

# How Can We Explain the Existence of Al-Qaeda?

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### How Can We Explain the Existence of Al-Qaeda?

We live in a dynamic world characterized in large by violence. Since the Second World War there have been ten million casualties per decade due to conflicts. Nonetheless, there is an identifiable evolution in the nature of these conflicts as the deaths of non-combatants are increasing and they are progressively caused by non-state actors. 1 In this sense and contrary to popular belief, 'security' needs to be regarded well beyond the Westphalian state-centric perspective and not be considered exclusively in military terms. The security threat that non-state actors present should not be categorized and respectively undermined as an artificial threat.

While there were a number of events that showed the importance of such a departure from traditional security thinking, it was not until the deadly attacks on 9/11 which enduringly and fundamentally changed the security environment. After the world witnessed the hegemonic vulnerability of a state by a violent non-state actor, effectively employing asymmetrical warfare in order to challenge its authority and monopoly of violence, terrorism rose to the top of the political agenda and was securitized in the West. 2 Despite the warnings of some commentators about the changing nature and degree of the terrorist threat, Al-Qaeda wanted a lot of people listening and watching and a lot of people dead and had achieved the capability to conduct series of closely coordinated 'symbolic' attacks against the United States causing the death of nearly 3,000 people and triggering profound socio-economic effects. 3

Nonetheless, even after the 'Global War on Terrorism' was introduced by the Bush administration and the Taliban government in Afghanistan was toppled down, the terrorist organization remained quite stable and was able to constantly adapt and change in order to maintain its activities. As Jenkins authoritatively noted, the desire for revenge combined with deeply-rooted hatred are indicators for the objective of Al-Qaeda to 'exploit all of its ability to cause catastrophic death and destruction [without] self-imposed limits to its violence.' 4

In this sense, the unprecedented impact on regional and international dynamics that Al-Qaeda generated and still generates is of specific scientific concern for this study while also deserving the attention of policy-makers. An answer to the somehow naïve but yet astute question 'Why they hate us?' and effective counter-terrorist measures can be produced only when we know our enemy, by not only trying to understand the root causes triggering its existence, but also penetrating into its organizational functioning and capability and see what keeps it alive. Remembering the lessons of Sun Tzu, Caryl noted that, 'In order to defeat the terrorists, we have no choice but to understand them.' 5

Therefore, as there has been little agreement among scholars on the possible reasons for the existence of Al-Qaeda, this study would try to shed light on this issue by arguing that existence could be both understood in terms of emergence and functioning which are inevitably interconnected and essential when trying to understand the overall being of the process Al-Qaeda. In other words, a terrorist organization may emerge as a consequence of structural factors, but it cannot operate effectively in the longer term without its principle resource – its human capital. It will be an oversimplification if the topic is analyzed one-directionally as the interaction of both the macro-level and the micro-level factors is what this study believes is in the heart of Al-Qaeda's existence. In this sense, 'the root causes are of analytical use only in conjunction with participant factors' 6 and both categories complement each other. For that reason, the paper will firstly follow the structural reasons for the emergence of the terrorist organization. Then, it will

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critically analyze the motivating factors for individual participation. Finally, this study will conclude that while terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda exist in a 'primordial soup of ideas, histories and influences'<sup>7</sup>, 'if no one seeks out Al-Qaeda, it will cease to exist'<sup>8</sup>, thus 'dissecting the reasons why individuals join is key to understanding the organization itself'.<sup>9</sup>

## Structural Factors for the Existence of Al-Qaeda

Firstly, Al-Qaeda has a long history as a transnational terrorist organization and its roots can be traced back to the rise of Islamic radicalism and militancy in the 1970s in the Middle East as a result of both the Arab and Zionist nationalist movements one century earlier.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, the nationalistic anti-imperialism and Pan-Arabism that emerged in the twentieth century was seen by Al-Qaeda as unable to deal with the prevalent problems of the Islamic community.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the results of World War One and World War Two, colonialism and the territorial dispute between Israel and Palestine all formed the contemporary geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and paved the way for the emergence of extremist factions within societies.<sup>12</sup> Contrary to popular belief, however, Islamic fundamentalism was in opposition to the West as a more general category rather than limiting itself to the Israeli conflict. The pan-Islamic ideology was an extreme representation of anti-colonialism in the sense that Western 'crusaders' were in the Middle East to impose 'their way' and to continue the imperial practices, a fear fueled by the allegiance that many countries in the region pledged to the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Secondly, Al-Qaeda was the violent child born out of the struggle to expel the Soviet Union from Afghanistan and the Cold War dynamics were the breeding ground. Since Afghanistan was historically marked by political instability and was strategically significant for the USSR, from the 1970s onwards it became a 'war zone' country constantly torn up by conflicts between competing groups aiming to hold the political power and dominance. Essentially, a pivotal point for the development of Afghanistan was the *coup d'état* of 1973 that put an end to the Afghan monarchy and imposed radical party instead. As this event took place in the years of the Cold War, it appears less rational that the USSR supported the Marxist-inspired government, while the US, the UK, Saudi Arabia and other states were backing the opposing Islamic fundamentalists or in this case the so-called mujahideen 'holy warriors'.<sup>14</sup> The Soviet invasion took place in 1979, however it is argued that the US, CIA in particular, provided weapons to the opposition even before that which gives credits to the maxim that today's allies are tomorrow's enemies. The evil creation was going to turn against its creators as despite the fact that Al-Qaeda's initial role was to serve as a welfare service provider, its actions were in their heart concerned military with the *jihād* against the Soviet power. Financial support through the 'Golden Chain' was established which facilitated the recruitment of mujahideen who fled from all over the Middle East into Afghanistan to defend their fellow Muslims. With such an immense external support for the rebellion, the end of the conflict was one step closer.

Thirdly, once the Soviets withdrew and the threat was overcome, on the surface it seemed that the holy fighters were losing their focus and coherence. Legions of Muslim foreign fighters were left without direction and bin Laden's charismatic appearance, respect in the community and his wealth were highly influential to connect their energies. The forces that were once unified against the USSR were now strategically reorienting to support other holy wars globally. On the one hand, and in addition to the charismatic leadership of bin Laden, this was a consequence of the success against the Soviet invaders and the confidence that they can do the same with the US. An imperative put on the top of the agenda especially after the humiliation during the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the overall floating feeling that the US used religious arguments when it suited them while involving in 'immoral' acts and applying the so-called double standards.

On the other hand, however, the post-colonial governments in the majority of Arab and Muslim states were displaying authoritarian tendencies and neglected or even suppressed the opposition. Combined with failed governance, associated worsened socioeconomic conditions and the loyalty to the United States, a main supporter of the Israeli occupation of Palestine, the need to fight the 'source of the problem' was created. This was also a consequence of the recognition that home states were too weak to protect their citizens, but yet too strong to be overtaken by non-state Islamist factions largely as a result of the US Foreign policy in the region. The Western supporter corrupted the Arab and Muslim states which in their turn committed crimes against both the specific countries and the Ummah (Islamic community). In this sense, there was a shift from the 'near' (local dictatorial, corrupt and repressive regimes)

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to the 'far' (their Western supporters) enemy and being part of an overall tendency among Islamist groups, Al-Qaeda was capable of distinguishing and strategically separating them. The 'freedom fighters' primary concern was the establishment of a new world order where the 'infidels' will be eradicated while 'liberating' the lands where the caliphate needs to be.

Moreover, violent conflicts between competing groups and the central government did not cease to exist in the post-Cold War realities and the decade-long conflict that plagued Afghanistan understandably contributed to the creation of political vacuum which was an incentive for Al-Qaeda to start filling it. As Williams and Gunaranta independent research showed, the emergence of violent non-state actors such as Al-Qaeda is often a consequence of poor state governance or failure of governance. 15 In fact, when the state is no longer the legitimate authority which has the primary obligation to protect its citizens and ensure their security and decent life, it is more likely that groups taking some of the functions of the state are to be regarded as the legitimate alternative to what is already falling apart. In fact, this also contributed to a great extent to the mobilization of the 'unfocused' forces as the discredited Arab governments were regarded as unable to defend their citizens and thus, between 1989 and 1995, Al-Qaeda aimed to maintain and train its transnational Islamist army. However, later in 1996, the group enjoyed a safe heaven under the Taliban regime which makes clear that violent non-state actors could emerge from the weakness of the state, but also could benefit from their relations with the government.

Finally, following the death of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, the era of the initial organization set up in Afghanistan was put to an end and the center of gravity of international terrorism has changed, it became diffused between regional franchises, a conglomerate of affiliates that have loose affiliation to the *Al Qaeda Al Oum* or mother Al-Qaeda, however are usually either created or inspired by it. Nonetheless, it remained active by constantly evolving and transforming itself from well-budgeted hierarchical group into a regionalized and decentralized organization, if you want a 'brand', inspiring individuals or groups to conduct their own attacks. Additionally, as Mohamedou noted although it gained new enemies, Al-Qaeda was capable to minimize their influence through expanding recruits, joining the veterans from the war against the USSR.16 In the light of these thoughts, while during the different periods of time some of the individual motivations may vary, hypothetically there might be at least one relatively static factor that influenced individual participation both in the past and nowadays. The following paragraphs represent this examination.

## Factors Triggering the Individual Participation in the Organization

The vision of one common Islamic polity was of an operational value as the boundaries between the individual states and their conflicts were removed until there was one single struggle between the authentic Islam and the Western enemy enabling the organization to attract a larger reservoir of human resources. 17 As Sparago argues, the human element is in the essence of what is understood as the existence and the operational capabilities of Al-Qaeda.18 But what made and still makes Al-Qaeda so attractive to individuals?

To begin with, it is too often argued that people join the terrorist forces out of economic despair and extreme poverty. After all, 'violence grows where desperation lingers' and the opportunity of economic gains ensuring financial stability and a decent life for one and one's family sounds like a perfect motivation. As one study suggested 'states with poor governance [and] weak economies... will be prime breeding ground for terrorism'.19 While in the previous part of our study we analyzed that poor state governance, combined with a history of conflicts and instability had an impact for the emergence of Al-Qaeda, there is inconsistency in the literature about the correlation between poverty and individual participation in the terrorist organization.

Hypothetically, if poor people were joining Al-Qaeda essentially because of greed it is unsure what they were going to gain from the establishment of a new world order where the Caliphate would expand from Spain to Southeast Asia or the punishment of the 'crusader'. In other words, individuals joining terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda are unlikely to benefit materially from participating in terrorist activities. According to the findings of O'Neill, terrorist leaders look for people who feel threatened or humiliated and 'terrorism is thus often linked to a sense of injustice and impotence rather than sheer poverty'. 20 Similarly, Lee (2011) recognized that there is a non-linear relation of wealth, education and terrorism and that terrorists come from the lower, however politicized and relatively educated segments of a

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society.<sup>21</sup> For instance, a young Saudi citizen who was captured in his attempt to join a jihadist group in Iraq explained that he was just promoted at work for a considerable amount of money. <sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, while this might sound like an exception, this is not an isolated case and there seems to be something more than economic gains motivating individuals. Empirical researches were unable to link terrorism to poverty or any other socio-economic factor, often misinterpreted as a reason. <sup>23</sup> Therefore, adhering to the logic of Clausewitz, it sounds reasonable to ask: Did terrorism proved to be a mere continuation of politics by other means?

As Brzezinski (2002) noted, 'political grievances shape the fanatic pathology of terrorists and trigger their murderous actions'<sup>24</sup> and the Salafi jihad ideology which is in the heart of Al-Qaeda's organizational structure and recruitment strategy is enhanced by these political and associated personal grievances. In this sense, the occupation of the Arabian Peninsula by infidels, the corruption of the local authoritarian regimes (both extensively discussed above) and the subsequent fear of losing the Muslim identity and the assumed failure of the processes of modernization and globalization (going to be discussed below) seem to make the global Jihadist ideology of Al-Qaeda more appealing for the involvement of individuals.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, there is a vital interaction between the political grievances and the ideology as 'the mere existence of privations is not enough to cause an insurrection; if it were, the masses would be always in revolt'<sup>26</sup>, but also ideology in itself is insufficient as there ought to be grievances in order for people to adhere to the ideology. Simply put, ideology is paving its way in the minds of the individuals only when there is a void that needs to be filled.<sup>27</sup> Ideology proved to be that relatively static factor that attracted and still attracts individuals to join the forces of Al-Qaeda. However, as discussed above, ideological propaganda is highly dependent on the response of the public. In other words, individuals are willing to adhere to the global jihadist ideology because of political and associated personal grievances emerging from structural factors, which shaped their perceptions of injustice and made them put a different moral and social calculus on participation.

For instance, due the fear of losing the Muslim identity the ideology depicts the oppression of the Islamic identity by Western crusaders and their territorial, cultural and ideological conquest and this is entrenched in the works of Sayyid Qutb, Abdullah Azzam, and Abu Muhammad al- Maqdisi. Without a competing identity, such terrorist organizations are unlikely to emerge and exist through the years. In this sense, universal and democratic values are seen as a tool of imperialism and the only way is to violently rebel against the West and eliminate it through jihad until Sharia law is not imposed in the Middle East countries. An idea partially resembling the writing of Franc Fanon about the need of violent anti-colonial, anti-Western struggles in Algeria.

In this sense, the structural context in the Arab and Muslim world enabled the creation of an identity to be opposed to and joining the violent jihad is part of this emotional struggle for preservation, determination, direction, and identity. The symbolic DNA of terrorism is often shaped out of feelings of social injustice and nostalgia and the need to return to heroic past by destroying the menace as the only way to preserve their threatened identity and achieve a glorious future. <sup>28</sup> The feelings of confusion, dispossession and exclusion are a common theme in the ideological propaganda of the organization and as already mentioned they need to resonate with the individuals in order to have an impact. <sup>29</sup> Recent empirical study has showed that joining Al- Qaeda assure the so-called 'identity seekers' a way to define themselves with the strong group identity and follow their activities, rules and perspectives. In this sense, identity and ideology merge proportionally in the sense that the more the former is absent, the more the influence of the latter is rising.

Moreover, relatively recently this could also be understood as a backlash to the socio- economic, political and cultural realities of a globalized world from which terrorist seek to departure but cannot. <sup>30</sup> After all, the crusade is driven by globalization, understood as Westernization and Americanization, engine of social progress corroding traditional politics and identity. Due to globalization, value systems started to interact inevitably by creating tensions in some places which in itself strengthened this fear of cultural hegemony.

As Ajami (2001) recognized, 'Islam didn't produce Mohamed Atta. He was born of his country's struggle to reconcile modernity with tradition.'<sup>31</sup> Similarly, according to Barber (2001) and agreed by Scruton (2002) individuals are attracted into the hands of Al-Qaeda due to the rejection and even hatred of modernity or 'the secular, scientific,

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rational, and commercial civilization created by the Enlightenment as it is defined by both its virtues (freedom, democracy, tolerance, and diversity) and its vices (inequality, hegemony, cultural imperialism, and materialism)' and that 'globalization's current architecture breeds anarchy, nihilism, and violence.' 32 It could be understood in terms of what Edward Said framed as 'bewildering interdependence' due to the fact that the lethal attacks on 9/11 were called by bin Laden himself 'great on all levels . . . Those awesome, symbolic towers that speak of liberty, human rights and humanity have been destroyed. They have gone up in smoke'. 33 In this sense, globalization and the processes negatively related to it, affecting the so-called developing world<sup>34</sup>, additionally enhanced the value of the ideological element and stimulated individual participation.

## Conclusion

In summary, this study has argued that the existence of Al-Qaeda can be understood both in terms of emergence (the structural root causes) and functioning (organizational capability). By recognizing that Al-Qaeda emerged as a consequence of structural factors, however effectively kept alive by its human capital, this study has critically examined that the interaction between the contextual/the macro-level and the individual/micro-level are in the essence of the existence of Al-Qaeda. While in the first ideological part of the study, the historical roots of Al-Qaeda were followed and dissected, the second part showed their impact on individual participators' calculations. Enhanced by and considerably dependent on political and the associated personal grievances, such as the occupation of the Arabian Peninsula by infidels, the corruption of the local authoritarian regimes, the subsequent fear of losing the Muslim identity and the assumed failure of the processes of modernization and globalization, ideology proved to be that relatively static factor, triggering individuals to join Al-Qaeda both in the past and nowadays.

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34 This study recognizes that the term is socially constructed as some of the writing of Foucault, Said and Fanon pointed and therefore used the phrase 'so-called'

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