each cell in its periphery, allowing them to operate with a maximum of stealth and flexibility⁸. This kind of operational structure provides significant benefits, not the least of which is that it is flexible and hard for outsiders to scrutinize, and it has proven very difficult to defeat militarily.

Paradoxically, as argued above, this flexibility may have made Osama Bin Laden and the centre of AQ less significant than in the past. While AQ’s resilience and survival make engaging it necessary, it is not at all clear whether engaging the organization’s top leadership would serve much purpose. Whether they would be able to deliver on any commitment – by being able to provide results in places not under their direct control – remains an open question⁹. Instead, ‘engaging Al Qaeda’ likely requires engaging a wide range of different types of armed groups, operating across a number of different places, often with diverse – and even contradictory – agendas¹⁰. Some of these groups operate in contexts like Iraq and Afghanistan, without an independent press, effective judicial system, or active and effective civil society to act as watchdogs over their actions. Groups that operate in other contexts (such as North America and Western Europe) will be more reined in by these institutions, which may be more in tracking information on different groups’ operations, membership, and support.

Conclusions

The calls for talking to AQ emerge because the group survives and continues to pose a threat. AQ has survived through its ability to adapt flexibly to changing circumstances, and by dispersing its operations after being forced to dismantle its base in Afghanistan. The paradox is that the reasons for talking to AQ are exactly the same reasons for not talking to its centre: the organization has survived by making the notion of a centre increasingly irrelevant. Therefore, engaging AQ means engaging a wide range of dispersed and decentralized groups and agents, with different structures and goals, even when they may be interconnected.

This raises some pointers about how that engagement might look: once the peripheries are taken seriously, engagement with AQ looks quite different. There is of course no reason not to engage the centre as well, but in a decentralized organization the peripheries matter. This kind of engagement may or may not involve issues of major international importance such as removing US troops from the Middle East, or curbing US support of Israel’s occupation of Palestine. It is likely, however, to involve more mundane local issues and problem solving, which will matter to groups at the peripheries.

Secondly, because engagement necessarily involves not only different groups but also different instruments, including the application of coercive force, it is difficult to draw sharp distinctions between negotiations (whether for political or humanitarian ends) and counterinsurgency. Instead of being sharply dichotomous, it is more useful to think of these as parts of a continuum of activities and options. Local problem-solving and political negotiation involves both coercive measures to establish order and control, as well as a more humanitarian approach to improve the lot of those who happen to live in these zones of violence.

Third, it is useful to think about this not in terms of two actors, but rather in terms of 'networks of engagement.' Once the peripheries are taken seriously, many actors become involved, and whole networks of different actors may be mobilized to engage armed groups for the purpose of binding them to different commitments and standards.

Fourth, the networks of engagement go both ways. From the perspective of AQ and its peripheries, as well as from the perspective of other armed groups in other places, there is no reason to suppose that engaging organizations like the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) or the ICRC should be seen as a way to engage the US government and its allies. Indeed, we dare hope that such an assessment on the part of armed groups themselves may result in less violence targeting independent humanitarian and development organizations.

Fifth, once the local dynamics are taken more seriously, we can see many other groups beyond AQ that also do not fit the standard categories of conflict, and which are at least as threatening to people's security in the areas in which they operate. For example, more people die of crime than of terrorism or (in recent years) warfare¹¹. Similarly, the stalemates between armed groups and authorities in places such as major Brazilian cities, Colombia, or parts of Central America, are as conceptually and politically challenging as the current one between AQ and the United States, and should also lead us to rethink standard approaches and frameworks. Groups that may have begun as criminal organizations pose significant political problems once they establish de facto control over large areas of a state's territory.

It is not possible in a brief essay such as this one to provide any more than a few suggestions about how to approach all these challenges. What is beyond doubt is that the time has come to shift our focus from the centre to the periphery of AQ. In so doing, we will begin to address the challenges posed by armed groups in general, regardless of their connections to AQ and its affiliates. ■

Endnotes

- 1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the seminar on Transnational and Non-State Armed Groups convened by the Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research at Harvard University in cooperation with the Graduate Institute of International Studies (Geneva), and the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, Cambridge, March 9–10, 2007. Readers wishing to view the full version, including a full set of bibliographic references, may contact info@hdcentre.org.

- 2 Dr. Ram Manikkalingam is an advisor to HD Centre and a visiting professor at the University of Amsterdam. He was senior advisor on the peace process to the former President of Sri Lanka, Chandrika Kumaratunga. Prior to that he led the Rockefeller Foundation's work in international peace and security. Dr. Pablo Policzer is an Assistant Professor and holder of the Canada Research Chair in Latin American Politics at the University of Calgary, where he also directs the Armed Groups Project.
- 3 There has not been another attack by Al Qaeda on American territory during these past five years, though there have been Al Qaeda-related attacks against US allies, including Britain, Spain, and Australia/Indonesia (in Bali).
- 4 Posen, Barry, "The Struggle against Terrorism: Grand Strategy, Strategy, and Tactics," *International Security* 26:3 (2002), pp. 39–55; "Exit Strategy: How to disengage from Iraq in 18 months," *Boston Review*, January/February 2006; Van Evera, Stephen W., "Assessing U.S. Strategy in the War on Terror," *The ANNAL of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 607:1 (2006), pp. 10–26.
- 5 Mohamedou, Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould, "Non-Linearity of Engagement: Transnational Armed Groups, International Law, and the Conflict between Al Qaeda and the United States," Program on Humanitarian Policy and Conflict Research, Harvard University, 2005.
- 6 See also Lawrence, Bruce, ed., *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*, New York: Verso, 2005.
- 7 cf Manikkalingam, Ram, "Islam, the West and Central America," *3 Quarks Daily*, March 27, 2006, http://3quarksdaily.blogspot.com/3quarksdaily/2006/03/temporary_colum.html
- 8 Refer to full paper referenced in endnote 1 (Manikkalingam and Policzer)
- 9 In 2006, the CIA closed Alec Station, its principal unit for "hunting Osama bin Laden and his top lieutenants." Reports indicate that the closure "reflects a view that AQ is no longer as hierarchical as it once was, . . . and a growing concern about Qaeda-inspired groups that have begun carrying out attacks independent of Mr. bin Laden and his top deputy, Ayman al Zawahiri" (Mazetti 2006). Other recent reports, however, suggest that AQ may have regrouped, and begun to once again create a more hierarchical form of organization (BBC 2006).
- 10 We do not reject the possibility that there might be some political benefit for the United States, say, to be seen to be engaging AQ or, at least, its political demands, and appear less belligerent, among some important sources of world opinion. There will of course be costs as well. We only say, here, that such 'talking at' AQ in the hope that others watching will shift allegiance is different from the approach of 'talking to' AQ in hopes that AQ itself will be able to deliver its peripheries. We thank Brian Burgoon for pointing out this distinction.
- 11 Human Security Centre 2005.