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The Impact of the War in Iraq on Islamist Groups and the Culture of Global Jihad

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The war in Iraq and the collapse of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan had a major impact on the ideology, activities, and mindset of Islamist terrorist groups, and on the political culture of Global Jihad at large. The quick and unexpected fall of Saddam Hussein and his government brought about by the United States and its Western allies, and the elimination of the Iraqi army and security forces, created a vacuum in Iraq that attracted a flow of Islamist volunteers to the country. Various old and new local Iraqi groupings have since rapidly turned Iraq into a new battleground. Furthermore, the United States has weakened the basic structure of the former Iraqi regime and society—i.e. the Iraqi army—thus triggering the emergence of fundamental conflicts and disputes in various respects. Post-Saddam Iraq presented to these predominantly Sunni Arab Jihadist groups, a golden opportunity to reinforce their struggle by combining several basic elements:

- Increasing anti-American and anti-Western sentiments.
- Advocating a violent struggle against most Arab national/secular or “infidel” regimes.
- Viewing the struggle in Iraq as a return to the heart of the Arab world and thus a “return home,” after years of struggle in “exile” including in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Central Asia.
- Seizing the opportunity to take advantage of political, social, religious, and cultural elements beyond global Jihad, to recruit a growing number of Islamic youth to support their political aspirations and Islamist interpretations.
- Concentrating the struggle on a “core triangle” consisting of three Arab countries – Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.
- Using the Internet to promote the solidarity of the “Islamic virtual nation (*Ummah*)” among large Islamic publics, throughout the Arab and Muslim world, as well as Muslim communities in the West.

The war in Iraq and the Jihadi and Ba`thist struggles that followed there, affected Islamist groups throughout the Arab and Muslim world by supplying new interpretations of Jihad. These interpretations altered so-called “red lines” that were previously set. The new

interpretations were accompanied by strategic policies and *Modus Operandi*. Among the more significant of these are:

- Non-discriminatory killings of both “infidel” foreigners and Muslims, and the adoption of more radical interpretations and doctrines of ex-communication or *Takfir*, including of Muslims. Furthermore, the barbaric killing of civilians by beheading became a widespread phenomenon in Iraq in the past year. It included Muslims and non-Muslims as well, and was carried out by various Islamist groups, under different names. Each execution was videotaped and, within hours, was circulated as video clips to Islamist web sites and forums on the Internet. At the beginning of September 2004, propagandists for Al-Qaeda and Jamaat al-Tawhid wal-Jihad in Iraq edited a “movie” that contained a collection of all the executions. They added subtitles and then posted the movie on various sympathizing web sites. Approximately 20,000 people downloaded the “movie” so far, and many others the various clips. Thousands of Muslim youngsters, mainly in the Arab world publicly stated their support for these barbaric executions, including of innocent Turks, Egyptians, or Nepalese, whose only “sin” was the fact that they came to Iraq to look for employment. They were all perceived as serving the American occupation forces and the global conspiracy against Islam, and hence, to be part of the combating forces.
- The war opened up new fronts in Arab and Middle Eastern countries, such as Jordan, Morocco, Turkey, and above all Saudi Arabia. Surprisingly or not, the only significant Arab country where the Islamist militants failed is Egypt, probably as a result of the “iron fist” that the Egyptian authorities had employed in handling the Islamist phenomenon during the past 20 years. Another important example where the war and the radical Islamists have little influence now is Algeria. There are signs of improved cooperation and heightened mutual influence between Algerian and Saudi radical groups, but this has not affected the struggle within Algeria.
- The war broadened opportunities for recruitment among Muslim communities in the West.
- The war broadened opportunities to influence the Islamist struggles in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and above all in Chechnya, long before the most recent attack on a school in the North Ossetian town of Beslan in early September 2004.
- It seems that in the past year, the war in Iraq has inherited the role of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a major factor in anti-Westernism. The Iraqi issue has become the most important criterion for carrying out terrorist operations even outside Iraq. Examples include the attacks in Madrid in March 2004, or in Jakarta in early September this year. In a declaration published in Islamist web sites in Arabic on September 10th, the Indonesian Jama’ah Islamiyyah stated clearly that the bombing nearby the Australian embassy in Jakarta took place as a lesson for the Australian government, which participates in the “war against our brothers in Iraq.” Other plans, thwarted in Europe, or threats against other countries such as Italy, Denmark, or Honduras, were all made against the background of the war in Iraq. The only major terrorist attacks that had nothing to do with Iraq were those that were in Moscow and Beslan, carried out recently by Chechen terrorists and their Arab supporters, who bombed also two planes in Southern Russia.

The entire process of radicalization that followed the war in Iraq is accompanied by a massive indoctrination by Islamist scholars, clerics, and intellectuals, who promote the building of a new system based on Jihad and the doctrinal interpretations of this Islamist struggle. This process creates a larger distinction between radical Islamists on the one hand,

and other Islamic doctrines and trends that do not advocate the violent radical Jihadi line in the Arab world, on the other hand. This process, which is currently at its beginning, might in the future, be useful in creating the Islamic answer to the radical Jihadi groups. Curtailing this phenomenon must come from within the Arab and Muslim world, and not be led by an outside force. The present situation in Iraq does not only bear the prospect of heightened Islamist radicalization, but it also contains the seeds for finding the reaction of Islamic moderates. Such a reaction however, depends both on the behavior of the Islamists, and the American policy vis-à-vis the Arab world in general, and Iraq in particular.

The war in Iraq and the terrorist operations that sprang up against the Iraqi background, mark what we might call the second and even third generation of Al-Qaeda and Global Jihad. It reflects a shift in the balance between Egyptians and Saudis in the ideological and doctrinal legitimacy for the culture of global Jihad. If we were to map the ideological developments of global Jihad, we could point out four main ideologues as the most significant figures:

- Dr. Abdallah Azzam, a Palestinian who imported global Jihad to the Afghan Mujahidin and their Arab supporters, and inspired Bin Laden in creating Al-Qaeda.
- Dr. Ayman Zawahiri, the Egyptian who contributed the principles of the Jihadi experience in Egypt. Both Zawahiri and Azzam were key to the consolidation of the doctrines of the Taliban in the attempt to create the only true Islamic Salafi state in modern times in Afghanistan.
- Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdesi, the Palestinian who combined the doctrines of Jihadi Salafiyah with the most severe principles of Wahhabiyyah, thus creating the Tawhid wal-Jihad that operates in Jordan and nowadays in Iraq as well. One of his most loyal disciples, the Jordanian of Palestinian origin, Abu Anas al-Shami, is the leading Islamist figure behind Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi in Iraq. Another Palestinian partner of al-Maqdesi, Omar Abu Omar alias Abu Qutadah, who is imprisoned in the UK, was the leading ideological figure of Al-Qaeda in Europe.
- Sheikh Yousef al-Uyeri, the Saudi scholar and commander of Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, who was killed in June 2003 by the Saudi police. Al-Uyeri marks the shift of the younger generation of dominant scholars of global Jihad to Saudi hands. Two of his Saudi associates, are trying to fill his place – Sheikh Fares Bin Ahmad al-Zahrani, alias Abu Jandal al-Azdi in Saudi Arabia, and Sheikh Abu Omar Seyf in Chechnya, who is the leading Islamic scholar of the Arab battalion of volunteers there. Another person that should be noted is Sheikh Hamed al-Ali, a Saudi who lives in Kuwait.

Even though he was killed over a year ago, Yousef al-Uyeri should be regarded as the leading architect of global Jihad in Iraq and other regions as well. In only three years, between 2000 and 2003, he wrote about 40 books and longer articles in Arabic, in which he sketched the future strategy of global jihad. All of his books and articles were published only on the Internet and were not signed. He remained anonymous to most of the world until his death and only in the past year the supporters of global Jihad recognized his writings. Unfortunately, he still remains largely unknown in the West, including to Western intelligence communities, even though the latter could have easily studied the Jihadist strategy for Iraq and the near future, just by reading his writings.

Al-Uyeri sketched his strategy in several books, among them a series of 13 parts, entitled “The Crusader war against Iraq,” where he posted 35 questions and answers. His first principle was that “the importance of the war in Iraq is not because a brother Arab country is attacked by the United States, but since Iraq is just one link in the chain of attacks to follow. Therefore, if the Mujahidin do not resist in Iraq, they are going to fail in the future aggressions.” Another important principle is the focus on the power of volunteers outside of the attacked region in order to guarantee the success of the Islamist resistance. This principle has been fully implemented in Iraq, as well as in other conflict regions before, including in Chechnya.

Al-Uyeri also marks the most significant split between the present generation of radical Islamist scholars and their Saudi mentors of the movement for reform, led by Dr. Safar al-Hawali and Sheikh Salman al-Awdah. Hawali and al-Awdah, who were also mentors for Osama bin Laden, were recruited in the past year by the Saudi government to defend the Kingdom against the extremists who used the war in Iraq to start a terrorist campaign on Saudi soil. This split caused a tremendous crisis among the Saudi Islamists, who took the opportunity to create a “fighting axis” between Iraq, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. Another development, which occurred on this backdrop, was the rapprochement of doctrinal and organizational links between the Saudi government and the mainstream of the Wahhabis on the one hand, with the mainstream Muslim Brotherhood on the other. It created two big blocks of Islamists in the Sunni Arab world—the violent Jihadi Salafiyah and the mainstream (*Wasatiyyah*) Ikhwani-Wahhabi block of non-violent groups and ideology. Exempted from this strategy of non-violence were issues concerning Israel and the Jews, where all forms of terrorism, including suicide bombings, had been accepted.

One interesting point should be noted with regard to the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, who remained entirely unaffected by the war in Iraq, probably for three reasons. First, there is a constant decrease in the Saudi support for Hamas, especially in the financial realm, as a result of American pressure and legislation strengthening the struggle against terrorist financing. Second, the killing of Hamas leaders Sheikh Yasin and Dr. Rantisi in Gaza, decreased the solidarity of Hamas with the Jordanian and global Muslim Brotherhood, and shifted the leadership outside of Palestine, to people such as Khaled Mish'al and Mousa Abu Marzouq, who are influenced by secular elements. Third, and most importantly, the anarchy in the Palestinian Authority enables Hizballah and its Iranian backer, turning it into an influential organization in the Territories. Neither these Shi'ite elements are part of the radical Sunni global Jihad, and have a different agenda.

The violent reality in Iraq, which is liable to continue at least several years, has recently turned into an arena for global Jihad. A case in point is the kidnapping of the two French journalists in Iraq by a group demanding the abolition of the law banning the wearing of the veils in France. This may-be the first sign of how the Iraqi Islamist podium is used for other global issues rather than Iraq itself.

We should also bear in mind that the American policy vis-à-vis the broader Middle East, including Central Asia and the Caucasus, might trigger the emergence of yet another axis of global Jihad up to the North. The role of the Arab volunteers in Chechnya, the Wahhabi radical influence in Uzbekistan, and the thus far limited support for global Jihad among Kurds and Turks, might lead to the creation of a wider Islamist front. This front is dangerous not only with regard to terrorism, but also in its influence on Muslim popular support. A greater sense of alienation among Muslim communities in Europe and North

America; an unstable situation in the Balkans; a rise in terrorist attacks in Russia and Central Asia; and further successes of terrorist groups in Arab moderate countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, or Morocco, might add further fuel to the fire.

The United States and its Western allies should pay more attention to promoting moderate Islamic elements, either in their own countries, or in the Arab world. The role of ideology, religious interpretations, and social factors, in further developing the global Jihad groups, is immense and must not be neglected by the West. The answer is not Western democracy, which will lead to Islamist states in the region, as occurred in 1989 in Algeria. Rather, the answer is to encourage Muslim elements to challenge these radical phenomena from within the Muslim world.

A journalist and former Kuwaiti Minister of Information Dr. Sa'd Bin Tefla, recently wrote an excellent article in which he asked: Where are the Fatwas Against bin Laden? He went on stating: 'We left the world with the impression that the Arabs are all bin Laden'. In the article, which was translated and circulated by MEMRI, he compared the lack of a fatwah against Bin Laden to the fatwah that called for the killing of Salman Rushdie in the late 1970s. He concluded his article by saying:

"But let us put aside the [subject of the] *Fatwa*. Have any protests been held condemning bin Laden's actions in any of the Islamic capital cities? Perhaps there were some that demonstrated in his favor. The [Muslim] satellite stations competed amongst themselves in broadcasting his sermons and *fatwas*, instead of preventing their dissemination as they did in the case of Rushdie's book. Have we earmarked a reward for anyone who kills bin Laden as we did for anyone who kills Rushdie on account of his book? "With our equivocal stance on bin Laden we from the very start left the world with the impression that we are all bin Laden."

Only when such voices will be heard more often in the Arab world can we really confront radical Islamist doctrines and terrorism. Until then, the complexity of the situation in Iraq serves the Islamists, who unfortunately benefit from increasing support from Arab Muslim youngsters who are attracted to the apocalyptic nature of the radical Islamist discourse.