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A Dichotomy: The Waning of Al-Qaeda and the Spread of Salafism

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While analysts in the West fret over whether the power of Al-Qaeda is rising or diminishing, a more worrisome spread of Salafism is taking shape in the Arab World. PI Online examines the rebirth of that rigid ideological branch of Islam, under a new cloak.

Over the past few months, Western analysts have failed to reach consensus about whether the power of *Al-Qaeda* is diminishing. The recent debate between *Bruce Hoffman* and *Marc Sageman* is a prime example of this controversy. In his review of *Sageman's* book, "*Leaderless Jihad*",¹ Hoffman faults *Sageman* for dismissing the threat of *Al-Qaeda*. In response, *Sageman* appeared to disassociate himself from his own findings, which are aptly summarized in the title of his book. This surprising turn leaves us wondering why *Sageman* would, in essence, recant. Hoffman, of course, seized the opportunity to focus in on *Sageman's* retraction and his acknowledgment of the continuing threat of *Al-Qaeda*.

Joining the ranks of skeptics such as *Bruce Hoffman*, *Michael Moss* and several contributors published yesterday in the *New York Times* an article entitled "A Threat Renewed"². The article is a lengthy, disjointed account of Algeria's role in *Al-Qaeda*. It has been known for some time that *Al-Qaeda* is recruiting North African members (see PI Online "The Changing Face of Jihad – Culture Trumps Ideology"). *Moss's* article covers little that is new. In all probability the article is correct that there is some communication between *Al-Qaeda's* *Zawahiri* and Algerian commanders. That, however, does not constitute proof of their claim that *Al-Qaeda* is strengthening. The only recent evidence *Moss* cites in support of his claim that *Al-Qaeda* is coordinating operations in Algeria is the interception of *Zawahiri's* letter to the Algerian commander, *Droukdal*, asking him to avenge the republishing of the Danish cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad. If that letter represents the extent of *Zawahiri's* "leadership" role in Algeria, the intelligence community must be breathing easier.

In the second article³ in *New York Times*, *Mark Mazzetti* and *David Rohde* exhibit a rudimentary understanding of the current situation in Pakistan and make the unsupported representation that the strength of the Taliban in the Northwest tribal region represents a serious terrorist threat to the United States. The authors conclude by quoting terrorist experts warning that "it is only a matter of time before a major terrorist attack planned in the mountains of Pakistan is carried out on American soil." In fact, such an attack, if it were to come, could just as well have been planned in London, Cairo or Riyadh. The present situation with the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan has little, if anything, to do with mastering an attack on U.S. soil or strengthening the *Al-Qaeda* movement.

¹ [The Myth of Grass-Roots Terrorism, Why Osama bin Laden Still Matters by Bruce Hoffman – FOREIGN AFFAIRS May/June 2008](#)

² [A THREAT RENEWED -In Algeria, Insurgency Gains a Lifeline From Al Qaeda By MICHAEL MOSS – The New York Times July 1st, 2008](#) – other contributors to the article are Souad Mekhennet, Eric Schmitt, Elaine Sciolino and Margot Williams

³ [Amid U.S. Policy Disputes, Qaeda Grows in Pakistan, by Mark Mazzetti and David Rohde – The New York Times June 30, 2008](#)

Two well researched articles illustrate the weaknesses in the arguments of the skeptics and support the conclusions in Sageman's book. "The Unraveling"⁴ by Bergen and Cruickshank concludes that *Al-Qaeda* is on the wane. Similarly, *Lawrence Wright's* article "The Rebellion Within"⁵ argues that *Al-Qaeda's* is not totally finished, but its power is diminishing fast. As an operational movement, *Al-Qaeda* has, for some time, been losing its grip on the emerging loosely organized Jihadi movements. The strategic military commands of *Bin Ladin* and *Zawahiri* have given way to ideological messages designed to influence Muslims at large, rather than address specific targets.

Writing this week in the newspaper *Al-Hayat*,⁶ *Murad Batal Al-Shishani* touched upon this controversy among Western analysts and made several interesting points. On the question of ideology, he considers the shift of figures such as Dr. Fadl (see PI Online Special series) and *Sheikh Al-Awdah* as major events influencing the movement. The rift between these "reformed" men and *Bin Ladin* however dates from the 1990's and, as *Al-Shishani* correctly points out, their present impact on the true believers is certain to be minimal. The point, however, is that *Al-Qaeda's* pool of recruits, which has shifted from Egypt to Saudi Arabia and, most recently, North Africa, seems to be operating in a disjointed, localized fashion without much international reach. The retreat suffered by the movement in Iraq has also destabilized their operations and created several small decentralized movements, separated from the core leadership of *Al-Qaeda*. As the Iraqi population and the tribal chiefs have turned against *Al-Qaeda*, the rest of the Arab World has become more critical and has begun disassociating from the movement, which is seen as fostering Muslim-on-Muslim violence.

While on the one hand it is difficult to evaluate the long-term prospects for Jihad, there is ample evidence that non-violent ideological fanaticism is on the rise in Muslim societies. It is this trend that analysts should be watching. They are so focused on *Al-Qaeda*, however, that they are ignoring this underlying current permeating the rest of Muslim society. While the Jihadists of *Al-Qaeda* have been declining, the essential ideology of Salafism has been on the rise.

Although scholars may disagree on the characteristics that define the Salafi movement, or on the distinctions between the different Salafi currents in the Muslim World, there appears to be a definite upward trend in the number of people who identify with some form of Salafism. The expanding use of the "Salafi" label makes analysis of this trend difficult. In addition to the more violent "Jihadi Salafi Movement", we now encounter "The Moderate Salafi Current" and "The Scholarly Salafi Current" and the "Reform Salafi Current". All of these Salafi-Sunni currents, however, have one thing in common – a conservative, rigid strain of Islam. These Salafis are presently non-violent and most, except in Kuwait, are not political. Nevertheless, some supporters of the politically active Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, such as analyst *Khalil Al-Anani*, are critical of the expansionist ambitions of what they consider a rival Salafi movement.

Al-Anani explains⁷ that the Brotherhood wants to participate in the political process shaping society while Salafism advocates isolation from modern society with a focus on strict religious observance and the afterlife. The rise of ultra-conservative but apolitical Salafism is juxtaposed

⁴ [The Unraveling - by Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank – The New Republic – June 11th, 2008](#)

⁵ [The Rebellion Within, by Lawrence Wright – The New Yorker June 2nd, 2008](#)

⁶ Murad Batal Al-Shishani - Dar Al-Hayat Newspaper – 6/29/2008

Source: <http://www.daralhayat.com/special/features/06-2008/Article-20080628-cfbobdec-coa8-10ed-0007-ae6d458f60db/storv.html>

⁷ Dar Al Hayat – June 4th, 2008 source: <http://www.daralhayat.com/opinion/06-2008/Item-20080603-4fa38dda-coa8-10ed-0165-7e5ac7387520/storv.html>

against the politically active Brotherhood, which is currently suffering from a split in its ranks and a lack of new blood in its leadership. *Al-Anani* correctly points out that Arab leaders prefer the politically non-threatening Salafis to groups such as the Brotherhood, which challenge their regimes. The Saudis, with their Wahabi-style Salafism, may also welcome the spread of Salafism from the mountains of Afghanistan to the shores of the Nile, which could leave them feeling less culturally isolated and could relieve pressure on the Saudis to reform, despite the best intentions of the King.

While the West must guard against a resurgence of violent Jihad, focusing solely on Al-Qaeda will not suffice. Arab leaders, and the West, must concentrate more broadly on the threat posed by the spread of the brand of Salafism practiced in Saudi Arabia, sought in Kuwait, adopted by the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and rising in Egypt. Only by understanding and counteracting this growing trend will we have any chance of averting a large-scale clash between the West and the Muslim world.

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