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The Pragmatic Fanaticism of al Qaeda: An Anatomy of Extremism in Middle Eastern Politics

MICHAEL DORAN

Al Qaeda's behavior presents us with something of a paradox. On the one hand, the organization stands for the principle that Islamic law is the only proper foundation for social and political life; on the other, it often disregards that law with impunity. For instance, the Islamic rules on warfare forbid attacks on women and children, but Osama bin Laden, in his smoking-gun video, expresses no remorse for having killed many innocents on September 11. On the contrary, he suggests that by doing so he showed the world the true face of Islam.

This supposition raises two central questions: What precisely is the relationship between al Qaeda's zealotry and its pragmatism? And, if not fanaticism, what did cause al Qaeda to misread the balance of power between its forces and the United States? In order to answer these, this article will examine the central doctrines of Islamic extremism, arguing that these ideas virtually compel al Qaeda to behave almost exclusively according to the principle of *realpolitik*. If the organization is a rational actor, then it is susceptible to the same kinds of analyses that we would apply to any other state or political movement in the Middle East. When viewed in this light, al Qaeda's defeat appears as but one in a series of Middle Eastern military miscalculations that includes, among others, the Egyptian remilitarization of the Sinai in June 1967 and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. The article will argue that this kind of military disaster occurs with relative frequency in the Middle East as a consequence of the complex balance of power in the region. Fanaticism, therefore, played no role in al Qaeda's miscalculation.

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September 11 was no isolated example. When it comes to matters related to politics and war, al Qaeda maneuvers around its dogmas with alacrity. Thus in the mid-1990s it “obtained specialized terrorist training” from Iranian government officials working with Hizballah in Lebanon.¹ If viewed through the cold eye of *realpolitik*, there is nothing surprising about the fact that these two parties found a basis for limited cooperation: Teheran and al Qaeda share the goal in the long term of ending United States hegemony in the Persian Gulf, and in the short term of ousting American troops from Saudi Arabia. However, only inveterate pragmatists on both sides could have turned a blind eye to the religious obstacles that stood in the way of even limited, covert cooperation. The Iranian hardliners are themselves Islamic radicals, but the Sunni-Shiah gulf separates them from al Qaeda, which reviles their Shiah belief as a form of polytheism.

It is important to keep in mind this example of *realpolitik*, because on the basis of the crushing defeat that al Qaeda has suffered in Afghanistan one might conclude that a single-minded commitment to religion translates into a simple-minded politics. One feels a temptation to interpret the entire trajectory of al Qaeda’s career as a consequence of its zealotry. The fanaticism of Osama bin Laden, so the argument would go, won for him the loyalty of suicide bombers, whose willingness to martyr themselves transformed his movement into a force in world politics. At the same time, this fanaticism also compelled bin Laden to launch a war against the greatest power on earth without weighing the consequences of his actions in a fully rational manner. This view assumes that a maniacal anti-Americanism on the part of al Qaeda’s rank and file dictates the organization’s political strategy. However, it seems reasonable to assume that the pragmatism informing bin Laden’s cooperation with Iran in the 1990s is continuing to dictate his strategic thinking in his war on America today.

THE INTELLECTUAL ORIGINS OF AL QAEDA’S REALPOLITIK

When searching for the connection between pragmatism and zealotry, a good place to start is with Ibn Taymiyya, the great Islamic thinker who, though he died in the early fourteenth century, laid the intellectual foundations for Islamic extremism in the twentieth.² Ibn Taymiyya was a Janus-faced intellectual, a fire-

¹ J. T. Caruso, acting assistant director, Counter Terrorism Division, Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Statement for the Record on al Qaeda International,” before the Subcommittee on International Operations and Terrorism, Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, Washington, DC, 18 December 2001, available at <http://www.fbi.gov/congress/congress01/caruso121801.htm>, 24 April 2002; and Peter L. Bergen, *Holy War, Inc.* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 85.

² On the influence of Ibn Taymiyya on modern Islamic extremism, see Johannes J. G. Jansen, *The Dual Nature of Islamic Fundamentalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); and Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Osama bin Laden himself quotes Ibn Taymiyya repeatedly in his 1996 “Declaration of War Against the Americans . . .,” which is located at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/nation/specials/attacked/>, under the link “Religious Texts,” 26 March 2002.

breathing zealot, but he was also a pragmatic man who accepted the political world as he found it.³ Al Qaeda's understanding of politics owes more to him than to any other source: a brief examination of his ideas against the background of his life helps us to understand why this is so.

At the age of five, Ibn Taymiyya became a refugee. In 1268 he fled his native Iraq for Syria in order to escape from the Mongols, who during the previous decade blew into the Middle East like a storm from Central Asia, destroying the Abbasid Caliphate in the process. They established a center of power in northeastern Iran around Tabriz from which they threatened Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. Consequently, Ibn Taymiyya lived his adult life under the shadow of the Mongol threat, which is the key factor for understanding the two faces of his thought.

In 1300, the reigning Mongol Ilkhan, Ghazan, a direct descendant of Genghis Khan, invaded Syria.⁴ Since Ghazan had converted to Islam in 1295, he could project himself as a legitimate Muslim ruler, thereby capitalizing during his Syrian campaign on the strong prohibition in Islam against internecine Muslim fighting. In effect, his conversion sent a message to the Syrians: "Do not resist me; I come not to destroy Islam but to strengthen it." This line did not convince Ibn Taymiyya, who put his genius for Islamic law to work in developing anti-Mongol propaganda. He argued that, although Ghazan sported the appearance of being a Muslim, his policies as a ruler proved that he remained loyal to traditional Mongol law and belief. By having converted to Islam but then having failed to raise up Islamic law in his realm, Ghazan demonstrated that his conversion was a sham. On this basis, Ibn Taymiyya pronounced him an apostate. Because Islam takes a very dim view of apostasy (abandoning the true faith) Ibn Taymiyya had the material at hand to build a strong legal case both for ignoring Ghazan's claims of being a Muslim and for making total war on the partially-Islamized Mongols.

Ibn Taymiyya thus established a boundary between the truly Islamic society and its pseudo-Muslim enemies, who in his view posed a grave threat not just to the Muslims of Syria but to religion itself. The extent of the danger meant that the war against the Mongols was the first priority of the community: prosecuting it required all necessary steps, even if they sometimes contravened the letter of Islamic law. Ibn Taymiyya's pragmatism probably reflected his desire to prevent fighting over matters of religion, so that the Islamic community would be capable of standing united against the external threat. Politics, he might have said, is too serious a business to be left solely in the hands of the men of religion, particularly in a time of war.

³ For a detailed discussion of Ibn Taymiyya's pragmatism, see Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 151–157. For a revealing biographical sketch, see D. P. Little, "Did Ibn Taymiyya Have a Screw Loose?" *Studia Islamica* 41 (1975).

⁴ On Ibn Taymiyya's attitude toward Ghazan, see Jansen, *Dual Nature*, 33–39.

Following the procedure that Ibn Taymiyya established, al Qaeda today draws a similar line. The following passage from its manual on guerrilla warfare describes the historical emergence of al Qaeda's primary enemy, the apostate ruler: "After the fall of our orthodox caliphates on March 3, 1924 and after expelling the [European] colonialists, our Islamic nation was afflicted with apostate rulers who took over. . . . These rulers turned out to be more infidel and criminal than the colonialists themselves. Muslims have endured all kinds of harm, oppression, and torture at their hands."⁵ This conception is clearly an extension of Ibn Taymiyya's world view to the circumstances of the present day. The role that the Mongols played as the threat to Islamic civilization in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is, in the view of al Qaeda and likeminded extremists, currently played by Western civilization.

In this conception, the ruling elite in the Middle East today are latter-day Ghazans, apostate rulers. President George W. Bush is not the enemy closest to home; Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, and King Fahd of Saudi Arabia are the pseudo-Muslim representatives of an alien civilization. These leaders pretend to follow Islam and to represent their own people when in actuality they stand in thrall to Western culture while serving as the puppets of the Western powers. Since they were born Muslims, profess Islam, and yet do not rule according to Islamic law (as defined by the extremists), they receive at the hands of al Qaeda the same verdict—guilty of apostasy—that Ibn Taymiyya meted out to Ghazan. Toppling them from power is the heart and soul of al Qaeda's politics.

Al Qaeda did not itself apply Ibn Taymiyya's ideas to the modern world. That task fell to Sayyid Qutb, one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century.⁶ A radical Islamic ideologue, Egyptian authorities executed him in 1966 for, they claimed, conspiring to overthrow the government. Qutb's importance lies in having translated the logic of Ibn Taymiyya's rulings on apostasy into a comprehensive perspective on the problems of Islam in the modern world. Qutb describes modern society as "*jahili*"—a word derived from "*jahiliyya*," the name of the historical period in Arabia before Muhammad began preaching Islam. Related to the Arabic word for "ignorance," "*jahiliyya*" translates roughly as "the Dark Age." In Qutb's use, however, "*jahili*" does not refer, as it traditionally does, to a specific historical stage but rather to a general state of barbarousness and idolatry—a state into which any Muslim society can sink, even after the advent of Islam. In his view, the impact of the West in the modern era did in fact cast Middle Eastern societies adrift, cutting them loose from their Islamic moorings and turning them into realms of idolatry. Idolaters, in the orthodox Islamic tradition, do not benefit from any of the restrictions on violence in the name of religion; they are a legitimate target for holy war.

⁵ *Al-Qaeda Training Manual*, 7. The manual was discovered in the house of an al Qaeda operative in May 2000, and introduced as evidence at the trial of the East Africa Embassy bombers. It is located at <http://www.justice.gov/ag/trainingmanual.htm>.

⁶ On Sayyid Qutb, see Sivan, *Radical Islam*; and Jansen, *Dual Nature*.

In effect, Qutb exhorts extremists to make war on the ruling elite, which is guilty of allowing idolatry to flourish. His remedy is revolution, but the enemy is not limited to the corrupt elite controlling the Middle East; a global evil threatens to wipe out Islam itself. Failure to bring about the Islamic revolution will, therefore, spell the end of all that is of value in the world.

By describing the present as the new *jahiliyya* and arguing that Islam is in danger of being destroyed by the forces of darkness, Qutb affords extremists like bin Laden easy access to what I will dub “the Hijra model,” by which I mean the example set by the Prophet Muhammad of how a Muslim should carry out a revolution.⁷ In the face of opposition by unjust rulers, the Prophet founded the Islamic community and defended it against idolatrous enemies. He began by preaching Islam in Mecca, where he achieved notable success when people from a variety of backgrounds broke with their pagan traditions and converted to Islam. This success threatened the reigning oligarchy, which sought to protect its privileged position by persecuting the nascent Islamic community. This step forced Muhammad and his followers to make the *Hijra*, or migration, to Medina, where they established an independent state. With his power base thus secured, Muhammad then conducted a successful war against the Meccan idolaters, the former persecutors of the Muslims, whom he eventually converted to Islam.

This pattern—preaching the true faith, performing *Hijra* to escape oppression, organizing an independent power base, and then conducting war to topple the unbelievers from power—is a blueprint for revolution. It is the model that bin Laden is following; in the context of the new *jahiliyya*, al Qaeda’s sanctuary in Afghanistan today is the functional equivalent of the Prophet’s community in Medina in 622. Viewing its circumstances today as virtually identical to those of the Prophet when he made war against idolatrous Mecca, al Qaeda sees itself as a tiny colony of true believers who are surrounded on all sides by enemies and on whose shoulders rests the fate of humanity. In some respects, al Qaeda resembles a doomsday cult: it divides the world into absolute categories of good and evil; it has a paranoid siege mentality; it sees in extreme violence a means of cleansing the world; and it believes that all humanity stands on the brink of an unspeakable disaster. “Mankind today,” Sayyid Qutb writes in the opening line of his most important book, “stands at the edge of the abyss.”⁸

However, the world view of al Qaeda differs from that of a doomsday cult with respect to the role of politics and war. According to al Qaeda, violence will not spark the apocalypse but instead will avert disaster and usher in a new dawn, provided that it destroys the idolatrous rulers, just as the Prophet Muhammad ushered in a new age of light and justice when he defeated idolatrous Mecca and ended the darkness of the *jahiliyya*. According to Qutb, mankind stands at

⁷ See Michael Cook, *Muhammad* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1984), chap. 6.

⁸ Sayyid Qutb, *Ma’alim fi al tariq* (np, nd). For an English translation, see Sayyid Qutb, *Signposts on the Road* (Mumbai, India: Bilal Books, 1998).

the abyss because it “is bankrupt in the realm of values that, under their shelter, permit human life to develop in a healthy manner and to progress properly.”⁹ Al Qaeda’s goal is to take control of the state in order to pull humanity back from the abyss by upholding Islamic values throughout society. Its violence, therefore, does not presage a supernatural event: it is part of a wholly conventional war that by keeping alight the flame of Islam will nevertheless have near-cosmic consequences.

If considered together as a comprehensive intellectual system, the thought of Ibn Taymiyya, Sayyid Qutb, and the *Hijra* model of revolution explain the seeming contradiction between al Qaeda’s principles and its pragmatism. This intellectual system fosters the creation of an enclave of true believers, who fervently support the principle that Islamic law belongs at the center of social and political life. However, Islamic society faces, in their view, a grave existential threat in the form of Westernization, which has bred several generations of apostate rulers in the Middle East. These rulers are using the power of the state successfully to snuff out true religion. Meeting this existential threat is the first duty of every true Muslim, and the hour is very late. In order to save the world from depravity, it is imperative to topple these rulers from power immediately. In this project, al Qaeda sees itself as *one* military arm of the enclave of true believers. Its overriding priority is to carry out Islamic revolution by whatever means available. Since the salvation of mankind hinges on the political effectiveness of the true Muslims, bin Laden has no intention of going down in a blaze of glory unless this sacrifice would destroy one of the apostate regimes or weaken it considerably. In general terms, however, the needs of the revolution require al Qaeda to preserve itself to fight another day. The gravity of the situation requires al Qaeda to pursue its interests by any means available; conventional morality impinges on its political thought only with regard to its utility in manipulating others. Al Qaeda’s long-term goals are set by its fervent devotion to a radical religious ideology, but in its short-term behavior, it is a rational political actor operating according to the dictates of *realpolitik*.

ANTI-AMERICANISM, THE TROJAN HORSE OF EXTREMIST ISLAM

If al Qaeda is, for the purposes of political analysis, a pragmatic revolutionary movement interested in self-preservation, then why did it pick a fight to the death with the greatest power on earth? A look at the background of the two most important men in al Qaeda—Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri—is instructive. These men rose out of local Islamic opposition movements—bin Laden in Saudi Arabia, Zawahiri in Egypt. They took up arms against America when they were forced into exile after failing to reform or topple their governments at home. The trajectory of their careers reflects a general trend in the Middle East: Islamic revolutionaries have been crushed in Syria, Egypt, and

⁹ Ibid., 3.

Algeria; in many other countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan, they have been coopted and exiled. Although revolutionary political action has failed, extremists have occupied more cultural space than ever before in the form of voluntary social clubs, welfare organizations, and mosque associations of a variety of different kinds. The war against America must be understood in this context of crushed revolutions in the midst of cultural resurgence.

Since Islamic radicals everywhere see the United States as the neo-Mongol power lurking behind the apostate governments that they seek to topple, attacks on America function as “propaganda by action,” as well as direct action itself.¹⁰ These bold acts of defiance have three main purposes: they bolster the morale of extremists around the Islamic world; they call new recruits to the banner of radical Islam; and they discredit the prevailing political order, which benefits from a general feeling that actions of individuals cannot alter the status quo. Operations such as the bombing of the East Africa embassies and the attack on the USS *Cole* sent out a clear message: We radicals have not given up the fight. We will eventually triumph, because America is a paper tiger, as are its stooges currently ruling the Middle East. In an effort to get the message out, al Qaeda celebrated its attacks on video tapes, which it distributed as recruitment material in radical mosques around the Islamic world.

On one level, the terrorist attacks on September 11 are simply the boldest in a series of propaganda actions. On another level, they diverge from this pattern significantly. By striking with such brutality, bin Laden fully intended to spark a conflict in Afghanistan between the United States and al Qaeda.¹¹ He certainly got his wish, but the war did not proceed as planned. Al Qaeda expected the United States to follow in the footsteps of the Soviet Union, whose Afghan adventure presented the world with the spectacle of a superpower going down slowly in defeat, but not before trampling under its boot tens of thousands of innocent Muslim civilians. Al Qaeda calculated that Washington would also discover Afghanistan to be the burial place of empires. Had the conflict actually proceeded according to al Qaeda’s scenario, it would have created severe friction between state and society throughout much of the Middle East. Governments in the region, under pressure from Washington to support its war, would find themselves caught between the demands of their foreign patron and the anti-American sentiments of their own public. The ensuing legitimacy crisis would help to advance the cause of the Islamic revolution, either by actually shaking the regimes to the core or simply weakening them.

Although to some this might at first glance appear to be a somewhat implausible scenario, modern Middle Eastern history does provide a clear prece-

¹⁰ Emmanuel Sivan, “The Third Wave of Radical Islam” (lecture delivered at Princeton University, 3 December 2001).

¹¹ I develop this argument in “Somebody Else’s Civil War,” *Foreign Affairs* 81 (January/February 2002).

dent for the conflict that al Qaeda envisioned—the Iranian hostage crisis.¹² In 1979, the Ayatollah Khomeini and his radical followers initiated a conflict with Washington and then deftly manipulated it as a means of discrediting their domestic rivals. At the risk of oversimplifying matters, we can divide the revolutionary forces in Iran into two camps, the moderate and the clerical, not at all unlike the division in Iran today between reformers and hardliners. In November 1979, supporters of the clerical camp, calling themselves “students following the Imam’s line,” stormed the American Embassy in Iran, just as National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski was meeting in Algiers with the Iranian Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan, who represented the moderate camp and, therefore, desired cordial relations with Washington. By taking the Americans hostage, the clerical camp toppled the Bazargan government, scoring a blow against the moderate camp and the Americans simultaneously, and also driving them apart from each other.

While the initial blow to the Americans brought significant results, the utility of the conflict with the United States only grew as the crisis between the two countries deepened. By continuing to hold the embassy for many months thereafter, the clerical camp brought the conflict to a fever pitch, creating a war-time atmosphere in Iran—an atmosphere made even more explosive by the failed rescue mission that Washington launched. In this climate, the radicals could tar with the brush of treason any politician or soldier with a history of ties to America. Documents captured from the American Embassy contained many memoranda of conversations with moderate politicians, dating from after the fall of the shah. With the country in the grips of a war psychosis, even innocent exchanges with American officials could be made to appear as convincing proof of participation in a conspiracy against the revolution. The cache of American embassy documents thus functioned as a ready supply of ammunition against the moderates. On top of the contrived charges came the discovery of real conspiracies between the Americans and some moderate forces, particularly in the military. These plots only increased the momentum of the radicals, who eventually succeeded in eliminating their rivals so as to enjoy a free hand in fashioning the institutions of the Islamic Republic.

The clerical camp used the crisis with Washington in order to create an external, “imperialist” threat in the eyes of the Iranian public and simultaneously to capture the moral high ground by posing as the authentic representatives of the nation against its foreign enemy. Using the conflict with America in this way, as a kind of Trojan horse for extremist Islam, is also at the heart of al Qaeda’s war on America. Bin Laden’s post-September 11 statements reveal his intention to use anti-imperialism as a means of reaching a broader audience than would otherwise be available to him. In early November he described the political situation as follows:

¹² I have based this broad-brush interpretation of the hostage crisis on the detailed narrative and analysis of the revolution provided by Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

Amid the huge developments and in the wake of the great strikes that hit the United States in its most important locations in New York and Washington, a huge media clamor has been raised. This clamor is unprecedented. It conveyed the opinions of people on these events. People were divided into two parts. The first part supported these strikes against U.S. tyranny, while the second denounced them. Afterward, when the United States launched the unjust campaign against the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan, people also split into two parties. The first supported these campaigns, while the second denounced and rejected them. These tremendous incidents, which have split people into two parties, are of great interest to the Muslims. . . .¹³

The two camps that bin Laden promotes here—supporters and opponents of America—are not the same two camps that emerge from his Manichean world view, which separates the enclave of true believers from everyone else. Dividing people according to their attitude toward American power demonstrates an intention to capture for al Qaeda the moral high ground in the struggle against the United States. Like the Iranian radicals in 1979, bin Laden regards the conflict with America as a tool for discrediting the ruling elites aligned with the United States in the Middle East, and thereby creating a revolutionary atmosphere that will, he calculates, benefit his brand of extremism.

Although al Qaeda's use of war with America as a vehicle for polarizing public opinion clearly resembles the Iranian hostage crisis, the two events nonetheless differ significantly in one regard. In contrast to al Qaeda, the Iranian clerical camp operated against rivals inside Iran, where the clerical camp controlled both public space and a coercive apparatus. By contrast, al Qaeda seeks to weaken enemies located far beyond the borders of its sanctuary in Afghanistan. Despite this disadvantage, the tensions between Washington and Riyadh that have risen to the surface since September 11 demonstrate that bin Laden did manage to land a few blows for his cause. Al Qaeda slipped the thin end of a wedge between Washington and Riyadh. A protracted U.S. war in Afghanistan would probably have driven it deep into the structure of the American-Saudi alliance, possibly even tearing the two countries apart.

MIDDLE EASTERN BRINKSMANSHIP

Al Qaeda views the post-September 11 conflict with the United States as a variation within an historical process. In the search for metaphors, one is tempted to say that bin Laden considers the struggle in Afghanistan to be a single battle in a long war. This image itself is, however, misleading, because it emphasizes the notion of a bilateral contest. For al Qaeda, the primary struggle is between the apostate rulers in the Middle East and the forces of true Islam, of which al Qaeda is but one representative. The relative strength of each side on the battlefield in Afghanistan, though not unrelated to the primary contest as defined by al Qaeda, is by no means a clear measure of success or failure. If al

¹³ Text from BBC News Online, 3 November 2001, located at <http://www.news.bbc.co.uk>.

Qaeda simply lives to regroup and to fight in the next stage of this ongoing process, it has scored a significant victory. On the basis of its world view, even total destruction of the organization does not necessarily constitute failure. If, for instance, al Qaeda's destruction were to result in the weakening of apostate regimes, and at the same time its martyrdom were to inspire a like-minded group to emerge from the enclave of true believers, then the very destruction of al Qaeda would constitute a political success.

This view of the conflict with the West as a process, not a discrete event, does not derive solely from al Qaeda's Islamic world view; some aspects of this perspective are shared by every major Middle East actor seeking to alter the status quo. Yasser Arafat and Saddam Hussein share aspects of this view, as did figures from the past such as Gamal Abdel Nasser and Muhammad Mossadegh. This attitude reflects a coherent approach to the difficult facts of life in the Middle East, where Western influence is permanently present but permanently illegitimate. Western power—political, economic, and military—has been a fixture on the political landscape for two-hundred years, and it shows no signs of being dismantled in the foreseeable future. However, the specific terms of Western engagement with the region are never fixed, often in flux, and therefore always subject to negotiation. At the same time, a number of nationalist ideologies and state interests militate in favor of expelling the West, redrawing borders between states, toppling regimes, and redistributing wealth. Since the Western powers are the ultimate guarantors of international order, the negotiable status of their influence keeps alive the possibility of actually taking steps to revise the status quo along these lines. Given all that such a revision would entail in terms of increased prestige and wealth, leaders have a powerful incentive to challenge the West.

These circumstances give rise to a mode of identity politics that, for lack of a better term, I will dub “anti-Western brinksmanship,” by which I mean the tendency of Middle Eastern actors to challenge the interests of a Western power directly, or indirectly, through one of its local allies in order to provoke the threat of Western intervention, if not actual intervention itself. In these crises, Middle Eastern leaders adopt utopian nationalist and religious ideologies tailored to appeal to a number of disaffected groups simultaneously. These ideologies undoubtedly exploit three permanent factors on the political scene: historical grievances against the West; revanchist sentiment toward Israel; and transnational identities, such as Arabism and Islam, which embrace the majority of people throughout the region. Often the response by the West (or Israel) to a provocation allows a Middle Eastern brinksman to achieve results that by his efforts alone would not have been possible. This model accounts for much of the interaction between the Palestinians and the Israelis throughout the history of their conflict, and especially since the beginning of the al Aqsa Intifada. As a political phenomenon, al Qaeda's decision to target the West deserves to be analyzed within this framework rather than as a simple story of religious extremism and virulent anti-Americanism.

One obvious response to this argument is that al Qaeda, unlike, say, Saddam Hussein, is clearly driven by its ideology. While al Qaeda is the ideological organization par excellence, there still exists a gap between its long-term goals set by its religious convictions and its immediate goals set by its understanding of the possible. The structure of the Middle Eastern international system places considerable constraints on successful political action. Consequently, al Qaeda has no choice, if it wishes to be a serious player in the game, but to follow the brinkmanship model, which is one of the few methods available to an anti-status quo power in the region.

Bin Laden virtually announced his use of the model when he invoked the cause of Palestine in his post-September 11 propaganda video tapes. His 1996 "Declaration of War," by contrast, had demonstrated far less interest in Palestine, being primarily concerned with specifically Saudi subjects. Palestine, in the language of Middle Eastern politics, is both a pan-Arab and a pan-Islamic symbol that stands simultaneously for the actual suffering of Palestinians under Israeli occupation and for the suffering of all Arabs and Muslims under the callous domination of the Western world. Bin Laden's late conversion to Palestinian nationalism signaled his intention to project his message to a wider audience in order to trump the West in the arena of identity politics.

If al Qaeda's policies actually reflected the shrewd calculations of a Middle Eastern brinksman rather than the irrational rage of a zealot, then what went wrong? Given the nature of the situation, we will never know for certain; but the brinkmanship model alerts us to the main factors that would have caused al Qaeda to misread the balance of power between itself and the United States.

First of all, bin Laden probably assumed that great power rivalries would place limits on the American ability to dominate Central Asia. He counted in particular on Russia and China constraining the United States; both powers wield influence in the region, and both had for some time expressed deep frustration with the unilateralist streak in President Bush's foreign policy. The Republican administration's insistence on pressing ahead with its missile defense plan had alienated Moscow and Beijing alike; both had threatened to engage in an arms race if Washington refused to respect their interests. For some time prior to September 11, friction between the United States and Russia had developed over the war in Chechnya. Moreover, the general discontent that the Russians had expressed regarding the rise of American power since the fall of the Soviet Union made it appear extremely unlikely that Moscow would have supported a massive and prolonged United States military presence in Central Asia close to the Russian heartland. The same held true for Beijing, where a number of bitter memories were still fresh in everyone's mind, from the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, to the conflict over the downed American spy plane, to the ever-present tensions over Taiwan.

If the great power environment appeared propitious, then the regional balance was even more promising for al Qaeda. Middle Eastern brinksman and Washington approach conflicts very differently. Washington searches for allies,

focusing on the stated intentions of governments. The brinksman, by contrast, realizes that the key question with regard to his interests is whether the regional political environment in general will permit Washington to carry out its plans. Formal alliances, therefore, mean very little; the brinksman focuses instead on relations within societies and works to bring about a set of political circumstances that will foil American aims.

Working from this perspective, bin Laden calculated that he could drive a wedge between the United States and the local allies that it would need in order to topple him. In this particular case, the decade-long regional struggle for Afghanistan worked in his favor. This geostrategic battle pitted a Russian and Iranian entente, which operated in support of the Northern Alliance against Pakistan, which backed the Taliban. For its part, the United States had traditionally allied itself with Pakistan in this regional contest, although relations between Washington and Islamabad had become strained in recent years. From bin Laden's point of view, this regional balance meant that Washington had only two options: it could align itself with the Northern Alliance or it could work through its traditional ally, Pakistan. Both scenarios appeared highly implausible. If a natural law of international politics is "my enemy's enemy is my friend," then the United States found itself working against nature: Washington's enemy, the Taliban, was the ally of its friend, Pakistan; and Washington's enemy's enemy, the Northern Alliance, was the friend of Washington's enemy, Iran. How could this not have bolstered the confidence of al Qaeda?

Bin Laden did not, however, simply assume that the regional balance of power would take care of everything by itself. He also had at least two cards of his own to play in order to influence the regional environment. First, he assassinated Shah Massoud, the leader of the Northern Alliance. Al Qaeda suicide bombers killed Massoud two days before September 11 by posing as Arab journalists coming from Europe to conduct an interview. By the time of his assassination, the Northern Alliance had in any case been relegated to a sliver of territory in northeastern Afghanistan, and it hardly seemed capable of posing a serious threat to the Taliban and al Qaeda. Nevertheless, bin Laden engineered the decapitation of the Northern Alliance in order to throw it into such disarray that it would be useless to the United States as an instrument of retribution.

Second, bin Laden issued a pan-Islamic appeal over the heads of the Musharraf regime in Pakistan to the people in the street sympathetic to him and hostile to America. Using a tactic perfected by Nasser and Saddam, bin Laden hoped that this appeal would either destabilize Pakistan or, at the very least, scare both Washington and Islamabad with the threat of destabilization. Bin Laden issued his appeal in the full knowledge that any attempt by the United States to ally with the Northern Alliance would inevitably provoke a backlash in Pakistan. In particular, he could count on three elements in Pakistani society that could be expected to react violently to such a provocation: groups in the military and secret services with strong ties to the Taliban and jihadist groups in

Kashmir; Islamic extremist political organizations; and especially, the Pashtun tribesmen along the Afghan border. The last group was of particular importance to bin Laden, because the Taliban represents, in addition to a religious affiliation, Pashtun ethnic dominance of Afghanistan. The fact that the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan dissects the Pashtun ethnic group amplified bin Laden's pan-Islamic ideology considerably; it appealed as a consequence not just to religious sentiment in Pakistan but in addition to Pashtun ethnic nationalism.

The overlap between Sunni Islam and the Pashtun ethnicity also gave bin Laden an advantage in countering any attempt by the United States to cooperate with the Northern Alliance, which in addition to its connections with Pakistan's regional rivals represented all the non-Pashtun and non-Sunni elements in Pakistan—the Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Hazaras. Thus, on September 11, bin Laden probably told himself that strategic, ethnic, and religious factors in Pakistan all militated in favor of Islamabad lobbying Washington with all vehemence to steer clear of the Northern Alliance.

From bin Laden's viewpoint, Washington had only one other option—to pressure Islamabad itself to help destroy the Taliban. For the Americans, this policy would allow them to work with, rather than against, their traditional ally, but it would also require Pakistan to dump a Muslim ally on orders from Washington, whose star had been falling in Pakistan in recent years. Such a radical policy reversal, bin Laden probably calculated, would unmask the Musharraf regime before its own public, revealing it as a puppet of the Americans. Again, bin Laden did not leave matters to chance. In proclamations directed to the Pakistani people, he stated: “The world had been divided into two camps: one under the banner of the cross, as Bush, the head of infidelity said, and another under the banner of Islam. A Muslim is a brother to fellow Muslims. He neither does them an injustice, nor lets them down. The Pakistani Government has fallen under the banner of the cross.”¹⁴ Bin Laden was certainly aided in this appeal by the tensions that developed between Pakistan and India over the Kashmir dispute. Even if bin Laden had no direct hand in these events, they were precisely the type of disruption that he envisioned when he provoked America to attack him.

The success of bin Laden's tactics, comparable to the Iranian hostage model, hinged on being able to initiate a controlled conflict with the United States. This, in turn, required being able to deny the United States a firm foothold in the region in order to neutralize American military superiority. Obviously, bin Laden severely miscalculated on many levels at once. The Russians allowed the Americans a free hand. The Musharraf government did manage to reverse its policy, align with the Americans while they cooperated with the Northern Alliance, oust pro-Taliban elements from its military, and rein in militants in Pakistan. Iran turned a blind eye to the American presence. In addition to these

¹⁴ Text from BBC News Online, 1 November 2001, located at <http://www.news.bbc.co.uk>.

misreadings of the regional balance of power, one could add many other miscalculations. To name just one, bin Laden, like most generals, planned for the last war; he failed to perceive the qualitative difference between the Russian army of the 1980s and the high-tech American military of the twenty-first century, which managed to overcome many of the obstacles in Afghanistan that previous outside powers had found insurmountable.

Nonetheless, Nasser in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War made military miscalculations based on a far less propitious set of circumstances. Like other Middle Eastern brinksmen before him, bin Laden miscalculated the strength of public opinion, and he misread the intentions and capabilities of a superpower. This should not blind us to the fact, however, that he did perceive correctly the general patterns in the relations between the United States and the Islamic world, and he attempted to exploit them with cunning. Moreover, it is too early to judge his errors as complete failures. The consequences of September 11 in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Egypt—to name just three countries—have yet to play themselves out fully. Even if al Qaeda never recovers from the military defeat in Afghanistan, bin Laden may still succeed in his aim of severely weakening the apostate regimes in the Middle East and of inspiring like-minded organizations to emerge from the enclave of true believers. He may even survive to fight another day.

There has been much talk about how September 11 permanently changed the United States and the world. In its relations with the Arab and Islamic peoples, however, Washington can almost certainly count on more of the same. The crash of the tectonic plates of history created the complex balance of power between the Middle East and the West today. This deep historical structure determined the range of choices available to even the most resolute superpower. Before too long, this balance of power will inevitably support the aspirations of another brinksman, who will step to the fore and challenge American hegemony. Bin Laden's miscalculations, even if they do spell total failure for al Qaeda, may well pave the way for somebody else's success.