



UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE www.usip.org

SPECIAL REPORT

1200 17th Street NW • Washington, DC 20036 • 202.457.1700 • fax 202.429.6063

ABOUT THE REPORT

Colonel John M. “Matt” Venhaus is the Jennings Randolph Army Fellow. He is a career psychological operations officer experienced with foreign media influence operations throughout Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. This study marries his operational experience gained while commanding the Joint Psychological Operations Task Force, whose missions included reducing the flow of foreign fighters in the U.S. Central Command’s area of responsibility, with his academic research as a Senior Service College Fellow. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Army, Department of Defense, or U.S. government.

Colonel John M. “Matt” Venhaus, U.S. Army

Why Youth Join al-Qaeda

Summary

- Interviews and personal histories of 2,032 “foreign fighters” show that rather than be recruited, young men actively seek out al-Qaeda and its associated movements.
- Al-Qaeda is more than just an organization; it is an ideology and a popular global brand that spins a heroic narrative with an idealized version of Islamic jihad.
- Al-Qaeda’s ubiquitous message of anti-Muslim oppression and global jihad appeals to the developmental needs of adolescents.
- To defeat al-Qaeda, it is crucial to understand who seeks to join and why.
- Common myths and misconceptions about why young men join extremist movements ignore the proximate causes.
- Potential recruits have an unfulfilled need to define themselves. Al-Qaeda’s ability to turn them to violence is rooted in what each seeks: Revenge seekers need an outlet for their frustration, status seekers need recognition, identity seekers need a group to join, and thrill seekers need adventure.
- To prevent radicalization, calm the revenge seeker with programs to vent his frustration (e.g., sports, creative arts, political discussion outlets, young adult mentors); promote the status seeker with opportunities to show off his self-perceived talents (e.g., local political participation, international exchange programs, positive public media depictions of young Muslims); give the identity seeker groups to join (sports leagues, model governments, student societies, community service programs, adventure groups); and turn off the thrill seeker by tarnishing al-Qaeda’s image.
- Fragmented efforts of public diplomacy, strategic communications, and information operations are underresourced, poorly coordinated, and understaffed given the strength and pervasiveness of al-Qaeda’s message.
- A U.S. Strategic Communications Agency should be established to consolidate efforts under a cabinet-level secretary of strategic communications; execute a presidentially approved national communications strategy; manage funding of all U.S. communications programs; enable, empower, support, and reinforce credible existing voices in the Muslim world; build U.S. message credibility with honest, transparent dialogue that closes the “say-do” gap in recent foreign policy; and collect, synthesize, and analyze public opinion research.

© 2010 by the United States Institute of Peace.
All rights reserved.

SPECIAL REPORT 236

MAY 2010

CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Common Myths about Al-Qaeda Recruits	4
Al-Qaeda’s Message and the Media Environment	6
The Four Seekers	8
A Radicalization Prevention Strategy	11
Policy Recommendations	16
Conclusion	18

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan institution established and funded by Congress. Its goals are to help prevent and resolve violent conflicts, promote post-conflict peacebuilding, and increase conflict management tools, capacity, and intellectual capital worldwide. The Institute does this by empowering others with knowledge, skills, and resources, as well as by its direct involvement in conflict zones around the globe.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

J. Robinson West (Chair), Chairman, PFC Energy, Washington, D.C. • **George E. Moose** (Vice Chairman), Adjunct Professor of Practice, The George Washington University, Washington, D.C. • **Anne H. Cahn**, Former Scholar in Residence, American University, Washington, D.C. • **Chester A. Crocker**, James R. Schlesinger Professor of Strategic Studies, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. • **Ikram U. Khan**, President, Quality Care Consultants, LLC, Las Vegas, Nev. • **Kerry Kennedy**, Human Rights Activist • **Stephen D. Krasner**, Graham H. Stuart Professor of International Relations at Stanford University • **Jeremy A. Rabkin**, Professor of Law, George Mason University, Arlington, Va. • **Judy Van Rest**, Executive Vice President, International Republican Institute, Washington, D.C. • **Nancy Zirkin**, Executive Vice President, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights

MEMBERS EX OFFICIO

Michael H. Posner, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor • **James N. Miller**, Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy • **Ann E. Rondeau**, Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy; President, National Defense University • **Richard H. Solomon**, President, United States Institute of Peace (nonvoting)

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

To request permission to photocopy or reprint materials, e-mail: permissions@usip.org

Introduction

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the “underwear bomber,” wrote in an online forum, “I do not have a friend, I have no one to speak to, no one to consult, no one to support me, and I feel depressed and lonely. I do not know what to do.”¹ His sentiments are typical of the isolated youth who finds an Internet chat room or a local student group where the friendly, welcoming voice of al-Qaeda is waiting. To inform a prevention strategy that diminishes the appeal of Islamic radicalization and dissuades potential recruits, the United States must understand this relationship.

When young men such as Abdulmutallab ponder the great questions of life, they are given a very short list of choices. Al-Qaeda presents itself as the most direct path to satisfying their needs, by providing a clear narrative that appeals to their concerns. To defeat al-Qaeda, it is crucial to understand who seeks to join and why, and what makes al-Qaeda appeal to them. This study traces al-Qaeda fighters’ paths backward from violent extremist actions to the thoughts and decisions of confused and malleable adolescents. This allows a better understanding of what motivates those who join al-Qaeda.

Several contributing factors and environmental conditions are frequently proffered as root causes of terrorism. This study debunks some of the myths and popular misconceptions about extremist motivations, focusing instead on potential recruits’ early development. Al-Qaeda seekers have characteristics common to other youths coming of age, but they choose the path toward violent extremism because al-Qaeda’s message fulfills specific needs. Individual seekers have distinct psychological, societal, economic, and cultural factors motivating them to pursue al-Qaeda membership or affiliation.

Seekers of al-Qaeda are relatively few in number, but they are not homogeneous in motivation. There are revenge seekers looking for an outlet for their frustration, status seekers looking for recognition, identity seekers looking for a group they can belong to, and thrill seekers looking for adventure. This study attempts to clarify each group’s motivations and explain how individuals within each group view the world.

The principal contribution of this study is a prevention-and-communications strategy targeting the specific mental framework and psychological needs of each type of seeker. It is designed to reduce al-Qaeda’s appeal and present youths who are highly susceptible to radicalization, or “at risk,” with an alternative narrative to the al-Qaeda message. The alternative narrative meets the underlying needs and desires while providing appealing choices besides al-Qaeda membership. This will lead to a reduced number of al-Qaeda members and hasten the organization’s overall defeat.

What is “al-Qaeda”?

The term “al-Qaeda” has become a popular shorthand for a specific type of violent Islamic extremism and includes several different terrorist organizations and groups. Like most terms of convenience, it sacrifices some accuracy for utility. For purposes of this study, “al-Qaeda” is considered in its broadest sense: as the consolidation of global Islamic terrorist organizations and affiliations that share a common philosophy and worldview. The broad group has five parts:

- *Strategic leadership*: Often referred to as “al-Qaeda Central,” and most likely residing in Pakistan, this includes the movement’s core leadership and senior-level managers and strategists.² Although it provides guidance, funding, and strategic direction, it does not directly control many aspects of al-Qaeda in the broader sense. It does, however, provide a powerful message to followers and actively foments unrest throughout the Muslim world and beyond.

- *Affiliated and associated movements*: These are groups that receive varying levels of support from the strategic leadership, but they are independent franchises of the brand rather than direct subordinates. Some have taken funding and received training; others have simply adopted the moniker to declare their commitment to al-Qaeda's principles. These include al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Shabab in Somalia, the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (also known as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb), and a host of smaller groups and movements that have aligned themselves with al-Qaeda's principles.
- *Independent adherents*: These are either former combatants no longer associated with an organized group or organization, or self-radicalized individuals who declare their membership. Some may have spent time in al-Qaeda training camps, but many have merely read about the movement and decided to adopt its teachings. Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab and Major Nadal Hasan are examples from this group.
- *Ideology*: Rooted in the writings of Sayyid Qutb, Abdullah Azzam, and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, the ideology rejects pluralism and democracy to portray an Islamic world under siege by the West. In the ideologues' view, the only solution is for a vanguard of Muslims to mobilize the entire Muslim world to rise up and destroy the West and the apostate regimes that support it, through violent jihad, until every country in the Middle East is ruled by Islamic law.³
- *Brand identity*: Despite the violent, nihilistic, antirational, millenarian ideology espoused by its theorists, al-Qaeda is a popular brand identity widely recognized and sought after by many in the Muslim world. It is also the label that Western journalists immediately attach to most acts of violence even when there is no evidence to support a connection.⁴

The most important distinction between al-Qaeda and other organizations or individuals who use or espouse violent measures to achieve political ends is that al-Qaeda's primary objective is to reestablish an Islamic caliphate through violent conflict with the United States and its allies in the West. It believes that the nationalistic anti-imperialism and Pan-Arabism that arose in the twentieth century failed to solve the endemic problems of the Islamic community. It advocates complete upheaval of the global order and sees no room for compromise, gradual change, or reform within the existing states that occupy the lands where its caliphate is to be.⁵

The Dataset

This analysis focuses on al-Qaeda members and affiliates who travel outside their home countries to train or fight under the banner of al-Qaeda. These "foreign fighters" are nonindigenous, nonterritorialized combatants who left the relative safety of home to participate in a conflict primarily against the United States and its allies. This excludes local insurgents and ethnonationalistic fighters and includes the 9/11 hijackers, 7/7 bombers, and others who used terrorist tactics to attack or attempt to attack the United States, its foreign interests, or other Western countries.

Those traveling across international boundaries under the auspices of foreign governments or traveling against their will were excluded from study. To accurately assess motivation, voluntary association with al-Qaeda or its objectives is required.

The data include only men because there was no reliable information showing that women crossed international boundaries to fight, and no conclusive evidence of women from foreign countries on any of the battlefields. It may be that the restrictions on travel for Muslim women contributed to this phenomenon, but there is insufficient data to derive reliable conclusions.

Finally, the data is limited to those who professed an association with al-Qaeda or another global Islamic extremist movement whose objectives were not limited to local

Despite the violent, nihilistic, antirational, millenarian ideology espoused by its theorists, al-Qaeda is a popular brand identity widely recognized and sought after by many in the Muslim world.

issues. In all, 2,032 individuals met the screening criteria and provided sufficient information for analysis.

The analysis of these cases draws on various sources. The most prevalent were interview reports from fighters detained by Coalition forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.⁶ These data were augmented with information from captured documents,⁷ journalists' interviews with families and friends, and public records of personal histories. The depth, nature, and quality of the reports vary widely, which introduces some uncertainty into the analysis.

This population represents one of the largest datasets of al-Qaeda recruits studied to date. Still, comprehensive data on all aspects of any elusive and chameleonic organization is difficult to obtain. Continued study is necessary as more information becomes available. Because this sample relies heavily on which fighters are captured and which ones destroy themselves before capture, it cannot be perfectly random; nevertheless, clear trends emerge across cases from various situations and time periods. The data allows the identification of trends, commonalities, general impressions, and recurrent themes, but it does not provide the statistical rigor necessary to support classic academic or predictive analysis. There was no control group or baseline study against which to compare the results of the interviews.

Common Myths about Al-Qaeda Recruits

The al-Qaeda terrorist who, quite literally, explodes onto the world stage is in a much different mental state from the impressionable young person who entered the recruiting and training pipeline.

The al-Qaeda terrorist who, quite literally, explodes onto the world stage is in a much different mental state from the impressionable young person who entered the recruiting and training pipeline. Many al-Qaeda fighters appear to have led normal lives before leaving the relative safety and security of home and family. When they become foreign fighters, they travel great distances to kill innocent people they have never met, in the name of an organization they may not even have joined, for a cause they may not fully comprehend. They make a mental transition so that distant events seem so personal and so egregious that they are compelled to join someone else's fight. Each has his own motivation to join an extremist movement, but there are five things that he is *not*.⁸

First, he is not crazy. After the radicalization and indoctrination process, his actions may appear utterly insane and irrational to an outside observer, but the young person who entered the process was mentally stable. As forensic psychiatrist and counterterrorism expert Marc Sageman has noted, individuals who suffer from antisocial personality disorders are untrustworthy and likely to compromise the security of a clandestine organization such as al-Qaeda. They are either kicked out or choose to leave when they discover that the essence of suicide terrorism is a willingness to sacrifice for the greater good.⁹ The difficulties of locating information and training, combined with the need to maintain secrecy and interact reliably with other members during the vetting process, could not be managed by an unstable mind. In a review of the social psychology of a wide range of terrorist groups, Clark McCauley and M. E. Segal conclude, "The best documented generalization is negative; terrorists do not show any striking psychopathology."¹⁰ The foreign fighters studied for this report who were in custody were all given full medical and psychiatric evaluations, and they show similar results. Antisocial behavior was clearly present in all, but they did not show signs of any clinical psychosis. This seems obvious when one considers insanity and recruiting. If all al-Qaeda recruits were insane, there would be a far smaller pool to draw from. And there would be far fewer potential recruits in the pipeline, because clinical psychoses are not easily or quickly acquired. During processing through the al-Qaeda pipeline, the recruit might well take on the outward appearance of instability infused with zealotry, but true mental disorders were almost entirely absent.

Second, the al-Qaeda recruit does not fit easily into an economic profile. Some individuals studied had been unemployed for years and were living in poverty, while others came from privileged backgrounds and relative wealth. Those with the means financed their own travel, and those without means found sponsors willing to pick up the tab. As Daniel Pipes of the Middle East Forums notes, radical Islamic ideologies, like other contemporary ideologically based movements, use the rhetoric of economic oppression to enhance their argument; however, their subjects are generally not drawn from the ranks of the desperately poor.¹¹ A young Saudi captured while trying to cross into Iraq revealed that he was promoted at work and in line for a substantial pay raise just before he joined a local jihadist group. His is not an isolated case. Among the subjects studied, economic motivations were the least cited reason for joining a terrorist organization.

Third, al-Qaeda recruits do not become terrorists because they are Muslim. They actually have an inadequate understanding of their own religion, which makes them vulnerable to misinterpretations of the religious doctrines. In general, they do not come from strong religious backgrounds. Almost universally, they either had an incomplete religious education or were raised in a household where the faith was routinely practiced but was not a dominating force. Whether their instruction came from a poorly funded madrassa in Pakistan or radical preaching at the only mosque in their small European town, they typically were exposed to a very narrow interpretation of Islam. Their teachers and religious leaders valued memorization of key phrases over rigorous analysis of the texts. They were not exposed to the over 1,400 years of Quranic commentary and scholarship, nor were they invited to question their instructors on finer points. For al-Qaeda to insert a skewed view of Islamic teachings into their heads, there was clearly some religious wiggle room in their early development, because they did not clearly define themselves in terms of a particular sect or religious dogma. As a result, they could become zealous adherents to an unorthodox and distorted version of Islam. History is replete with examples of religious arguments being used to justify the violent redress of grievances. Regardless of the primary religion involved, small groups play up selected passages of religious texts into guiding principles to manipulate the uninformed and justify violent behavior.¹² The same was true in these cases.

The fourth myth is that these young men were initially approached by an al-Qaeda recruiter. Partly because of their nomadic lifestyle, al-Qaeda cadres do not actively approach potential recruits to join the movement. The young men studied in this project more often followed the “bunch of guys” theory proposed by Marc Sageman, in which individual recruits sought out information about al-Qaeda through friends and associates.¹³ The first step was usually taken by the individual, not the organization.

To generate interest, al-Qaeda has developed and aggressively promoted a global brand. Al-Qaeda is coterminous with the arrival of new media capabilities, most notably satellite television and Internet chat, which have allowed it to create an aspirational brand identity through careful public positioning worthy of the savviest product marketers. Individuals become aware of the brand and seek more information about it long before they meet an al-Qaeda member or recruiter.

The al-Qaeda legend portrays the group as the acme of jihad, and this legend is its greatest asset. It is a glorious, wispy presence, just out of reach, which only the most dedicated, most committed, and purest of heart can hope to obtain. The posters are much better than the reality, but the legend is nonetheless pervasive and persuasive. Al-Qaeda does not so much recruit as position itself for only the most driven; then it allows them to petition for membership. The vast majority of subjects in this study had either approached a friend or relative in the movement or independently sought information on the Internet or in a mosque known for supporting al-Qaeda.

Although radical Islamic ideologies use the rhetoric of economic oppression to enhance their argument, their subjects are generally not drawn from the ranks of the desperately poor.

The al-Qaeda legend portrays the group as the acme of jihad. It is a glorious, wispy presence, just out of reach, which only the most dedicated, most committed, and purest of heart can hope to obtain.

Finally, al-Qaeda is not everywhere. There are more than 1.5 billion Muslims worldwide, yet those who have joined al-Qaeda, both living and dead, number only in the thousands. Most of the world has seen al-Qaeda's message, but few travel to another country to fight. U.S. and other Western governmental policies that restrict Muslims' freedom or target restrictive security practices at Muslims alienate entire populations. A belief that Western civilization is hurtling toward an existential clash with Islam does not help us understand and reduce the pool of potential recruits to violent extremist movements, because statistically, these policies more often target innocent people who are seeking to live peacefully.

With the common myths removed, the young men under study who were attracted to al-Qaeda displayed the emotional struggle for purpose, direction, and identity that is common in adolescent development in most cultures.¹⁴ Their experiences and surroundings have shaped them, but their desire to establish a role in society, and the thwarting of that desire are the true catalyst for their affiliation with al-Qaeda.

Al-Qaeda's Message and the Media Environment

Al-Qaeda is an ideology and a popular global brand that employs terrorism as a tactic to further its goals. Like other groups throughout history, it uses terrorism as a "genre of symbolic communications" rather than a military tactic.¹⁵ The psychological impact of the deed is more important than the physical results of the fight. Al-Qaeda stands out for its focus on martyrdom and death. As al-Qaeda spokesman Maulana Inyadullah once said, "The Americans love Pepsi-Cola, we love death."¹⁶ Al-Qaeda elevates death to its most heroic and fabled abstractions. Among the subjects of this study, the Quranic passages relating to *ishtishad*, or the act of martyrdom, were among the most frequently quoted. The subjects often spoke of "achieving" death, and their disappointment at being prevented from killing themselves was readily apparent.

Al-Qaeda is peripatetic, migrating from place to place as conditions warrant or allow. When enough attention or combat power is focused on its current location, it relocates to a place where the local government is either supportive or ineffective. Therefore, it cannot be defeated in a place; it must be defeated as a concept. A successful countermessaging strategy would destroy the psychological appeal of the al-Qaeda brand by dissolving and displacing the feelings that draw young men to it. If no one seeks out al-Qaeda, it will cease to exist. If no one makes the sacrifice necessary to become a member or start a franchise operation, al-Qaeda will disappear. And if those who seek al-Qaeda continue their steady aspiration to belong, no amount of physical force will adequately protect the United States and its allies from future attacks.

Al-Qaeda uses satellite television and ubiquitous user-generated content on the Internet to reinvigorate pan-Muslim identity with a vengeful, defiant underdog narrative in which Islam is under constant and global attack by a monolithic adversary. Al-Qaeda's leaders are effective and prolific communicators who have benefited from the extended reach of modern communications, continuous news coverage, sympathetic television outlets, and the Internet in ways unimaginable to leaders of previous movements. Unlike newspapers, pamphlets, radio, or even terrestrial television broadcasts, the Internet has the ability to carry al-Qaeda's message quickly and directly to millions of people around the world.¹⁷ With each new posting or forwarded link, al-Qaeda's message is repeated and echoed throughout cyberspace. Constant repetition increases both its likelihood of retention and its credibility in the minds of its target audiences.

Al-Qaeda uses a shifting array of forums, primarily through three media entities—*Fajr*, the Global Islamic Media Front, and *As Sahab*—to maintain a daily flow of consistently and systematically branded information on the Internet and in traditional media.¹⁸ These three

***As al-Qaeda spokesman Maulana
Inyadullah once said, "The
Americans love Pepsi-Cola, we
love death."***

media production and distribution enterprises receive information for various groups that are either affiliated with or sympathetic to al-Qaeda, and post them to locations around the Internet where they will be most easily viewed by the largest number of people. Al-Qaeda uses these organizations to distance itself from direct distribution, for security purposes. No other terrorist organization is so adept at using the Internet to allow unprompted recruits to seek membership.¹⁹

Terrorist movements of earlier decades often had to struggle for notoriety outside the geographic area of their activities. The rapid advancement of Internet technology, with social networking and user-generated content becoming widely available, has made it possible for al-Qaeda and its associated movements in the twenty-first century to expand their reach. The brand is globally referenced, and its leaders frequently state the importance of managing its public reputation. Ayman al-Zawahiri declared, "More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media."²⁰ Al-Qaeda's chief propagandist and the emir of the Global Islamic Media Front, who goes by the *nom de guerre* Saladin II, exhorted the faithful, "Unite, O Muslims of the World. . . . Set up squadrons of media jihad to break Zionist control over the media and terrorize the enemies."²¹ Because it relies so heavily on global redistribution of its message beyond local news media, al-Qaeda must be more aware of its public identity than other terrorist organizations in history.²² In managing its global identity, it must maintain constant flow of information and updates to remain prominent in the public consciousness.

Besides constant references on satellite television and the Internet, al-Qaeda also uses low-tech methods of distribution. Audiotapes, written sermons, and CDs or DVDs were given to almost all subjects of this study to answer their questions about current events. Typically, a young person who was confused or curious about an aspect of Islam or current events would be given a taped sermon or taken to a local mosque where he would be presented with al-Qaeda's perspectives and interpretations. Many fighters were captured with tapes in their possession, and they revealed during their interviews that these tapes were highly valued. The new members carried them as status symbols, and cell leaders encouraged recruits to share the tapes with friends.

When radical sermons, both live and taped, are combined with regular Internet glorification, a constant buzz develops around al-Qaeda, and it becomes the aspirational brand. It can easily be seen as the only answer to a young man whose head is full of questions. As noted veteran terrorism researcher Brian Michael Jenkins explains, "The recruiting vocabulary focuses on humiliation, shame and guilt, contrasted with dignity, duty and honor."²³ The seeker eventually sees al-Qaeda as having a ready answer for everything, and the path to success is clearly illuminated.

In every conceivable form of media, including talk on the streets, the seeker finds al-Qaeda mentioned as a legendary entity. Al-Qaeda offers a coherent worldview with a simplistic, unitary explanation of ostensibly disparate phenomena that neatly packages the seeker's frustrations with the struggles of Muslims across the globe.²⁴ In this narrative, there are only two choices: continue to suffer or join us and fight.

Symbols of glory are mixed with honors bestowed on young men who have found their calling, their place, and defined their lives. This idealized version of Islamic jihad spins a heroic narrative and removes the doubt that young men feel about their place in the world, replacing it with purpose and direction. Al Qaeda's message offers the opportunity for self-selection, and an inroad to joining the virtual *umma*, or community of the faithful. Although the young seeker may have previously experienced disappointment in his interactions with Muslim society, he sees this as a chance to reconnect to something greater than himself.

It is difficult for Westerners to comprehend the level of glorification that exists. Before a seeker crosses the threshold to knock on the al-Qaeda clubhouse door, his ears are filled with a cacophonous din of extremist rhetoric. The current media environment in portions

Al-Qaeda offers a coherent worldview that neatly packages the seeker's frustrations with the struggles of Muslims across the globe. In this narrative, there are only two choices: continue to suffer or join us and fight.

Videos of past and future volunteers; photos of martyrs on leaflets, posters, and calendars; and the reenactment of martyrdom operations in pageants and school plays all serve to justify and glorify the act of suicide bombing.

of the Middle East presents impressionable youths with the idea that there are no viable positive alternatives to al-Qaeda. In 2007, over 4,500 jihadist Web sites were disseminating al-Qaeda's ideology, sponsoring chats, and facilitating discussions about the role of young Muslims in the modern world.²⁵ The number of sites continues to grow, as do blogs and postings on YouTube and other social networking sites. Al-Qaeda also maintains an online library of several thousand books and articles by major jihadist authors.

On television news in Lebanon, the "Mothers of Martyrs" are interviewed regularly. They speak of pride in their sons' accomplishment, and they are portrayed as pillars of both the faith and the community. Videos of past and future volunteers; photos of martyrs on leaflets, posters, and calendars; and the reenactment of martyrdom operations in pageants and school plays all serve to justify and glorify the act of suicide bombing.²⁶ Regardless of its originating location, the glorification of fighting is generalized when satellite television broadcasts local information to regional audiences.

The Four Seekers

The potential al-Qaeda recruits who live in this highly charged media environment are vectorless energy looking for guidance and direction. They want to understand who they are, why they matter, and what their role in the world should be. They have an unfulfilled need to define themselves, which al-Qaeda offers to fill. Throughout the interviews and in all the statements of those who crossed the threshold and began the indoctrination process, the recurring theme was that they all were looking for something. Al-Qaeda's ability to turn them to violence is rooted in the fundamental nature of their search. Based on what they are seeking, they fall into one of four broad categories: revenge seekers, status seekers, identity seekers, and thrill seekers. A discussion of what they are looking for leads directly into how their path can change.

It is important to note that these are categories of *potential* recruits, not of al-Qaeda members or vigorous supporters. Once a young man has "crossed the threshold" and begun the indoctrination process, his information environment changes dramatically. He is isolated and indoctrinated and his worldview altered to a point of cultlike zealotry that makes him psychologically unlike his preindoctrination state. Once a potential recruit has entered the pipeline, he is no longer an appropriate target for counterradicalization through positive influence, because he is unlikely even to hear an opposing message, and the chance that he will be free to respond to it or interpret it objectively is minuscule.

Second, these are not homegrown insurgents rising up against their government to join insurgent or separatist movements. Their willingness to leave their homeland makes them distinct in their motivations and uniquely dangerous to the United States and its allies. Problems of domestic terrorism or insurgent violence, although related, are drawn from different motivations.

The Revenge Seeker: Looking for an Outlet for Frustration

The first of the four seekers, the revenge seeker, perceives himself as a victim in society. In his logic, external forces are causing his unhappiness and making it hard for him to succeed. More accurately, he doesn't know why he feels angry, so he is looking for something to be angry about. The flames of his anger can be fueled by any number of minor slights, from a schoolyard rivalry to a romantic rebuff, until he is filled with frustration and rage. Psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut described this as "narcissistic rage . . . the need for revenge, for righting a wrong, for undoing a hurt by whatever means, and a deeply anchored, unrelenting compulsion in the pursuit of all of these aims."²⁷ Many of the subjects interviewed for this study initially claimed that their reason for fighting was to punish the West for its attacks on

Muslims. As the discussions progressed, however, it became clear that they had been angry with members of their families, especially their fathers, or had been involved in neighborhood disputes and squabbles before becoming interested in al-Qaeda.

Middle Eastern Muslim culture expert Marvin Zonis notes that Arab societies value the honor and dignity of the individual more than personal liberty. When the principles of honor and dignity confront the devastating failures of many Middle Eastern states to achieve prominence in the world, the result is a profound and omnipresent humiliation and rage that is palpable throughout the region.²⁸ Although separating the anger that they felt before joining al-Qaeda from the anger generated by extremist rhetoric was occasionally difficult, it was clear in nearly 30 percent of the cases that young men had sought al-Qaeda because they were angry.

In many ways, the revenge seeker is similar to someone who joins a local movement, whether political or militant, to try to change the political conditions he lives in. The major difference is that the revenge seeker who becomes a foreign fighter must elevate his anger to perceive a slight that he has never personally or physically experienced. To satisfy his need for revenge, he must rage against something that he has only vicariously experienced. Foreign fighters who fell into the revenge seekers' category often showed signs of an inflated sense of self-worth. They believed that only they could set the world aright. Al-Qaeda's propaganda fuels their anger and channels it toward the United States, giving them both purpose and direction.

Since the revenge seeker is most attracted to al-Qaeda's message of intent to lash out against the West, which he sees as responsible for the ills of the Muslim community, he must be shown other ways to vent his anger. To divert a revenge seeker from the path of violent extremism, he must be given an outlet for his anger and a means to direct it toward meaningful change in the world. Opening a channel of communication for the revenge seeker by encouraging political discourse and participation, supporting the creative arts, and offering sports programs can help him meet the need to release his anger.

The revenge seeker who becomes a foreign fighter must elevate his anger to perceive a slight that he has never personally or physically experienced.

The Status Seeker: Looking for Recognition

Whereas revenge seekers were more common among those living primarily in Middle Eastern Muslim societies, the second group, status seekers, was more prevalent among the diaspora, especially those living in the West. The status seeker sees a world that does not understand or appreciate him as he perceives himself. His frustration stems from unrealized expectations that he will be successful in his new home and recognized by his community. This is especially prevalent in recent immigrants looking for work, and in international college students looking to assimilate in a foreign country. They are often not shown the kind of respect that they got before leaving their home countries.

Take, for example, the young North African who travels to Europe in search of better wages or a better life. When he arrives, he finds only menial work, though the pay is much greater than in his home country. He dutifully sends money home, all the while seething over the fact that he is restricted to certain sections of town or certain jobs by a society that is interested in him only as cheap labor.²⁹ One young Moroccan proclaimed, "I was like a slave in France. I could work in the kitchen but was not welcome in the dining room. When I left my neighborhood, people avoided me on the street as if I were unclean."³⁰ Young men in these situations believe that they have value and abilities and a worth to the world that their position in society doesn't reflect. More than 25 percent of the fighters in the sample were seeking either to improve their status in the community or to demonstrate their prominence to the world.

Albert Bandura's social learning theory is illustrative in these cases because young men who are frustrated with their roles and development seek "high-status" members of

the community after whom they can model their behavior.³¹ In ethnically divided Western communities, these young men find few fellow countrymen who have achieved high status, and they begin to perceive that prejudice and persecution is preventing their entire group from improving its lot. This sets off an “I’ll show you” response and drives them to demand acknowledgment of their intrinsic worth. Personal honor and respect are hallmarks of the societies where these young men have grown up. They begin to feel that they must do something to show the world their value. Racism and mistrust of Middle Easterners only exacerbates the isolation and sense of undervaluation. With no other outlets or opportunities to excel, they can easily be seduced to believe that al-Qaeda’s status would transfer to them if they joined.

At this point, the legend of al-Qaeda presents its martyrs and operatives as glorious, heroic figures who have gained great respect in their communities. Older Muslims living among the diaspora, to enhance their own bona fides, may recount tales of personal glory achieved while fighting in distant lands. Before long, the status seeker begins to perceive that the surest route to respect is to join the global jihad. For him to turn away from this belief, he must be reflected publicly in a manner more consistent with his self-perception. Foreign exchanges that confer status, provide positive media depictions of Muslims, and desegregate communities all help turn the status seeker away from al-Qaeda.

The Identity Seeker: Looking for a Place to Belong

Unlike the status seeker, who wants to stand out from the masses, the identity seeker is more concerned with assimilating into a defining organization. Being part of something is the principal motivation for the identity seeker. The strength and stability of one’s personality rests on the formation of a satisfying and functioning identity, and the motivation to define oneself by the group identity is strong and, indeed, almost universal among developing adolescents. It draws young people to street gangs and chess clubs, to marching bands and al-Qaeda. This springs from the innate need to internalize the behavior, mores, and attitudes of a social grouping.³² The identity seeker needs the structure, rules, and perspective that come from belonging to a group, because belonging defines him, his role, his friends, and his interaction with society.

As a young man struggles to define himself, the norms of group identity and the acceptance of his peers are crucial. Group identity also provides outward symbols of his affiliation, announcing him to the world and defining him in the eyes of others. Identity seekers comprised the largest percentage of foreign fighters studied. For them, al-Qaeda is more than just a legend—it is the best possible club to join. As with other highly exclusive groups, from fraternal orders to religious cults, al-Qaeda’s ideology demands strict obedience to a state of mind and prescribes how members should think, feel, and behave. These clear rules and coherent vision of the world appeal to identity seekers because they neatly package an identity into the ideology. A young man casting about for guidance and direction finds it in abundance with al-Qaeda.

The behavioral framework and guiding principles provided by group affiliation also explain the culture of suicide and violence that exists within an al-Qaeda cell. Violence and death become the norm. Anyone who rejects violence is cast out by the group and loses the positive benefits and defining principles that came from belonging.³³ Thus, it is critical to turn young men away from al-Qaeda membership before they have joined. Once they are inside, the dynamic of distancing from society and clinging to the group is continuously reinforced.

Just as in the struggle against urban gang violence, the greatest challenge is to provide viable alternatives and other groups to which a young man can belong. The United States

The motivation to define oneself by the group identity is almost universal among developing adolescents. It draws young people to street gangs and chess clubs, to marching bands and al-Qaeda.

and its allies must support organizations that create positive identity groups, from community service organizations to sports and adventure clubs. The structure and purpose of an organized group, along with the symbols of membership, will make the identity seeker less likely to fulfill his needs by joining an al-Qaeda cell.

The Thrill Seeker: Looking for Adventure

Thrill seekers represent the smallest percentage of those studied, accounting for less than 5 percent of the sample. They also represent a very distinct motivation from the other three. The thrill seeker is filled with energy and drive. He wants to prove his manhood by accomplishing an arduous task or surviving a harrowing adventure. Bored or unchallenged at home, he looks for the next trial or newest adventure. Often from a middle- or upper-middle-class family, he has no interest in the family business or what he perceives as the mundane life on his horizon.

The thrill seeker is often attracted to violent video games and the fanciful tales of returning fighters. He is most impressed by the images of glory and adventure portrayed by al-Qaeda propaganda. For the thrill seeker, al-Qaeda is a horror action brand that promises spectacular violence and unimaginable glory.

The thrill seeker is also the most likely to quit the movement if the reality fails to live up to the legend or he is not challenged. One young Syrian said in his interview that he spent the first few months cooking, cleaning, and driving the other members around the city. "I was like a woman for them; they did not trust me to do any real fighting." In reality, most al-Qaeda cells are initially suspicious of newcomers because they fear infiltration by intelligence organizations. New recruits are often given menial work until they can prove their trustworthiness. This makes it possible to dissuade the thrill seeker simply by exposing the reality of life inside al-Qaeda.

For the thrill seeker, al-Qaeda is a horror action brand that promises spectacular violence and unimaginable glory.

A Radicalization Prevention Strategy

Since defeating al-Qaeda does not involve fighting in a particular physical place, the central tenet of the radicalization prevention strategy is to discredit the brand image and dissuade those who seek membership or affiliation. Physical confrontation should continue, because discrediting the brand requires that al-Qaeda operations be continuously and publicly destroyed, dismantled, and disrupted with an active combination of military and law enforcement actions. Concurrently, a parallel effort should plant doubts about the viability and effectiveness of al-Qaeda operations in the minds of those who seek to join al-Qaeda or establish an associated movement.

Psychological defeat of al-Qaeda also requires the United States to engage fully across the broad spectrum of communications, in a campaign of active listening and robust participation. Much of this effort will take place in new media forums such as chat rooms, blogs, and video postings, in which members of the Muslim community are encouraged to express their opinions and generate discussion. The counter-al-Qaeda narrative must present seekers with more choices and alternative definitions that allow them to find productive and positive self-definition. These young men want to grow into their decisions and choices. The United States must help make the right choices available.

Specific strategies address each seeker's distinct needs, but strategies also share characteristics. Messages appearing to emanate from the U.S. government to Muslim populations struggle for credibility in the minds of a skeptical public. Recent public opinion polling shows that while most Muslims have mixed feelings about al-Qaeda and its objectives, many also view the U.S. government as hypocritical and disrespectful of Muslims.³⁴ This leads to

mistrust of any message coming directly from the United States and makes it more important that partner nations and independent organizations be more engaged on behalf of the United States. While the United States must pursue this strategy with vigor and purpose, it cannot be an externally imposed, U.S.-only solution. The weight of effort must be toward encouraging, facilitating, and nurturing indigenous efforts to create the competing narrative.

The most important step for each strategy is to listen. The seekers tell the world their feelings and are often frustrated because no one listens. In one noteworthy interview, a young man said, "I felt like I could not be heard. No one heard me when I spoke, so I started to shout. No one heard me shout, so I started to throw things. Still no one listened, so I went to a place where my voice could not be ignored. They will hear me now." Market research is a critical component of any communications strategy, but it is especially important in helping the United States bridge vast cultural and religious divides between Muslim societies and the West.

Second, the United States must engage seekers in their media. This will include technological steps both forward and backward. Al-Qaeda's activities on the Internet often make news in the West, but many extremists report that they first heard the call to fight on a cassette tape or CD passed around their community.³⁵ Despite the allure of new media strategies, values, ideas, and coping strategies are most routinely presented in traditional media, public sermons, comic books, video games, and children's literature. Positive depiction of the Muslim faith, presented in a "kid friendly" context, is the hallmark of The 99, a comic book series aimed at Muslim youth and produced by Kuwaiti psychologist Dr. Naif A. al-Mutawa.³⁶ This and other similar projects that are culturally appropriate and designed to follow current popular trends should be nurtured and promoted.

There are important lessons from reeducation and reintegration programs, especially concerning religious education. The prevailing characteristic of the subjects studied is incorrect or incomplete religious education during their formative years. The lack of a complete understanding of their own faith made the subjects vulnerable to al-Qaeda's skewed appeal. Reintegration programs in Saudi Arabia, the Netherlands, Singapore, and Indonesia have successfully rehabilitated former extremists by directly refuting al-Qaeda's religious interpretations with knowledgeable Islamic scholars.³⁷ If reeducation through religious teaching can cause a fighter to renounce al-Qaeda, it stands to reason that religious education programs conducted with younger participants could inoculate them against the appeal of al-Qaeda. The United States must overcome its squeamishness over religious issues and actively support clerics whose interpretations of Islam support peaceful coexistence with Western culture. These ideas are active throughout the Muslim world, but their voices must be amplified, rebroadcast, and retransmitted to wider audiences.

To defuse the sense of persecution and isolation that Muslims feel, especially if they are living in Western societies, programs such as those provided by the International Center for Journalists and by Search for Common Ground should be promoted and encouraged. Journalism training, media outreach training, distribution of positive articles, and broadcasts on Muslim-Western relations counter biased reporting and curtail present and future negative images of Islam and Muslims in Western media.

Also, moderate organizations such as the Council on American Islamic Relations; and programs such as Soliya, initiated under the World Economic Forum, and Project Nur, created by the American Islamic Congress, provide more accurate depictions of Islam and allow moderates to voice their disapproval of Islamic fundamentalists. The U.S. government should therefore support them. These programs support Muslim-Western dialogue and foster religious education to transform interpersonal relationships between Muslims and Western non-Muslims. Respectful depiction of Muslims erodes al-Qaeda's argument that the United States is at war with Islam, calling into question one of al-Qaeda's main appeals to disgruntled Muslim youth. It also erodes the separation between Muslim communities

Reintegration programs in Saudi Arabia, the Netherlands, Singapore, and Indonesia have successfully rehabilitated former extremists by directly refuting al-Qaeda's religious interpretations with knowledgeable Islamic scholars.

and the broader societies where they live, which reduces the isolation that many young Muslims feel.

Service projects provide outlets for at-risk youths to connect with their communities. Service activities can create a sense of interconnectedness and of belonging to a larger community—ideal for the identity seeker. Service provides opportunities to create new friendships, and often the intergenerational mixture of volunteers creates an environment for revenge seekers to develop mentors. Also, public service connects young men with their communities, fosters civic engagement opportunities, and opens the door to political involvement for status seekers.

Few of the subjects studied fit exclusively into one of the four seeker categories. Most displayed aspects of at least two of the characterizations, with one generally more prominent. Individual strategies address specific needs for the various groups but are not solely for a specific group's consumption. Messages and activities within each set work in concert with the others to produce a holistic message, broadly accessible to all young Muslims who are struggling to define themselves.

Calming the Revenge Seeker

For the revenge seeker, the most pressing need is an outlet to vent his frustration. The United States should not simply monitor the conversation; it must help create a space where alternative voices can be heard. Creating additional escape valves helps vent the pressure of frustration. Creative outlets, especially music and poetry, are particularly effective at giving angry young men a way to vocalize their frustration. The wildly popular “Afghan Star” program in Afghanistan is just one example of how musical expression creates an outlet. In a country where music was systematically and brutally repressed, young people continued to yearn for an opportunity to express their emotions in song.³⁸ Similar programs enabling youth to write and perform their own music are burgeoning across the Middle East and should be promoted and enhanced.

For the less artistic revenge seeker, sports competition provides another meaningful outlet. It satisfies the need both for an in-group/out-group dichotomy and for glorification of the victors. The revenge seeker who effectively vents his aggressive frustrations on the playing field is less susceptible to messages that tap unfocused rage. Building sports programs also gives young people the opportunity to interact with peers who may have similar feelings and frustrations.

Since the revenge seeker is often unsure of the source of his anger and is ill equipped to vent it effectively, mentoring programs that link young men with older role models reduce the likelihood that they will be enticed by al-Qaeda. Revenge seekers partnered with a positive role model can define their role in society in a productive rather than a destructive framework.

Promoting the Status Seeker

The status seeker believes that he is smarter and more capable than the world has acknowledged, so programs designed for him must provide an opportunity to show off his gifts. Status seekers are drawn to political discourse at universities and on call-in radio shows. Al-Qaeda will lose its appeal to the *umma* when Muslims understand that al-Qaeda is not serving their best interests. Al-Qaeda will be defeated when its supporters see that its violent strategy will never realize the utopian vision of a global Islamic caliphate. There is a great internal debate within Islam over the utility and viability of violent extremism, and the United States can help foster that debate by actively promoting and encouraging public discourse on local, regional, and international levels.

The revenge seeker who effectively vents his aggressive frustrations on the playing field is less susceptible to messages that tap unfocused rage.

Al-Qaeda will be defeated when its supporters see that its violent strategy will never realize the utopian vision of a global Islamic caliphate.

The study of political science at universities in the Middle East is all but nonexistent. Many Middle Eastern regimes, fearing a threat to the status quo, censor political discourse and the writings of prominent Muslim political scholars.³⁹ Offering classic works of Islamic and Western political thought fosters more discussion of the role of government in the lives of citizens. Encouraging the removal of barriers to open political debate and study and supporting the promulgation of religious and political scholarly works helps intellectually disarm al-Qaeda.

The status seeker needs not only to discuss politics but also to participate. Young Muslims, especially in the diaspora, often find themselves excluded from local governance and community activities. Building political participation at all levels of government begins with encouraging student groups and political advocacy. An example is the Muslim Public Affairs Committee in the UK. In 2006, when extremist protesters used the depiction of the Prophet Mohammed in European newspapers as an excuse to promote violence and jihad on the streets of London, the Muslim Public Affairs Committee not only denounced their activities but was given a platform by the British government to help disseminate the message.⁴⁰ Groups like this, bolstered with government support and fueled by publicity, can give status seekers a position of prominence they desire.

International exchange programs expose young people to an alternative view of the world. Current exchanges are mostly available to the children of the elite and well connected. New exchanges should be targeted specifically at youth in higher-risk communities. To avoid isolation and despair, the exchanges should be as short as one month and should focus on a "Middle East meets Middle America" strategy rather than on elite degree programs at American universities. When the young men return home, they will have not only direct experience with America and its principles, but also a newfound status in their communities since their selection and participation in the program.

Finally, the depiction of their peers in the public media dramatically affects status seekers. The United States should foster and promote positive public depictions of Muslim youth in the media. Unlike the ill-fated "Muslims in America" programs, which tried to show Muslim assimilation into American culture, these programs must show Muslims thriving within their own cultural context and being valued for their distinct contribution to Western society. One of the defining characteristics of early Muslim society was its tolerant and transparent nature compared with other societies in the seventh and eighth centuries. This history can be recounted to remind Muslims of the more productive eras in their own history and to portray their stories positively in the media. Negative stereotypes in the media only feed the preexisting feelings of oppression among isolated youth, so the West must promote positive images and celebrate the accomplishments of its Muslim citizens.

Negative stereotypes in the media only feed the preexisting feelings of oppression among isolated youth, so the West must promote positive images and celebrate the accomplishments of its Muslim citizens.

Giving the Identity Seeker a Group

For the young identity seeker struggling to belong, programs must first acknowledge the existence of Muslim subcultures within Western societies and foster their healthy growth. Muslim subcultures exist throughout the world, but young immigrants often cannot easily connect with their countrymen without encountering al-Qaeda's message. Among immigrant populations, the first encounter that a young person has with al-Qaeda often occurs in a mosque or Islamic community center, but these places are also among the best opportunities for him to meet with others who share his experiences of isolation. Promoting moderate religious education and actively fostering programs to bring these communities together provides an alternative to radical views.

Within the Muslim communities of the Middle East, a young man is surrounded by people who look, dress, and talk as he does, but he may still feel isolated until he finds a group to identify with that will accept him. Within these communities, the United States should help

partner governments develop, foster, and encourage collective activities that give young men a set of defining principles to guide their development and frame their world. Identity seekers use these venues to define themselves. Sports leagues, model governments, student societies, community service programs, and adventure groups all offer outlets that include symbols of membership and a brand to adopt. Further, they alleviate the feeling of isolation and provide a place and sense of belonging.

Sports heroes are especially effective in providing group identity. Unlike the revenge seeker, who craves the competition and victory of participating in a sport, the identity seeker enjoys the vicarious benefit of following a professional or national team, because he displays outward support for the team and is immediately accepted by other fans. Sports personalities are closer in age to at-risk populations and use more accessible language than political figures do, so they are more credible sources of information for young people. Like other role models within a society, sports figures give young people someone to admire and an aspirational goal without encouraging detachment from the mainstream of society.

Turning Off the Thrill Seeker

Thrill seekers are obsessed with the legend of al-Qaeda, so the most direct component of a communications strategy aimed at them is to debunk the legend by demonstrating the reality of al-Qaeda. Those who have left the movement after negative experiences should be encouraged to tell their stories and explain the realities of living on the run and performing menial tasks in deplorable conditions. Care must be taken to ensure that they are not humiliated in the process, but their tales of actual events can be compelling. Graduates of deradicalization and reintegration programs are effective spokespersons because they have seen both the reality of al-Qaeda activities and the indignities of capture and incarceration. Encouraging them to speak and broadcasting their stories tarnishes the legend of al-Qaeda and dissuades the thrill seeker.

Thrill seekers, like many young men and boys, love first-person shooter games because they provide vicarious thrills. One of the most popular in the Middle East, *Special Force*, lets the young fighter defend Palestine through a series of missions and adventures.⁴¹ Winning the game requires the player to assassinate the Israeli prime minister. Kids are often so caught up in trying to get to the next level, they are unaware that they are learning to hate. The United States and its allies can offer a much more positive message while accepting that something on the screen (zombies, aliens, criminals, or terrorists) will still have to explode if anyone is expected to play the games.

Discrediting the al-Qaeda brand in the eyes of potential thrill seekers also requires that al-Qaeda operations be publicly portrayed as inglorious and shameful. The military and law enforcement activities that are used to thwart attacks must be determined and aggressive, but the public recounting should question al-Qaeda's effectiveness and delegitimize its struggle by making it appear bumbling, inept, and illegal.

Al-Qaeda's adventurous appeal also wanes dramatically for the thrill seeker when the reality of living in squalid conditions, fighting for a lost cause, and dying an ignominious death is prominently displayed. The disparity between the professed global aspirations and the local ethnonationalist activities of some of al-Qaeda's associated movements highlights disunity and cross-purposes within the organization, making it appear less monolithic and less prestigious in the process.

Discrediting the al-Qaeda brand in the eyes of potential thrill seekers also requires that al-Qaeda operations be publicly portrayed as inglorious and shameful.

Policy Recommendations

Why do young men join al-Qaeda? Because they see no other viable choice. A continuing and compelling case must be made for something else to give their lives meaning. If those who seek al-Qaeda continue their steady aspiration to belong, no amount of physical force will adequately protect the United States and its allies from future attacks.

To make this case to a skeptical Muslim population requires a focused and coordinated effort to present an alternative narrative through every available means of communication. These ideas are hardly new, but they have too often been words without funds, and visions without programs. This ambitious strategy cannot be successfully accomplished within the current framework of U.S. communications capabilities and organizations. Fragmented efforts of strategic communication, public diplomacy, and information operations to date are underresourced, poorly coordinated, and understaffed given the strength and pervasiveness of al-Qaeda's message.⁴² Ambassador-at-large for Counterterrorism Daniel Benjamin noted with pride during testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee that the Department of State had recently formed a six-person unit responsible for creating programs to counter violent extremism.⁴³ Even when combined with the State Department's two dedicated Arabic-language bloggers and the ability to make grants of up to \$100,000 from the Ambassadors' Fund for Counterterrorism, it is clear that the level of effort toward countering al-Qaeda's message must be significantly bolstered. The size, shape, and composition of the U.S. government must change to reflect the reality of the times. The cost of doing anything less is too high.

The first step is to create the capability to break through what Jeff Jones, the former National Security Council director of strategic communications and information, called the "bureaucratic turf battles, misperceptions, and the absence of visible, sustained interagency commitment that are detriments to progress."⁴⁴ The United States must establish an independent national organization responsible for conducting strategic communications. This new agency would be responsible for all U.S. government messaging and communications and would consolidate all current efforts under a single cabinet-level secretary of strategic communications.

Discussions of U.S. communications strategy frequently elicit the vocal but fallacious contention that the United States can never have credibility with Muslim audiences. Based on our recent history of poor communications, officious foreign policies, and lack of strategic appreciation for Muslim culture, the United States currently struggles for credibility, but this is a temporary condition and not sufficient justification to relinquish all speaking parts on the world stage. A cursory review of the founding documents of the world's former colonial holdings shows that the United States was once considered a major thought leader on the relationships between citizens, their creator, and their governments. In many ways, this intellectual leadership continued through most of the Cold War, framing the debate between free-market democracy and Communism. Centered as it was in the political debates of Christian nations, it did not escape the gaze, or the commentary, of Muslim scholars and political thinkers who have for centuries been trying to define those relationships in a uniquely Muslim context.

A U.S. Strategic Communications Agency would begin its existence following two distinct but parallel paths. First, enable, empower, support, and reinforce the existing moderate voices on the world stage that have credibility with Muslim audiences. This is accomplished primarily by remaining in the background and helping willing partners, whether states, organizations, or individuals, move the dialogue in a direction consistent with our national interests. Simultaneously, the United States must slowly build its message credibility with honest, transparent dialogue that closes the "say-do" gap that has plagued much of recent

U.S. foreign policy. Sustainable credibility, built over time, will allow the United States to engage in constructive dialogue with Muslim audiences without constantly struggling for legitimacy in the debate. The United States will thereby regain a position of prominence in the political debates of the world.

With the responsibilities and capabilities consolidated, the U.S. Strategic Communications Agency must also be empowered with the funding necessary to control the implementation of programs. Current interagency coordinating bodies, no matter how well meaning, lack the power of the purse strings; thus, disparate agencies and organizations conduct their own programs, using dedicated funding, with little regard for coordinated effects. This erodes the power, cohesiveness, and credibility of any U.S. message.

Once a U.S. Agency for Strategic Communications is established and appropriately funded, it must be further empowered with a comprehensive and presidentially directed National Communications Strategy. The Strategic Communications Acts of 2008 and 2009 (S 3546 and HR 489, respectively) and the Smith-Thornberry Amendment (HA 5 to HR 5658) have all called for a National Communications Strategy and sweeping reform of U.S. communications capabilities and structure, but none of this legislation has yet been fully considered or implemented. The communications stakeholders, whether at the State Department, Department of Defense, Broadcasting Board of Governors, or any of the other entities involved, cannot reform themselves without the external pressure generated by strong legislation.

To implement a National Communications Strategy against al-Qaeda, the regional engagement strategies of the military's Geographic Combatant Commands must complement and reinforce the country-specific strategies of U.S. embassies abroad. In some countries, Military Information Support Teams (MIST), deployed at the specific request of U.S. ambassadors, reside in embassies to provide support to U.S. public diplomacy efforts in support of the mission strategic plan. MISTs also give the ambassador a link to regional military information programs. These linkages should be enhanced, and MISTs deployed more extensively around the globe. Coordinated efforts abroad between the Department of State and Geographic Combatant Commands ensure message consistency and clarity, letting each leverage the unique capabilities of the other toward a unified goal.

There must be a similarly coordinated effort between influence programs and development programs. While some tension will always exist between focused strategic communications activities and the creation of viable, independent media in developing countries, the exchange of ideas that occurs in a robust and credible media is crucial to challenging the appeal of violent extremism. Coordination across the government, non-governmental organizations, and private media groups is essential. The role of the U.S. Strategic Communications Agency in coordinating media actions would be similar to that of the U.S. Agency for International Development in coordinating humanitarian relief and development projects.

The U.S. military can play a supporting role in these efforts and temporarily augment each as its capability builds. It can also continue to provide security assistance and military training to willing partners who wish to bolster their own internal security capabilities. Also, military activity must be framed within the context of the National Communications Strategy so that the gap between actions and statements continues to narrow, as it has recently in Afghanistan.

Overseas programs where the Department of State holds primacy and the military and other agencies support it must also be effectively coordinated with domestic programs targeting Muslim diaspora communities in the United States. The prospect of self-radicalization, as displayed by Major Nadal Hasan at Fort Hood and the self-proclaimed "Jihad Jane" in Philadelphia, combined with ready domestic access to Arabic-language programming from overseas, has increased the need to ensure consistency of messaging at home and abroad. This will require review and amendment of the U.S. Information and Educational Exchange

The United States must slowly build its message credibility with honest, transparent dialogue that closes the "say-do" gap that has plagued much of recent U.S. foreign policy.

Military activity must be framed within the context of the National Communications Strategy so that the gap between actions and statements continues to narrow, as it has recently in Afghanistan.

Despite improvements in open-source reporting, and partnering agreements with public opinion research firms, there remains no central point of coordination for the measures of effectiveness that are critical to strategic communications.

Act of 1948 (popularly referred to as the Smith-Mundt Act) to account for the globalization of the media environment.

The U.S. Strategic Communications Agency should also house a robust capability to collect, synthesize, and analyze public opinion research. Managing a complex message in a nuanced and responsive fashion requires that adjustments be made to the message based on changes in popular perceptions of U.S. actions and previous messages. Despite improvements in open-source reporting, and partnering agreements with public opinion research firms, there remains no central point of coordination for the measures of effectiveness that are critical to strategic communications. Individual agencies and stakeholders, each with their own small research staffs, can get only part of the picture, and the intelligence community is better suited to analysis of more concrete physical information. With a synthesized research capability working in partnership with indigenous market researchers around the globe, all communications actors would share a common frame of reference for events.

Conclusion

Studying individuals who sought out al-Qaeda and fought for its principles gives unique insight into both the recruiting appeal of al-Qaeda as an organization and the path that takes young men to it. These young men were following developmental paths like those of young men in other societies, but they were presented with too few options to satisfy their developmental needs. Al-Qaeda has spent years promoting and perfecting its brand management strategy to appear to young Muslims as if it were the only answer to all their problems.

Creating a new dialogue with the Muslim community, one that fosters positive relations and erodes the appeal of al-Qaeda, requires the United States to reject the myths that extremism is somehow caused by religion, poverty, or insanity. Instead, U.S. policies and programs must focus on understanding the depths of personal need and the peculiar nature of adolescent development that make al-Qaeda's message resonate with young men. When that understanding is coupled with significant increases in the amount and efficiency of U.S. communications capabilities and managed under the umbrella of a comprehensive, whole-of-government strategy, the defeat of al-Qaeda and its associated movements will become inevitable.

Notes

1. Jon Gambrell, "Web Posts Suggest Lonely, Depressed Terror Suspect," *Seattle Times*, Dec. 29, 2009, www.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/nationworld/2010621860_apafairlinerattackinternetpostings.html (accessed Jan. 12, 2010).
2. Discussion of the components of al-Qaeda and the history of its development and evolution is greatly informed by Bruce Hoffman, "Combating Al Qaeda and the Militant Islamic Threat" (testimony presented to House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities, Washington, DC, Feb. 16, 2006); Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2003); and Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).
3. Although this ideology has been referred to by various different names, some either counterproductive or insulting (e.g., "islamofacism"), it was most accurately described as "Qutbism" by the Combating Terrorism Center in its comprehensive survey of existing militant ideological writings. William McCants and Jarret Brachman, *Militant Ideology Atlas: Executive Report* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2006).
4. Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror*.
5. David Aaron, *In Their Own Words: Voices of Jihad: Compilation and Commentary* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008).
6. The author was able to review these reports directly, draw conclusions about their content, and request limited follow-up questions but did not participate directly in the interview process.
7. Most notable among these were the Sinjar Records, which have been analyzed by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. See Peter Bergen, Joseph Felter, Vahid Brown, and Jacob Shapiro, *Bombers, Bank Accounts, and Bleedout: Al-Qa'ida's Road In and Out of Iraq* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2008).
8. Some of these myths have recently been articulated in Jessica Stern, "5 Myths about Who Becomes a Terrorist," *Washington Post*, Jan. 10, 2010, B4. While I agree with some of Stern's points, we diverge on the role of religion and levels of belief in the cause—I lean more toward the analysis in Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Threat Matrix: Is the Importance of Terrorist Ideology a Myth?" *Long War Journal*, Jan. 11, 2010, www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2010/01/is_the_importance_of_terrorist.php (accessed Apr. 2, 2010).
9. Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).
10. Clark R. McCauley and M. E. Segal, "Social Psychology of Terrorist Groups," in *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, Vol. 9 of *Annual Review of Social and Personality Psychology*, ed. C. N. Hendrick (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1987).
11. Daniel Pipes, *Militant Islam Reaches America* (New York: Norton, 2003).
12. James F. Rinehart, *Apocalyptic Faith and Political Violence: Prophets of Terror* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).
13. Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*.
14. Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968).
15. Nicholas J. O'Shaughnessey and Paul R. Baines, "Selling Terror: The Symbolization and Positioning of Jihad," *Marketing Theory* 9, no. 2 (2009): 227–41.
16. Jihad Watch, *Jihad Watch*, Feb. 4, 2004, www.jihadwatch.org/archives/00800.php (accessed Mar. 10, 2010).
17. Brian Michael Jenkins, *Unconquerable Nation: Knowing Our Enemy, Strengthening Ourselves* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2006).
18. Daniel Kimmage, *The Al-Qaeda Media Nexus: The Virtual Network behind the Global Message* (Washington, DC: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2008).
19. Ibid.
20. Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi," Office of the Director of National Intelligence: News Release no. 2-05, Oct. 11, 2005, www.dni.gov/press_releases/letter_in_english.pdf (accessed Feb. 16, 2010).
21. Billah, Ahmad al-Watheq, "Al-Qaeda Takes Jihad to Media Four Years after 9/11: Al-Qaeda Fighters Become Producers, Film Directors, Video Cameras Have Become Their Most Potent Weapon," *Middle East Online*, Sept. 9, 2005, www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=14500=14500&format=0 (accessed Feb. 16, 2010).

An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our Web site (www.usip.org), together with additional information on the subject.

22. Jarret M. Brachman and James J. F. Forest, "Terrorist Sanctuaries in the Age of Information: Exploring the Role of Virtual Training Camps," in *Denial of Sanctuary: Understanding Terrorist Safe Havens*, ed. Michael Innes (London: Praeger Security International, 2007).
23. Jenkins, *Unconquerable Nation*.
24. O'Shaughnessey and Baines, "Selling Terror."
25. Bruce Riedel, "Al Qaeda Strikes Back," *Foreign Affairs* (May–June 2007): 24–41.
26. Nasra Hassan, "An Arsenal of Believers: Talking to the 'Human Bombs,'" *New Yorker*, Nov. 19, 2001.
27. Heinz Kohut, "Thoughts on Narcissism and Narcissistic Rage," in *The Search for the Self: Selected Writings of Heinz Kohut*, ed. Paul H. Ornstein, 615–58 (New York: International University Press, 1978).
28. Marvin Zonis, "Values, Narcissistic Wounds, and Violence in the Middle East" (paper delivered at the 26th Annual Conference on the Psychology of the Self, International Association for Psychoanalytic Self Psychology, Chicago, Nov. 6–9, 2003).
29. This is a representative story derived from multiple accounts of detainees who traveled to Europe from the Magreb, all of whom recounted similar tales. In many ways, it is similar to the experiences of the 9/11 hijackers who lived in Germany before deciding to join al-Qaeda.
30. This quote came from an individual interview with a fighter captured in Iraq, although his sentiment was shared by many others in the same situation.
31. Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (New York: General Learning Press, 1977).
32. William Bloom, *Personal Identity, National Identity, and International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
33. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks*.
34. Steven Kull, Clay Ramsay, Stephen Weber, Evan Lewis, and Ebrahim Mohseni, "Muslim Publics Oppose Al Qaeda's Terrorism, but Agree With Its Goal of Driving U.S. Forces Out," *World Public Opinion*, Feb. 24, 2009, www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/bmiddleeastnafrica/591.php (accessed Apr. 2, 2010).
35. Jarret M. Brachman and William F. McCants, "Stealing Al Qaeda's Playbook," *Studies in Conflicts and Terrorism* 29, no. 4 (2006): 309–21.
36. Naif A. al-Mutawa, "The 99," www.the99.org (accessed Apr. 5, 2010).
37. Christopher Boucek, *Saudi Arabia's "Soft" Counterterrorism Strategy: Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Aftercare* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008); Mohamed Feisal Bin Mohamed Hassan, "The Roles of Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) in Singapore," Religious Rehabilitation Group, Sept. 23, 2008, www.rrg.sg/edisi/data/The_roles_of_RRG.pdf (accessed Jan. 8, 2010); Kirsten E. Schulze, "Indonesia's Approach to Jihadist Deradicalization," *CTC Sentinel* 1, no. 8 (Jul. 2008): 8–10; Lorenzo Vidino, "A Preliminary Assessment of Counter-radicalization in the Netherlands," *CTC Sentinel* 1, no. 9 (Aug. 2008): 12–14.
38. Alastair Leithead, "Afghanistan's Pop Idol Breaks Barriers," BBC News, Feb. 25, 2008: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7262967.stm (accessed Apr. 2, 2010).
39. Lowell H. Schwartz, Todd C. Helmus, Dalia Dassa Kaye, and Nadia Oweidat, *Barriers to the Broad Dissemination of Creative Works in the Arab World* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009).
40. Russell Razaque, *Human Being to Human Bomb: Inside the Mind of a Terrorist* (Cambridge, UK: Icon, 2008).
41. Tony Harnden, "Children Play Israeli-Killers in Bloody New Video Game," *Daily Mail*, Aug. 17, 2007, www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-475966/Children-play-Israeli-killers-bloody-new-game.html (accessed Apr. 2, 2010).
42. Tony Blankley, Helle C. Dale, and Oliver Horn, *Reforming U.S. Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 2008).
43. Daniel Benjamin, "U.S. Government Efforts to Counter Violent Extremism" (statement for the record before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Emerging Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee, Washington, DC, Mar. 10, 2010), www.state.gov/s/ct/rts/rm/2010/138175.htm (accessed Oct. 7, 2009).
44. Jeffrey B. Jones, "Strategic Communication: A Mandate for the United States," *Joint Forces Quarterly* no. 39 (fourth quarter 2005): 108–14.



**United States
Institute of Peace**
1200 17th Street NW
Washington, DC 20036
www.usip.org