

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Victory over al-Qaeda

by Jon B. Alterman

In an important way, al-Qaeda has been defeated. At one time, many Muslims admired the organization for its courageous opposition to Western domination, and many Westerners feared that al-Qaeda might draw Muslim communities into a battle with the West. Immediately after the events of September 11, 2001, it was not always clear how the battle for Muslim hearts and minds would end up. With the passage of time, we now know, and al-Qaeda has lost.

It is, perhaps, strange to proclaim al-Qaeda's defeat so soon after an al-Qaeda operative sought to bring down an international jetliner last Christmas day, and at a time when al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and al-Qaeda Central in the hills of Pakistan all continue to operate. It is true that al-Qaeda continues to threaten Western interests, and the organization and its affiliates are likely to do so for some time. But the task of containing the damage from perhaps a few thousand fighters is a more achievable task than defeating more than a billion people. We feared that we would have to fight the larger battle, but the battle against a few thousand is the one we are fighting—and which we will continue to commit billions of dollars to fight.

Yet the ongoing smaller battle should not prevent us from seeing that al-Qaeda has lost the larger one. After almost two decades of trying, al-Qaeda's thirst for anarchic violence has failed to inspire the multitudes. Instead, authoritative clerics have picked apart al-Qaeda's theology and removed the cloak of divine approval that the organization had appropriated. Even some leading jihadi clerics, such as Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (also known as Dr. Fadl) have repudiated al-Qaeda's views. To be sure, there are still clerics who support al-Qaeda, but they are a shrinking and increasingly isolated minority.

Jihad, of course, is not dead. It remains a prominent theme in Islamic thought, a topic that has occupied Muslim theologians for centuries. Yet, strict rules govern jihad, many of which narrow the bases on which it can be waged. Jihad developed as a way to rally the masses *behind* the political leadership; the idea

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Avatar Diplomacy

Television and movies were once the preeminent American cultural ambassadors, but that was all *so* twentieth century. Now X-Life, a series of role-playing games created by the U.S. Department of State, allows Middle Eastern users to pose as American college students and aspiring young rock musicians by playing the game on their cell phones.

The games are a State Department "e-diplomacy" effort to foster goodwill and understanding among Muslim communities through digital means. To encourage knowledge of the United States, characters who pass tests on American history and culture win points they can trade in for new cars and other perks. The game also connects players to social networking sites like Facebook, and U.S. embassies in Iraq and Egypt have used these sites to post news and teach English.

The games were developed jointly by the State Department, a U.S. government interagency group called the Global Strategic Engagement Center, and a government contractor specializing in collaborative information technology. The CEO of the contractor, an Iranian-American named Ali Reza Manouchehri, lived in Iran as a young adult after growing up in Northern Virginia, and found Iranian youth far more open to American culture than he had expected.

Egypt is X-Life's largest market. Seventy-one percent of Egypt's 80 million people have cell phones, and 1.67 million Egyptians got new ones in December 2009 alone. X-Life also targets Jordan and Lebanon, and has been marketed in Indonesia. ■BB

The Dynamics of North African Terrorism

The Middle East Program at CSIS hosted a conference entitled "The Dynamics of North African Terrorism" on February 16, 2010 that discussed the expanding reach of Islamist groups in the Maghreb and the challenges and approaches to deradicalizing them. The first set of panelists described the growing confluence of the drug trade and terrorism and analyzed the evolving relationship between extremist groups and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The second panel assessed various state, regional, and international deradicalization efforts. Ambassador Robert Godec delivered the keynote address during which he entreated the U.S. government to "continue building and strengthening its cooperation and coordination with its North African partners" to combat AQIM. Click [HERE](#) to learn more about the event. ■

that some would use jihad to rally the masses *against* the political leadership was an innovation of the last half-century.

The anti-establishment ethos of jihadism was one of the most important factors that doomed the movement. Over centuries, Muslim clerics had sought to maintain a difficult balance, acting as a check on government excess without threatening the government itself. Al-Qaeda challenged that balance, and in turn it questioned the legitimacy of legions of clerics who had maintained it. Those clerics fought back, with the support of their governments. Al-Qaeda, which tried to overcome a low quotient of clerics with the zealotry of its lay leadership, was no match. Over almost a decade, the clerics reasserted their traditional role and prevented their societies' slide toward radicalism.

The jihadists' performance in Iraq was another contributing factor to their failure. Not only were the bulk of their victims fellow Muslims, but they alienated the very Sunni tribes that were giving them refuge. The organization in Iraq revealed itself to be more a criminal gang than a millennialist movement, and its defeat at the hands of the U.S. military added little to its luster.

Finally, intelligence and law enforcement has taken a tremendous toll on the organization. With so many governments seeing the group as an existential threat, the resources poured into disrupting the organization and its communications have had the desired effect. Operational communications have diminished considerably, and suspicion pervades the online chat rooms that have provided such a robust avenue for jihadi communication. As one U.S. government contractor observed privately, "You never know if the guy you're carrying on a discussion with is a bad guy or just another contractor in the next cubicle."

Still, it would be a mistake to see al-Qaeda's defeat wholly as a victory for the West. Religious conservatives waged and won the bulk of the ideological battle against al-Qaeda, and they did so with little interest in boosting the forces of secular liberalism. While tolerance and individual rights are cherished principles at the core of the Western liberal tradition, many conservative forces see them as the harbingers of atheism, amorality and social decay. Further, the conservative forces that are rising in the Muslim world tend to be strongly nationalist, scarcely more favorably disposed toward Western governments' policies than al-Qaeda is. In Palestine, in Iraq and beyond, they see an unalloyed record of Muslim suffering and a Western world that is either wholly indifferent to Muslims' plight, or is actively abetting their suffering.

These conservative forces have risen as al-Qaeda has fallen, dealing a blow to the hopes many in the West had for the future of Muslim communities after al-Qaeda's demise. Secularists are in retreat, and much of the creativity in these societies is contained in religious communities that seek to embrace modernity on their own terms. Religious television, for example, is far more popular than the news in the Arab world, and its most solid viewing audience is among women—the very people whom many Western observers would seek to liberate from the patriarchy of Islamic tradition.

Even so, al-Qaeda's failure is good news. The organization's failure renders rapprochement between the West and Muslim communities no less important than it appeared to be in years past, but it has become less urgent. That rapprochement needs to be pursued with patience and creativity, and realistic goals. We do not need to conquer one another, but we do need to live together. On that basis, a great deal can be achieved. ■ 2/23/10

Links of Interest

Jon Alterman was quoted by Fox News' *White House View* in "[Iran: Sanctions are Coming.](#)"

Jon Alterman was quoted by the *Christian Science Monitor* in "[Obama says sanctions are 'next step' for Iran.](#)"

Jon Alterman was quoted by *Agence France Presse* in "[Expect modest U.S. gains from thaw with Syria: analysts.](#)"

Learn about a recent U.S. "e-diplomatic" initiative in the Middle East on the [X-Life Games Website](#)

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