

The Differences Between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda

Written by Josh Schott

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

The Differences Between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda

<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/11/17/the-differences-between-the-taliban-and-al-qaeda/>

JOSH SCHOTT, NOV 17 2012

Following the attacks on 9/11, President Bush told the American public that the Islamic militant group Al-Qaeda was responsible for the devastating attacks and the Taliban regime of Afghanistan provided a safe haven for the terrorist organization. The mainstream media and the Bush Administration blended the Taliban and Al-Qaeda together making the two groups the same terrorist entity in the eyes of the American public. The Taliban, however, played no role in the 9/11 attacks, had no prior knowledge of the attacks, publicly condemned the attacks, and provided many different options to the US to try Osama Bin Laden for his crimes. The two organizations are distinct and have very different goals, ideologies, and sources of recruits. This paper serves to differentiate between the Taliban (not neo-Taliban) and Al-Qaeda and examine how and why each group started, their goals, operations, and cultural, ethnic, and geographical backgrounds.

When the Soviets left Afghanistan after ten years of a bloody and costly war in 1989, Afghanistan descended into anarchy and chaos. What was left of Najibullah's regime did not wield any significant power and it collapsed in 1992. The ISI helped institute a transitional government comprised of former mujahideen commanders in 1992, but soon the commanders competed for power and civil war ensued (Zaeef 50). The mujahideen who were semi-united during the war and fought the Soviets had splintered and each mujahideen commander became warlords ruling over specific regions of Afghanistan. Each commander set up his own checkpoints requiring commissions, killing innocent passers by, or forcing people to work as slaves. Rival commanders battled each other for power and innocent Afghans paid the price (54). Roughly 25,000 Afghans died in the first six months of 1994 alone (Fergusson 9).

Afghans know this time of lawlessness and feudal barbarism as "the time of the men with guns" (Zaeef 59). Disgusted by the atrocities the warlords committed, Mullah Salam Abdul Zaeef, a former mujahid during the Soviet war, met with fellow former mujahideen and decided that they needed to build a force large enough to confront the warlords, to defend the rights of all Afghans, and to establish order and justice. They believed this could only be done with the support of the people and to find a solution working with the people (62). They consulted Mullah Mohammad Omar and asked him to be the leader of the new movement. At first he declined, but soon accepted the position. In the autumn of 1994 about fifty people gathered at a mosque in Sangisar and formally founded the Taliban movement with Mawlawi Abdul Samad as Amir and Mullah Omar as the Taliban commander (65). This is not the first time the term *Taliban* was used. *Taliban* is plural for *talib* meaning "student" in Arabic, literally "one who seeks knowledge." They are devoted religious students of Islam who have been in Afghanistan since the creation of madrasas, which have been around since the earliest days of Islam (Fergusson 14). During the Soviet war these Taliban participated in the jihad. The Taliban were known for their skillful fighting capabilities, discipline and the galvanizing effect their religious convictions had on their morale (15). Zaeef states in his autobiography, "Jihad was not just about fighting: in our view, there had to be a strong educational perspective as well as a provision for justice" (Zaeef 22). At that meeting in the mosque at Sangisar where the Taliban officially started the movement to bring order to Afghanistan, they called themselves the *Taliban* because that's simply who they were.

After they attacked and dismantled the warlord Daru Khan's checkpoint in Kandahar, the movement gained rapid momentum. The Taliban swept through Kandahar, cleansing the city of the vicious warlords. They dismantled many checkpoints and roadblocks that exploited traveling Afghans and they imposed a traditional tribal code of behavior, as well as Sharia based civic order (Crews 64). Soon, they expanded to other provinces and took control of Kabul in September of 1996 (66). The Taliban created the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan with Mullah Omar as the Amir al-

The Differences Between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda

Written by Josh Schott

Mu'minin, which means *Commander of the Faithful* or "ruler of all Muslims." The elimination of the warlords and the order the Taliban created, gave "reassurance to a society traumatized by nearly fifteen years of violence... and provided a rare unifying moment in the region's history" (64). Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates recognized the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan on May 25, 1997 (67). The movement's success can be attributed to the mass popular support it experienced from ordinary Afghans. Abdulkader Sinno explains the reasons for their success, "The Taliban provided moral clarity, a promise of a just and safe society stemming from a potent vision of Pashtun authenticity, and the satisfaction of being part of a momentous movement that could accomplish what became the stated goal of the jihad started in 1979 – a just Islamic state that would incidentally also terminate non-Pashtun control of the capital" (Crews 78). By 2000, the Taliban controlled ninety percent of Afghanistan excluding sections of the north (Crews 69).

As discussed, the Taliban sought to fix Afghanistan; they had a local perspective, limited horizons, and immediate concerns. The plights of the Palestinians, Kashmiris, Chechnyans or Muslims elsewhere did not interest the Taliban; in fact, some may have not had any knowledge of those conflicts (Crews 217). They restricted their jihad only to Afghanistan. In their view, if other foreign militant groups declared jihad against their own governments or western countries, then fine, but it did not concern Afghanistan and did not involve them (Barfield 267). Their goal never went beyond establishing the "Taliban version of utopia within their own borders" (Fergusson 91). Furthermore, the Taliban were not too concerned with the threat of westernism, instead they were starting to build cozy relationships with the US government and the US oil company UNOCAL. Historically, Afghanistan was different from the Middle East and South Asia in that there was no particular tradition of anti-Westernism, excluding the disdain for the British (Crews 221). This can explain why "few Afghans ever sought to join international movements such as Al-Qaeda, and their lack of participation in activities outside Afghanistan or Pakistan border region" (Barfield 268).

The founder of Al-Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden, first became involved in the jihad in Afghanistan when he opened a half way house in Saudi Arabia for recruits travelling to Afghanistan to fight in the jihad. He provided very basic military training to high school and college students, as well as fundraised for the jihad. Wealthy individuals, including members of the Saudi royal family, contributed to the cause and the Saudi government offered great discounts for airlines to Pakistan. Lawrence Wright explains, "The people who rallied to the Afghan jihad felt that Islam itself was threatened by the advance of communism. Afghanistan meant little to most of them, but the faith of the Afghan people meant a great deal" (97). When Bin Laden finally went to Pakistan and entered Afghanistan, he saw that the Afghan Arabs were not trained properly, so he suggested that he and Palestinian scholar and mystic Abdullah Azzam take on the responsibility of the Afghan Arabs and create a formal role for them. They created the Services Bureau in Peshawar that provided housing and services to incoming Arabs to fight in the jihad (103). However, the Afghan Arabs were not a significant force in the war against the Soviets and the numbers of Afghan Arabs fighting at any one time were estimated at two thousand, compared to the 250,000 Afghan mujahideen. Despite the disapproval of other leaders, Bin Laden created the first all-Arab camp in Jaji in 1986, as part of a grander plan to wage jihad after the Soviet war by creating an Arab legion that could defend Muslim causes everywhere (111).

Osama Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri – an Egyptian physician, founder of the Egyptian Islamist group Al-Jihad, and current leader of Al-Qaeda – first met when Bin Laden attended a lecture at the hospital where Zawahiri worked as a physician in Saudi Arabia. They complemented each other quite well, filling in where the other lacked. Zawahiri needed money and contacts, which Bin Laden could provide handsomely. Bin Laden needed direction and Zawahiri, a veteran propagandist, provided it. Interestingly, until Bin Laden met Zawahiri, he "never voiced opposition to his own government or other repressive Arab regimes," instead he focused his efforts on expelling the Soviets from Afghanistan (127). As the war started to die down in 1988, tension began to rise between Azzam and Zawahiri, since they both had different goals for after the war and both wanted to use Bin Laden to accomplish those goals. Azzam purported to be against the intentional killing of civilians and wanted to focus on the liberation of Palestine, followed by liberating oppressed Muslims in other regions; whereas, Zawahiri wanted to start revolutions in Muslim countries (130). Bin Laden had slightly different goals from both men. He wanted to carry the struggle to the Philippines, Kashmir and especially the Central Asian republics where the jihad against the Soviet Union could continue (131). The US was not a target quite yet, since they are still on the US's pay roll at this point.

At a meeting in Peshawar on August 11, 1988 the leaders of the Arab legion convened to discuss the future of the

The Differences Between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda

Written by Josh Schott

jihad. As a result of a vote, they formed a new organization assigned the task of continuing the jihad after the Soviets left Afghanistan. They decided on a plan stating, "Initial estimate, within 6 months of al-Qaeda, 314 brothers will be trained and ready" (132). For most of those present at this meeting, this was the first time they heard the name Al-Qaeda, which means *base* in Arabic. On August 20 the same group of commanders met and officially founded the organization they called Al-Qaeda, "The mentioned Al-Qaeda is basically an organized Islamic faction, its goal is to lift the word of God, to make His religion victorious." They divided the tasks for the organization into two parts: limited duration and open duration. Limited duration determined that the Afghan Arabs be trained and placed with the mujahideen for the remainder of the war. Open duration determined that after the war, the Arabs are to be tested and the best of them be chosen to become members Al-Qaeda (133). The group chose Bin Laden to lead the organization. Bin Laden stated that they named the group *Al-Qaeda* because "Abu-Ubaydah formed a camp to train youth to fight against the oppressive, atheist, and truly terrorist Soviet Union. We called that place Al-Qaeda – in the sense that it was a training base – and that is where the name came from" (134).

When the Soviets left Afghanistan in 1989, the mujahideen turned their guns on each other. Bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia to consult with Saudi intelligence and Prince Turki's chief of staff to determine who to support in the ensuing Afghan civil war and the chief of staff said it was best just to leave (143).

As shown, Al-Qaeda was formed to continue the jihad after the Soviet war and make it into a global struggle. Contrasted to the Taliban, Al-Qaeda had a global perspective, expanded horizons, and long term goals. The plights of the Palestinians, Kashmiris, Chechnyans, and Muslims everywhere were of ultimate concern. The attack on Islam in Afghanistan was just one instance of oppression of Muslims, but they did not have a vested interest in Afghanistan beyond expelling the atheist invaders.

It is of crucial importance to understand the geographic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds and sources of recruits of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban to discern between the two groups. Both of the most influential founders of Al-Qaeda, Zawahiri and Bin Laden, came from notable families and both were very well educated. Zawahiri was a very skilled Egyptian physician and Bin Laden attended one of the best high schools in Saudi Arabia and graduated from King Abdul Aziz University in 1980 (Wright 81). Bin Laden's family was close to the Saudi royal family and his family owned the very successful multi million-dollar company the Saudi Binladin Group (83). The first Al-Qaeda recruits were Afghan Arabs from the Soviet war. The backgrounds of the Arabs who went to fight in the jihad against the Soviets varied. Azzam's teachings of martyrdom and calls for jihad enchanted many young Arabs. Some were ostracized renegades in their home countries who were deemed religious fanatics. They viewed themselves "as a borderless posse empowered by God to defend the entire Muslim people" (105). Death and martyrdom particularly attracted those who experienced government repression and economic deprivation. Martyrdom and paradise seemed a lot more appealing than the pains of life (106). While another group of Afghan Arabs included those who were curious about the jihad, longed for adventure, and wanted an exciting way to spend their break. Many came from wealthy families and going to fight in the jihad provided a deeper meaning for their otherwise frivolous or mundane lives (109). This group included "pampered kids from the Persian Gulf who came on excursions, staying in air conditioned cargo containers; they were supplied with RPGs and Kalashnikovs, which they could fire into the air, and they could return home, boasting of their adventures." Most of them were high school or college students (137).

Bin Laden and some Al-Qaeda operatives returned to Afghanistan in 1996, after spending time in Sudan. During their stay, the Al-Qaeda operatives were not popular with the Taliban or other Afghans because Al-Qaeda members were wealthy, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan. Additionally, they were quite racist and viewed the Afghans as uneducated barbarians. The Afghans resented the arrogance with which they drove their air-conditioned, shiny new vehicles that had blacked out windows and Dubai license plates (Fergusson 94).

The jihad expanded in the years following the Soviet war and became a truly globalized movement. Al-Qaeda does not institute any formal procedure of indoctrination or recruitment; instead they rely on attracting a wide array of volunteers who join for diverse reasons. Al-Qaeda recruits do not share a uniform practice of religious or political mobilization (*Landscapes of the Jihad* 20). No cultic, ideological, ethnic, class, or personal background commonality unites them (25). Following the attacks on 9/11, Bin Laden stated that no accepted school of Islamic law united the hijackers (16). In fact, most Al-Qaeda militants receive a secular education, instead of a religious education and

The Differences Between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda

Written by Josh Schott

many attend American universities (159). Al-Qaeda leaders do not control or own their operatives; instead they network the operatives through the provision of information, contacts, training, and finances (19). This lack of prescribed uniformity explains how Egyptian citizen and German resident, Muhammad Atta, who lead the hijackings, was known to be very pious, while some of his comrades drank alcohol, gambled, and enjoyed strip clubs. Also, the men suspected to be responsible for the 2004 bombings in Madrid were described as appearing “westernized and integrated into the Spanish community, with a liking for football, fashion, drinking, and Spanish girlfriends... whose Spanish friends are said to have included women who sported crop tops, tattoos, and piercings” (17). As discussed earlier, many Al-Qaeda members are highly educated and some can speak many different languages. For example, there were references to Jesus, Aristotle, and, quite shockingly, Manachem Begin’s book *The Revolt* and there were documents in French, English, Malay, and Persian found among files stored on a computer Al-Qaeda members used in Kabul (159).

Contrasted to the cosmopolitan Arabs who formed the member base of Al-Qaeda, Azzam described the Afghans as representing “humanity in a pristine state – a righteous, pious, pre-industrial people – struggling against the brutal, soulless, mechanized force of modernity” (Wright 96). Because war, displacement, poverty, and violent premature death plagued Afghanistan since the 1970’s, no Afghan under the age of twenty-one in 1996 experienced peacetime. Most of those Afghans, who would make-up the recruits of the Taliban, were orphans who grew up in refugee camps in Pakistan. A solution for these orphaned boys was to enroll them in Islamic madrasas, which followed the curriculum of the Deobandi Sunni Hanafi Islam school of thought, since they were the only institutions that could care for them because they provided, room, board, and an education. The Deobandi fostered intense mental and moral discipline through an iron regulation of personal conduct (Fergusson 44). Two Pakistani religious parties, the Association of the Ulama of Islam and the Islamic Party, created and managed the extensive networks of madrasas that dotted the Afghan-Pakistan frontier. The founders of the Taliban predominantly came from the Association of the Ulama of Islam. Although too young to take on prominent or leadership roles in the jihad, students of these madrasas still participated in the war against the Soviets and Najibullah regime (Crews 63). During the Soviet war and the civil war that followed, the madrasas shut down classes and sent the students to war whenever the mujahideen needed reinforcements. Because girls did not attend these madrasas, these boys lived in a solely male dominated world. This lack of knowledge or interaction with women can partly explain the oppressive policies and practices of the future Taliban regime. When the Taliban officially formed and began to cleanse Afghanistan of the vicious warlords, they began to recruit men who were too young to fight in the jihad against the Soviets and provided them an opportunity to fight in the new jihad against evil and corruption. These men lived in the shadow of their fathers and older brothers, who defeated the Soviet superpower, and they wanted to obtain glory for themselves (Wright 228).

The Taliban developed as a Pashtun movement because the original Taliban were Pashtun, the movement started in the Kandahar area which is predominantly Pashtun, the young men from refugee camps and madrasas in Pakistan were Pashtun, and the Taliban’s success in defeating the warlords can be attributed to their ability to mobilize the Afghan Pashtun population. While the Taliban are still predominantly Pashtun, the movement has expanded and has incorporated many different ethnic groups. However, former Taliban Ambassador to Pakistan, Mullah Zaeef, states, “There was more to Afghanistan than just Pashtuns and that the other tribes settled there were just as much a part of our country as the Taliban... Many Taliban belonged to the same ethnic group, and often people get confused by this and say that tribal heritage was important to the movement. In reality, it was purely incidental; the movement started in the birthplace of the tribe, but even though the tribe assisted in its rise it never played a role later on” (Zaeef 116). Compared to the other ethnic groups in Afghanistan, the Pashtuns are a defiantly tribal society. They are divided into roughly sixty tribes, including over four hundred sub-clans. The Pashtuns are one of the largest tribal societies in the world and they are proud of it. Understanding Pashtun culture is crucial to understanding the Taliban. The two main defining qualities of Pashtuns are their Indo-Iranian language – Pashto – and a strict adherence to Pashtunwali. Pashtunwali is their ancient set of tribal customs and is an “honor based behavioral code that still regulates all social intercourse” (Fergusson 40). One important facet of Pashtunwali is hewad, which is a devout loyalty to the Pashtun nation. Defending Pashtun culture from foreign intrusion and protecting it from disintegration by external threats is paramount (55). Because the Taliban movement is deeply rooted in rural, tribal culture, they hold very rigid perspectives of urban culture (Crews 106).

Leading up to 2001 Al-Qaeda and the Taliban had very different goals (and still do). The Taliban had three goals

The Differences Between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda

Written by Josh Schott

from 1994 to 2001: cleanse Afghanistan of the corrupt warlords and bring order to Afghanistan, create a functioning government for the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan grounded in Sharia law, and gain international recognition. Even after the Taliban took control of Kabul and gained control of ninety percent of the country, the Taliban and the Northern Alliance were still fighting, and the Taliban desperately tried to gain total control of Afghanistan. Initially, however, forming a government themselves and ruling over Afghanistan had not been part of the agenda. Their goal was to bring order to Afghanistan, install a government that would rule according to Sharia law, and go back to their lives studying Islam (Fergusson 56). Shortly after Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates recognized the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan in 1997, the Taliban sent forces to try to take Mazar, but the operation utterly failed and hundreds of Taliban fighters died in battle and thousands more were imprisoned and executed (Crews 67). Consequently, Mullah Omar tried to create a compromise with Ahmad Shah Massoud and end the violence. He offered to share political power with Massoud in the region; however, Massoud also wanted to share military power by instituting a joint military council, but the Taliban rejected this offer fearing that this would lead to future clashes and bloodshed. The negotiations fell through (Fergusson 189). Fortunately for the Taliban, three commanders of the Northern Alliance – Malik, Dostum, and Massoud – turned their guns on each other, weakening the Northern Alliance. The Taliban capitalized on this opportunity and captured Mazar (Crews 68). Soon, the Taliban only met some guerilla resistance by Massoud's forces in the Uzbek regions and in the Hazarajat. Al-Qaeda operatives killed Massoud two days before 9/11 (69).

Because the Taliban did not have plans to run the country, they had no preparations for running the country, but once they came to power, they instituted a very radical version of Sharia law and attempted to create a functioning state apparatus. David Edwards attributes the Taliban's success in mobilizing the Afghan population to the practice of "consistently downplaying tribal or regional identities in favor of what might be called village identity... They put themselves on par with the people whose support they had to enlist if their movement was going to be successful" (Crews 76). The Taliban created an image of being neutral in the context of Afghan conflicts (85). This can explain why Stuart Worsley, program director of Care International, argues that the Taliban generally tried to govern by consensus. He states, "The enforcement of rules usually depends on local tradition" (Fergusson 37). Mullah Zaeef said the Taliban calmed ethnic tensions and united Afghanistan (188). On the other hand, the imposition of their version of Sharia law, blended with Pashtunwali, was very swift. They implemented very oppressive policies of women, banned television and related forms of entertainment, banned music, banned the trimming of men's beards, eliminated images of living things, banned kite flying, among many other policies. The Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Provision of Vice enforced these policies brutally, but also quite arbitrarily (Crews 109).

The Taliban had the very difficult task of building a state nearly from scratch. The former communist government relied on Soviet funds to function and when the Soviet Union collapsed, so did the Afghan state and its infrastructure. The ensuing mujahideen civil war led to the further disintegration of state institutions (Crews 247). The structure of the new Taliban government consisted of a six member Inner Shura led by Mullah Omar, who had the supreme authority, and then a nine member Central Shura handled the administrative and foreign affairs (Barfield 261). The largest obstacle to the Taliban's functioning state apparatus was the near lack of existing funds. The entire government had to operate on \$80 million a year and \$70 to \$75 million went to the war (Fergusson 76). Compared to the US federal government who spends \$450 billion per year. While most of the government funds went towards the war and the highest priority of the Taliban regime was to implement and strictly enforce Sharia law, many Taliban leaders made the construction of state administrations a priority also. After they captured Kabul, the Taliban earnestly began state building efforts and within a year, twenty-seven ministries functioned in Kabul (Crews 254). The Taliban regime experienced the same problems that previous regimes experienced also. The ministries in Kabul and the provincial governors disputed endlessly. The ministries in Kabul sought to implement formal systems of governance and the governors struggled to control the provincial departments themselves (Zaeef 93). The Taliban also started to revive Afghanistan's industries. According to Mullah Zaeef, after he became Deputy Minister of Mines and Industries, "The production levels of Sar-I Pul and the power output soon reached their previous levels. The brick-baking plant, ice factory and water plant were re-built. The engineers surveyed and repaired the existing wells. The gas network was extended from Sheberghan to Mazar-e Sharif; the production of cement increased; and industrial plants were re-built and became active throughout the north" (Zaeef 95). The Taliban's priority was to build their own state, not attack other states.

The Differences Between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda

Written by Josh Schott

When the Taliban captured Kabul and declared Afghanistan the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, they sought international recognition, while at the same time, trying not to sell out to Western interests. The day after the Taliban took Kabul, the State Department instructed ambassadors in the region to “demonstrate USG willingness to deal with them as the new authorities in Kabul.” The State Department instructed USG staff in Islamabad to go to Kabul and meet with the new Taliban government. The job of the envoy to Kabul was to discuss narcotics, stability, terrorism, and the possibility of opening a US embassy in Kabul. Additionally, the State Department instructed the envoy to invite the Taliban to send a delegation of their own to Washington, adding that the US would not renew the current anti-Taliban Afghan diplomats visas (Crews 249). In 1997 the Taliban sent delegations to Washington, Omaha, New York, and Texas. While in the US, they met with UNOCAL officials to pursue the possibility of building a pipeline through Afghanistan, protested the lack of international condemnation of the recent killing of three thousand Taliban POWs by the Northern Alliance, and demanded US and UN recognition of their new government. Taliban representatives made appeals to foreign diplomats to recognize their government. One appeal was titled “Time to Recognize Afghanistan’s Legitimate Government,” in which Abdul Hakim Mujahed objected to foreign critics’ accounts of events in Afghanistan and selective attention to human rights. He argued that the Taliban are committed to the protection of human rights, international law, and individual rights, according to Sharia law. Mujahed added that the Taliban government is grounded on “a traditional style of Afghan self-rule that honors and protects all Afghan women, who enjoy a proposition of dignity and honor and represent the crucible of our culture” (250). During the trip, acting Foreign Minister, Mullah Mohammed Ghaus, stated, he “felt the government under the Taliban should be like any other government, with a responsibility towards the rest of the world” (Fergusson 81).

Banning opium production provided a means for the Taliban to cooperate with the international community, particularly the US, and provided increased government revenues. In 1997 the Foreign Ministry issued a statement making opium production illegal, but the law was not very effective. Then Mullah Omar decreed a complete ban on poppy cultivation in July 2000. The next year the amount of poppy planted was the lowest on record, at less than a tenth of the amount planted the previous year. Representative of the United Nations Office of Drug Control, Bernard Frahi, called it “one of the most remarkable successes ever in the fight against narcotics.” Because the Taliban collected customs revenue from poppy production, the decreased supply of poppy increased the price by fourteen times the original price (Fergusson 78). The US noticed the Taliban’s tremendous success and responded with a \$43 million grant to the Taliban government to curb poppy cultivation (Crews 254).

While the Taliban were concerned with fighting the war in the north, building a state apparatus, and gaining acceptance into the international community, Al-Qaeda’s goal is to maintain a globalized, protracted struggle against the Zionist-Crusaders. Unlike the Taliban who had a vision and a coherent plan for the future of Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda does not have a prescribed vision and plan for the future (*Landscapes of the Jihad* 4). Instead, the jihad is strictly an individual duty that is ethical, rather than political, like prayer. Al-Qaeda’s modern jihad rejects the doctrine of holy war as a political or collective obligation (*farz kifaya*), such as installing a ruler or administering justice. Treating holy war as an individual and ethical obligation (*farz ayn*) spiritualizes the holy war; therefore, the jihad transcends the pragmatism of political life (*Landscapes of the Jihad* 34). Jihadis abandon political notions such as ideology and statehood to globalize their practices, without a future vision of a collective utopia (*The Terrorist in Search of Humanity* 78). This is characteristic of other global movements as well, such as the environmental movement. Environmentalists lack an ideological conception of utopia. While environmentalists advocate for eco-friendly government policies and encourage others to live more eco-consciously, environmentalists primarily approach their cause as an individual and ethical obligation, like reducing their own carbon footprint, consumption, and waste (79).

In his book, *Knights Under the Banner of the Prophet*, Zawahiri intentionally denounces regional struggles and calls for global jihad (*Landscapes of Jihad* 61). Like the environmentalist, human rights activist, or nuclear disarmament activist, the Al-Qaeda militant views Muslim suffering and the jihad as a humanitarian cause that must be addressed globally. The entire globe is their field of operations. They move from one location or source of Muslim suffering to the next, as if committing acts of humanitarian intervention (*The Terrorist in Search of Humanity* 6). Because they do not see their jihad as a war between civilizations or ideologies, they do not choose their targets because of those targets’ religious or political beliefs, but rather, for violating their vision of a world dictated by principles of human rights (7). Militant attacks on infrastructure resemble US and NATO attacks on cities like Tripoli or Pristina because “both kinds

The Differences Between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda

Written by Josh Schott

of intervention become 'humanitarian' by their targeting of command, control, or logistics capabilities to secure a regime's compliance with human rights codes, with suicide bombers taking the place of smart bombs" (51). US and NATO attacks kill civilians just like suicide bombings, except US and NATO attacks result in more civilian deaths. The fact that US and Israel fill the role as the two greatest enemies now and that the Soviet Union and Serbia filled the bill not so long ago, shows how the struggle transcends international politics (40). The broader metaphysical struggle subordinates the sites of struggles themselves, which are solely instrumental (*Landscapes of Jihad* 27).

Faisal Devji argues that "two factors make the jihad into a global movement: the failure of local struggles and the inability to control a global landscape of operations by the politics of intentionality" (*Landscapes of Jihad* 31). Jihad affects many different countries and peoples who usually may not share a common history or culture. For instance, terrorist attacks in Madrid affect US policy and make US citizens feel less secure (9). The global ramifications of Al-Qaeda's jihad exceeds its local causes; thereby, surpassing its intentions (2). The jihad's globalization rests in the unintended consequences of its actions (14). Devji also compares Al-Qaeda to multi-national corporations because like corporations, jihadis do not have the ability or the desire to control the regions where they operate. The relationship between them and these territories can be seen as investments. Like participants in the global economy, the jihadis' investments draw them into a world that does not function according to their intentions but seems to possess a life of its own. Operations carried out by Al-Qaeda members are similar to those of risks in the global market (9). The global market dictates the strategies of Al-Qaeda and alliances they build, just like any company in the global economy (11). Zawahiri even used economic terms to describe Al-Qaeda's operations: "But Allah enlightened us with His mercy when the Omar Brothers Company was established. It has opened new markets for our traders and provided them with an opportunity to rearrange their accounts. One benefit of trading here is the congregation in one place of all the traders who came over from everywhere and began working for this company" (10).

Al-Qaeda's key method of attempting to end US dominance throughout the world is to provide the right circumstances for the US to commit suicide. Because Al-Qaeda is not a conventional force and its operations are coordinated over the internet, quite possibly in an internet café in Atlanta, the US can only confront the terrorist menace by attacking itself, through the shredding of the constitution and the stifling of the technological, demographic, and financial mobility that contributes to the US's economic might. By committing suicide to catch potential suicide bombers, the US becomes a martyr itself. In October 2001 Bin Laden stated that the destruction on 9/11 is nothing compared to what the US will do to itself (*Landscapes of Jihad* 138). Al-Qaeda did not set the US on fire on 9/11; they just provided the US with the gasoline and matches. History shows that empires always collapse. Al-Qaeda's goal is to encourage the US to rapidly expand its empire; thereby, increasing the risk or shorten the time frame of collapse (154). Bin Laden noted in a speech that no domestic issue has had such an impact on the direction of the US, like the unexpected actions of a few foreigners. He stated that it is impossible to maintain the integrity of democratic principles when insignificant actors and accidental events possess more political clout than the most pressing domestic issues (*The Terrorist in Search of Humanity* 209). The collapse of the twin towers symbolized the collapse of the qualities that supposedly defined the US – freedom, democracy, and human rights. The rapid deterioration of civil liberties and democratic rights characterizes the decade since 9/11. While international law has never applied to the US, the US accelerated the pace of the shredding of the Geneva Conventions and other international statutes. The US is not only hypocritical in defining itself as the beacon of freedom and democracy because of its oppression of others around the world, but also because it tramples on the freedom and rights of its own citizens (*Landscapes of Jihad* 151). Al-Qaeda "judges America by its own rules and according to its own terms" (*The Terrorist in Search of Humanity* 80). Bin Laden's goal was not to convert Americans to Islam, but rather, force them to "remain true to themselves – or rather to their own ideal of human rights" (206).

Al-Qaeda offers an alternative to the US setting itself on fire. Because the US is a democratic country, terrorist attacks are also used to encourage US citizens to force their government to stop the hegemonic and oppressive policies around the world, since terrorist attacks are direct consequences of those policies (*Landscapes of Jihad* 143). This explains why the targeting of civilians is legitimate to Al-Qaeda. American civilians are responsible for their government's actions because their government represents them and the people elect those government officials who cause the suffering of Muslims. By placing such a strong duty and responsibility on American citizens to exercise their democratic rights, Al-Qaeda takes democracy more seriously than Americans themselves. However, Al-

The Differences Between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda

Written by Josh Schott

Qaeda leaders recognize that some American citizens are ignorant of such policies or are deceived by their government. Yet, they still hold American citizens responsible because “responsibility here does not depend on a knowledge of some truth, so that like the citizen who breaks the law without knowing it, the American who supports an anti-Muslim government without knowing it is held responsible for his actions” (100). But those attacks do not need to happen. Bin Laden even called for a truce and provided the circumstances that would end the jihad. He stated, “We also call you to deal with us and interact with us on the basis of mutual interests and benefits, rather than politics of subdual, theft, and occupation, and not to continue your policy of supporting the Jews [Israel] because this will result in more disasters for you” (149). Additionally, Al-Qaeda leaders and operatives state they would forgive the US and its allies if the US and its allies repented for their crimes and stopped their evil practices of global hegemony and oppression (*The Terrorist in Search of Humanity* 32).

The concept of the equality of death is important in understanding the operations of Al-Qaeda. Equality of death meaning: the US kills civilians and inflicts suffering on the rest of the world, so the militant kills US civilians and inflicts suffering on the US (*The Terrorist in Search of Humanity* 46). To them, killing American civilians merely means forcing the US to look in a mirror; thereby, shifting the accountability of the death of civilians to the US. The only action the militant is held accountable for is his own death (58). Such attacks are meant to force the US to experience Muslim suffering. It is not revenge, but rather, it is meant to allow both the victims of US atrocities and the victims of Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks to indentify with and communicate with each other (42). Al-Qaeda members “recognize the unity of the globe in which no man can be separated from any other, each one being held responsible for his fellows, with whose suffering he must identify” (43).

Identifying with one another and sharing a common humanity explains the practice of suicide bombing and martyrdom. Suicide bombers die alongside their victims. By comingling their blood with the blood of their victims, the suicide bomber brings to light a common humanity (52). The suicide bomber’s desire to share a common humanity with his victims is also revealed by the fact that many suicide bombers abandon their pious lifestyles and religious practices and join the society and culture they plan to attack during the period leading up to the planned attacks. Some shave their beards, stop praying, gamble, go to strip clubs, open relationships with different women, and drink alcohol. Devji explains, “It is almost as if the militant were preparing to die alongside his victims by sharing their lives beforehand to acknowledge a common humanity” (71).

The meaning and significance of martyrdom can only be attained when it’s witnessed in the media. In fact, martyrdom means to “witness oneself” and the Arabic word for martyrdom is *shahadat*, which means to “translate one term into the other,” thus; bearing witness is to be martyred (*Landscapes of Jihad* 94). Those who witness suicide bombings or other acts of martyrdom on TV, other media outlets or in person are active participants in the rites of martyrdom, making martyrdom a social and inclusive act that excites pity, anger, sadness and compassion in those who witness the act (95). This is part of the globalization of the jihad. Devji explains, “It is the media’s representation of martyrdom that creates a global community whose witnessing imposes certain responsibilities upon its members. This community, however, is not limited to Muslims, but includes all those who bear witness” (96). Thus, those who bear witness also participate in the suicide bomber’s jihad either as friends or foes (99).

As shown, the goals, operations, ethnic, cultural, and geographical backgrounds of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban are entirely different and they are two very distinct organizations. Therefore, it is imprudent and wrong to treat each group as if they are the same entity. By blending and obscuring the distinctions among various groups or regimes that do not unconditionally subordinate themselves to American hegemony and agglomerating them into one huge, amorphous terrorist menace, the US creates more enemies than it can subdue. While the uncompromising and belligerent policies of the US, thus far, have expanded the US sphere of influence and have secured its business interests abroad, the current path is not sustainable and will eventually lead to its demise, just as Al-Qaeda leaders predicted when planning the attacks on 9/11.

References

Barfield, Thomas J. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010. Print.

The Differences Between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda

Written by Josh Schott

Crews, Robert D., and Amin Tarzi. *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008. Print.

Devji, Faisal. *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2005. Print.

Devji, Faisal. *The Terrorist in Search of Humanity: Militant Islam and Global Politics*. New York: Columbia UP, 2008. Print.

Fergusson, James. *Taliban: The True Story of the World's Most Feared Guerrilla Fighters*. London: Bantam, 2010. Print.

Wright, Lawrence. *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*. New York: Knopf, 2006. Print.

Zaeef, Salam A. *My Life with the Taliban*. New York: Columbia UP, 2010. Print.

Written by: Josh Schott
Written at: Stanford University
Written for: Professor Robert Crews
Date written: 3/14/12