



Polemical and Fratricidal Jihadists: A Historical Examination of Debates, Contestation and Infighting Within the Sunni Jihadi Movement

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“And here we are extending our hands to you again, to be the worthy successor to the best predecessor; for the sheikh Usama bin Laden united the Mujahidin upon one word, while you [Ayman al-Zawahiri] disunited them, split them and dispersed them in total dispersion.”

Abu Muhammed al-Shami al-Adnani, May 2014
Late spokesperson of the Islamic State

Abstract

The Sunni Jihadi movement has since its emergence in the early 1960s been fraught with internal tensions in the form of competitive dynamics, discursive contestation and fratricide. Despite largely sharing the same religious foundation and political ideology, individuals and groups time and again engage in intra- and inter-group criticism which occasionally escalates to more serious conflict with detrimental effects for the broader Jihadi movement. The ongoing conflict between al-Qaida and the Islamic State is undoubtedly the most critical episode of intra-Jihadi conflict, but comparable conflict dynamics are not unprecedented. This report provides an introduction to and overview of the most noteworthy historical examples of contestation and outright conflict between Sunni Jihadists with the aim of illustrating the diverse nature of such internecine struggles. It helps contextualise the conflict between al-Qaida and the Islamic State by showing that similar dynamics have previously occurred – on a smaller scale – and by charting how the sources of contestation and conflict have varied over the years.

Introduction

It was a historic day, early in February 2014, when al-Qaida published a statement announcing that it no longer had any ties to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham. For the first time since the establishment of its affiliate structure in 2004, a group had left the al-Qaida network and the organisational splinter represented the beginning of what evolved into a Jihadi civil war that pitted al-Qaida and the Islamic State against one another, competing for recruits, territorial control and authority. While the splinter and the ensuing infighting severely escalated the internal tensions within an increasingly competitive Jihadi movement, it was not entirely unprecedented. Internal disagreements, competition and contestation, both discursively and militarily, have impacted Sunni Jihadism since its modern inception in the 1960s.

In order to foster a better understanding of the contemporary struggle between al-Qaida and the Islamic State, this report offers an introduction to the phenomena of intra-Jihadi conflict up until the current infighting.¹ It traces how Sunni Jihadi individuals and groups have disagreed and competed with each other, on several occasions and for different purposes. As will become evident, in some of these examples disagreement led to violent confrontation, while in others the outcome was verbal discourse. In some instances, it was both.

Studying internal conflict, or *fitna*, within the Jihadi movement is interesting because it is considered a highly sensitive issue, a potentially illegitimate endeavour from the perspective of Jihadists that poses a threat to the cohesion needed for combatting the common enemy.² This illegitimacy is related to the impermissibility of shedding Muslim blood which is central to Jihadists of all stripes. Jihadists have dealt extensively with legitimising conflict with groups and individuals who consider themselves as Muslims, but – in the eyes of Jihadists – are only nominal Muslims and who effectively should be considered either apostates (*murtadd*) or hypocrites (*munafiqun*). The focus of these efforts has mainly been Muslim regimes.³ Warning against the danger of killing other Muslims, the late senior al-Qaida figure Atiyyatullah al-Libi cautioned that “We [al-Qaida] remind our brother Mujahideen everywhere, may Allah grant them success, of the importance of emphasizing and spreading the importance and knowledge of the sanctity of Muslim blood, the obligation to take great precaution in its regard, to protect and preserve it, and to fear

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- 1 For a good introduction to Jihad see David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (London, England: University of California Press, 2005); Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006); Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Nelly Lahoud, *The Jihadis' Path to Self-Destruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea* (London: Hurst, 2016).
 - 2 For an introduction to conflict and rebellion in Islam see Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); John Kelsay, “Muslim Discourse on Rebellion,” *Ethics and International Affairs* 27, no. 4 (2013): 379–91, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679413000348>. For readings on historical examples of fitna and infighting see Abu Jafar Muhammad bin Jarir Al-Tabari, *The History of Al-Tabari: The First Civil War*, translated by G.R. Hawting, Volume XVI, 1996; Nathan Spannaus, “The Azāriqa and Violence among the Khawārij” (Harvard University, 2007); Lahoud, *The Jihadis' Path to Self-Destruction*.
 - 3 See, for instance, Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj, “Al-Faridah Al-Gha'ibah [The Neglected Duty]” (Translated by Johannes J. G. Jansen, n.d.), §46.

from it and its unlawful spilling. They must block any path which leads to carelessness in regards to Muslim blood, wealth, and honor.”⁴ In *This is Our Aqida*, the influential Jihadi ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi adds that “The mistake in leaving one thousand kuffar [unbelievers] is easier [better] than the mistake of shedding the blood of one Muslim”.⁵ Unsurprisingly, the issue becomes much more sensitive when focus is directed towards other Jihadists, that small group of people who are otherwise considered the best of believers.

4 Atiyyatullah al-Libi, “The Importance of the Sanctity of Muslim Blood,” 2011, 3, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/ae1b9adc4abyyatullah-abc5ab-abd-ar-rae1b8a5man-maximizing-the-sanctity-of-muslim-blood.pdf>; See also Christopher Anzalone, “Revisiting Shaykh Atiyyatullah’s Works on Takfir and Mass Violence,” *CTC Sentinel* 5, no. 4 (2012): 10–13.

5 Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi, *Hadhihi Aqidatuna [This Is Our Aqida]*, 1997, 62.

The Beginning: Jihadism's Emergence as a Heterogenous Movement

Despite being a relatively unified movement in terms of objectives and ideology, Sunni Jihadism has witnessed its fair share of internal disagreement and conflict. In 1964, the Egyptian Jihadi theorist Sayyid Qutb published his manifesto legitimising Jihad, *Ma'alim fi-l-Tariq*, commonly known as 'Milestones'. In the widely disseminated book, Qutb criticises Western decadence and the *jahiliyya* (pre-Islamic ignorance) that, in his view, has infested Islamic societies. Set in the context of a severe crackdown on Islamist forces by the Egyptian regime, Qutb's answer to the state of jahiliyya was to legitimise rebellion against Muslim rulers and to propagate Jihad exercised through an Islamic vanguard movement. This stance, however, was considered too radical by many in the Muslim Brotherhood, where Qutb was still a leading figure, provoking Hassan al-Hudaybi, the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, to publish 'Du'at la Qudat' (Preachers, Not Judges).⁶

Unlike future Jihadi ideologues, Qutb did not consider Jihad a goal itself, but rather as a means to an end to create a more just and Islamic society.⁷ He also viewed Jihad as a process consisting of several stages. Before one could be part of the vanguard and participate in the militant Jihad, one would need to go through an inner Jihad (*jihad al-nafs*) to obtain the necessary knowledge to 'see the milestones along the road', as Qutb puts it. Obviously, this functioned as a *restriction* on the operationalisation of Jihad.

In 1966, after spending ten very productive years in prison, Qutb was hanged – martyred – but his vision for an emerging Jihadi movement was about to be brought into being. The first organisation to find inspiration in Qutb's ideas was Jama'at al-Muslimeen, better known as al-Takfir wa-l-Hijra (Excommunication and Withdrawal), led from 1972 by Shukri Mustafa. Mustafa's extreme approach, which involved declaring everyone refusing to join his group *murtadd* (apostate) and stressing the requirement to isolate in the desert to establish an Islamic state, resulted in its own demise.⁸ Hence, it was not until the late 1970s, when Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj as part of Tanzim al-Jihad (Al-Jihad Group)⁹ wrote the manifest *al-Faridah al-Gha'ibah* (The Neglected Duty), that Qutb's vision of Jihad took proper organisational shape.

⁶ Kepel has argued that Hudaybi's book was a direct response, see Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*.

⁷ Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, 1964.

⁸ Jeffrey B. Cozzens, "Al-Takfir Wa'l Hijra: Unpacking an Enigma," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 32, no. 6 (2009): 489–510; Gilles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt: The Prophet and Pharaoh* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 74.

⁹ Al Jihad consisted of several smaller groups, but Hani al-Sibai narrates that it was established in 1968 through the formation of a small group, counting Ayman al-Zawahiri and Sayyid Imam among the founders. See Hani Al-Sibai, *Qissah Jama'at Al-Jihad [The Story of Al Jihad Group]* (Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad, 2002).

While Faraj's view of Arab governments was clearly influenced by Qutb, he also disagreed with Qutb on several important issues. Like Qutb he believed in a vanguard movement to topple the Egyptian government and he prioritised a focus on *al-aduww al-qarib* (the near enemy). However, on the issue of the necessity of education, training and knowledge prior to engaging in Jihad, Faraj implicitly criticised his predecessor, believing that the Jihadi movement was in fact ready for action.¹⁰ In *The Neglected Duty*, Faraj writes that:

*"There are some who say that at present the true road is the quest for knowledge. 'How can we fight when we have no knowledge [of Islam and its prescripts]? The quest for knowledge is an obligation too.' But we shall not heed the words of someone who permits the neglect of a religious command or one of the duties of Islam for the sake of [the quest for religious] knowledge, certainly not if this duty is the duty of jihad."*¹¹

While criticism is also directed at the official religious establishment in Egypt, it is hard not to read a critique of Qutb's precautions here, as Faraj continues:

*"We find that today jihad is an individual duty of every Muslim. Nevertheless we find that there are those who argue that they need to educate their own souls, and that jihad knows successive phases; and that they are still in the phase of jihad against their own soul."*¹²

For Faraj, the objective was to simplify the rules of engagement and the understanding of militant Jihad by removing restrictions. Whereas Qutb sought to *legitimise* Jihad, Faraj wanted to *operationalise* it. Hence, he argued that Jihad was indeed *fard al-'ayn* (individual duty), that it was both defensive and offensive, and that training and education were not prerequisites. Modern Jihadi ideology started with Qutb and Faraj; even though the latter criticised several of his predecessors and contemporaries, including Qutb, Shukri Mustafa and the al-Azhar establishment, such criticism did not result in debate between adherents of the two ideological trends at that time. The modern Jihadi movement was still in its infancy, yet the schism between Faraj and Qutb was an early indicator of future debates and disagreement within the movement.

¹⁰ Aaron Y. Zelin, "Al-Farida Al-Gha'iba and Al-Sadat's Assassination, a 30 Year Retrospective," *International Journal for Arab Studies* 3, no. 2 (2012).

¹¹ Faraj, 188 (§63).

¹² *ibid.*, 200 (§88).

Afghanistan's Competitive Militant Environment in the 1980s

It was in the 1980s, during the fight against the Soviet invasion and the communist Afghan regime, that tensions between organised factions would first emerge. Afghan mujahideen, supported from 1984 onwards by Arab fighters, the so-called Arab-Afghans, united to fight against a common enemy. However, the struggle was not limited to the battle between communists and mujahideen as tensions also arose among the mujahideen. The first-hand accounts by Abdallah Anas¹³ and Mustafa Hamid¹⁴ are particularly enlightening about these intra-mujahideen problems, which began simply as matters of access to funding, power and mobilisation of recruits.

The Jihadi scene in Afghanistan was an extremely competitive environment. In their conversational book, Leah Farrall and Mustafa Hamid, the latter a Jihadi journalist close to the Taliban, describe the Jihadi community as “a melting pot of different Jihadi groups who fought over things like funding, recruits and resources in addition to the favour of the Taliban”, while concluding that this internal competition “destabilized the Jihadi community and caused disunity”.¹⁵ It makes sense to divide the intra- and inter-group competition within Afghanistan's Sunni Jihadi environment into before and after portions, taking as the division point the critical defeat at Jalalabad in 1989. Up until then, debates and competition had in the main not been the result of ideological disagreements, but this changed with the defeat and the ensuing assassination of Abdallah Azzam, al-Qaida's isolation in its training camps, and bin Laden's departure to Saudi Arabia. These events led to a vacuum that facilitated what Hamid calls the *Jalalabad School*, which ideologically and doctrinally challenged the existing Jihadi groups and organisations during the 1990s.

The real war between Afghan warlords broke out in 1992, after Russian forces had left the country and the Afghan communist regime finally crumbled, but already in the early 1980s the different warlords started to compete against each other for power.¹⁶ Abdul Rasul Sayyaf won the struggle early on and, in January 1980, was elected president of the Ittihad i Islami Tahrir Afghanistan (Islamic Union for the Liberation of Afghanistan),¹⁷ which included all the main parties engaged with the Russians.¹⁸ Although the factions were fighting on the same

13 Abdallah Anas and Tam Hussein, *To the Mountains: My Life in Jihad, from Algeria to Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2019).

14 Mustafa Hamid and Leah Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan* (London: Hurst, 2015).

15 *ibid.*, 4.

16 Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 116–21.

17 This union was later replaced by another initiative to unify the Afghan Jihadi factions known as Ittihad i Islami Mujahideen Afghanistan, for which Sayyaf continued as president.

18 The other main warlords or commanders in Afghanistan were Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (leader of Hizb-e-Islami), Yunis Khalis (a prominent Paktia commander), Jalaluddin Haqqani (closely allied to Khalis and probably the most prominent field commander in Paktia Province), Sibghatullah Mujaddidi (leader of Afghanistan National Liberation Front), Burhanuddin Rabbani (leader of Jamiat-e-Islami), and Ahmed Shah Massoud (an ethnic Tajik, he was the most influential commander in the north and close with Rabbani, and was assassinated in two days before 9/11 by al-Qaida). Hekmatyar, Khalis and Haqqani were arguably the most religiously conservative compared to the more moderate Al Azhar-educated Rabbani and Mujaddidi.

side against the Russians, they also competed for funding and weapons coming from Pakistan and, later, Saudi Arabia. To address these issues a meeting was convened in 1981 in Peshawar where Mawlawi Mansur, the leader of Harakat-i-Inqilab (the Revolutionary Movement), complained not only about the corrupt practices of many of the parties but also about the fact that the rivalry resulted in the leaders preventing their followers from collaborating with each other. Characteristic of the competitive nature of the time, Mansur concluded that every attempt of unity ended with the creation of a new party.¹⁹ The rivalry between Afghan commanders eventually cost Mansur his life as he was reportedly killed by the forces of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the leader of Hizb-e-Islami, in 1993.²⁰ It is clear, then, that the fragmentation between Afghan Sunni Jihadi factions did not occur with the fall of Najibullah's communist regime in 1992,²¹ but was already critically affecting the struggle against Russian forces from the very beginning in the early 1980s.

Tensions only increased when Arab mujahideen arrived in more substantial numbers from 1984 onwards. In his famous book from 1979, *Defence of the Muslim Lands: The First Obligation after Faith*, Azzam concludes that Jihad is *fard al-'ayn* (individual duty), thus providing the theological foundation necessary for Arabs to join in greater numbers. Azzam was in Afghanistan in the early 1980s and saw with his own eyes that this was not sufficient, so he created the Maktab al-Khadamat (the Services Bureau, MAK) in 1984, which helped facilitate the travel and organisation of Arab foreign fighters to Afghanistan.²² As problems between Afghan Jihadi warlords were already present in 1984, Azzam also saw the MAK as an opportunity to bring unity to prevent the negative consequences of a divided opposition. Abdallah Anas was placed in charge of de-escalating any arising tensions.²³ What Azzam probably did not foresee was that such interference would eventually exacerbate the internal relations between Jihadi groups and individuals.²⁴

The establishment of the Badr Camp by Azzam in 1984 was similarly with the direct purpose of promoting unity. Unlike other camps, it did not offer military training, but rather stressed the importance of fighters praying and fasting together, while also offering religious courses to them. The idea behind Badr was for diverse groups of fighters to become friends.²⁵ While Azzam may have succeeded in his endeavour at Badr, this was not the case in other camps. With more and more Arabs arriving, among them many Salafis from the Gulf, doctrinal orientation started to become a problem. At the Qais Camp, which was run by Mawlawi Mansur, a Sufi following the Hanafi school of *fiqh* (jurisprudence), Salafis were invited to come and train. Although the experiment succeeded in the end, initially the different groups clashed internally, especially regarding how to pray correctly.²⁶ Another example was the Zhawar Camp in Khost run by Haqqani but used by several groups including Egyptian Al Jihad. Once again, doctrinal

19 Hamid and Farrall, 50–56.

20 *ibid.*, 60.

21 This is argued in Hassan Abbas, *The Taliban Revival* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

22 Hamid and Farrall point out that facilitation was only one part of the reason why Azzam established the MAK. Probably of greater importance, they argue, was the problem of corruption within the Afghan Jihadi groups, which the MAK was supposed to prevent. Against the conventional wisdom that Azzam was the main source of facilitation of the mobilisation of Arab fighters to Afghanistan, Brown and Rassler argue that Jalaluddin Haqqani was in fact the first to promote and facilitate such mobilisation: see Vahid Brown and Don Rassler, *Fountainhead of Jihad: The Haqqani Nexus, 1973–2010* (London: Hurst, 2013).

23 Anas and Hussein, *To the Mountains: My Life in Jihad, from Algeria to Afghanistan*.

24 Hamid and Farrall, 80.

25 *ibid.*, 81–2.

26 *ibid.*, 75.

disagreements occurred between rigid Salafis and supporters of Haqqani, who were more traditional and less concerned about rigid doctrinal praxis.²⁷ Similar problems were to grow more severe in the 1990s.

There is a lot of disagreement about the establishment of al-Qaida. Documents reported to be its founding papers are dated 8 August and 10 September 1988; they refer to the facilitation of military training and the establishment of an 'Advisory Council'. Around this time, in the final phase of the war against Russia, bin Laden and Azzam started to drift apart. Some accounts explain this by emphasising that the Egyptians hijacked bin Laden's mind, but it is also very likely that the two simply differed with regard to future priorities. Vahid Brown and Don Rassler claim the split was a direct result of bin Laden establishing his Masada camp, as Azzam saw it as a misuse of resources and a direct threat to the MAK.²⁸ At the time, the MAK ran the Sada training camp, so bin Laden's Masada camp was considered a competitor.²⁹ That Azzam perceived bin Laden's activities as a threat is not so surprising, since bin Laden had become the most popular Arab-Afghan in 1987, a popularity that endured until his defeat at Jalalabad in 1989. With the establishment of al-Qaida, people started to leave Azzam's MAK to join the new group.³⁰ As a result, the main purpose of the advisory council was to unify Azzam, bin Laden and their respective followers.³¹

The final years of the struggle against the Russians turned out to have severe implications for the future Sunni Jihadi environment, both in Afghanistan and abroad. The great battle of Jalalabad in the spring of 1989 ended in a devastating defeat for the mujahideen, including the nascent al-Qaida, and was a severe personal blow to bin Laden. The battle was the first time the Muslim Brotherhood joined the front and they started to criticise bin Laden, warning against him becoming the leader of the Arabs.³² Around the same time, the so-called *takfiri* (excommunication) trend also started to gain prominence on the Afghan scene, the forerunner to what later would be known as the Jalalabad School. It is reported that before being assassinated in November 1989, Azzam said that some mujahideen – referring mainly to al-Zawahiri and the Egyptians – were creating *fitna* and that *takfir* was the real issue.³³ Increasingly extreme religious interpretation, however, was not exclusively an Egyptian phenomenon, but also present among other North Africans such as Libyans and Algerians, who eventually brought it back home, leading to the critical events below.³⁴

27 *ibid.*, 113.

28 Azzam was not the only one opposed to the Masada camp; most people around bin Laden tried to talk him out of it as the location of the camp was not suited for guerrilla warfare.

29 Brown and Rassler, 75.

30 Hamid and Farrall, 296.

31 *ibid.*, 123.

32 *ibid.*, 162.

33 Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Vintage, 2006), 140.

34 Author's interview with Ahmed al-Hamdan, 19 November 2016: <http://www.jihadica.com/the-increasing-extremism-within-the-islamic-state/>

Contestation Turning Ideological: The Emergence of the 'Jalalabad School'

After the fall of the Najibullah regime, Afghan warlords turned their guns against each other, thus transforming what in the 1980s was mainly inter-group competition into actual infighting as seen in the civil war waged between 1992 and 1998. From 1994, the Taliban participated in the conflict.³⁵ But it was another event, in 1989, that would transform the character of intra-Jihadi conflict. The defeat at Jalalabad turned out to be of extreme significance for the Jihadi environment both in Afghanistan and abroad.³⁶ Not only did the post-Jalalabad period give rise to a more ideologically founded contestation, but it also witnessed personal power struggles between bin Laden on one side and prominent Jihadi figures like Mullah Umar, Abu Musab al-Suri and Ibn Khattab, on the other.

In the late 1980s, a survey was conducted among Egyptian Al Jihad members in Afghanistan on their view of Jihad in the country. In their opinion, "nothing is to be hoped for from the war in Afghanistan, nor will there arise an Islamic State there, on account of doctrinal/ideological defects among the leaders and the masses."³⁷ Perhaps this was an opinion limited to the Egyptians (and maybe to the Algerians and Libyans), but it was a sentiment that was about to become more widespread. In the aftermath of the defeat at Jalalabad three important events occurred that all helped facilitate the emergence of the Jalalabad School, which is better understood as an ideological trend pertaining to certain ideas in matter of *'aqida* (creed) and *manhaj* (methodology).

After the defeat at Jalalabad, neither Azzam nor bin Laden supported further Arab involvement in the fighting and focused instead on training. This left some Arab fighters disgruntled as fighting was the reason they had left their home countries to travel to Afghanistan and they considered it a religious obligation. As is evident in the account by Abu Jandal, at a later date bin Laden's bodyguard, some Arabs like himself were men who wanted to be on the front lines.³⁸ But to fight they would have to find new leaders and this could be a challenge in a context where Arab mobilisation was still heavily dominated by Azzam and bin Laden. Hence, when Azzam was assassinated in November 1989 and bin Laden left for Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of the defeat at Jalalabad, a leadership vacuum emerged. The youth who were originally mobilised to fight found themselves nowhere near the battlefield and suddenly without the presence of their authoritative leaders. It is this opening that facilitated the emergence of the ideology of Jalalabad, which Mustafa Hamid defines as an 'everything goes'

35 In this period, Christia describes seven shifts in alliances in the struggle for power in Afghanistan between mujahideen forces. See Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*.

36 Tore Refslund Hamming, "The Hardline Stream of Global Jihad: Revisiting the Ideological Origin of the Islamic State," *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 1 (2019).

37 Paul Cruickshank, "Al-Qaeda's New Course Examining Ayman Al-Zawahiri's Strategic Direction," *IHS Defense, Risk and Security Consulting* May (2012).

38 Interview with Abu Jandal in *Al-Quds al-Arabi in Arabic*, August 2004.

approach. Characteristic of the new ideological trend was its obvious lack of experience. Its leaders were mostly in their twenties, they had, according to their critics, limited political and military understanding³⁹ and they agreed on the weakness of the existing leadership. Observers may compare this to the emergence of the Islamic State in 2013.

The new ideological trend developed in and around the Khaldan Camp located in Khost, Afghanistan. In several accounts Khaldan has been described as an al-Qaida camp, but it is important to note that this was not the case.⁴⁰ In fact, a rumour suggests that bin Laden was once refused entrance to the camp⁴¹ and it was eventually forced to close in 2000 because al-Qaida and the Taliban opposed its continuing operation.⁴² Initially Khaldan was associated with Azzam and bin Laden's MAK, but this changed under the new leadership of Ibn Shaikh al-Libi and, from 1994, Abu Zubaydah. The jump to a more rigid focus on doctrine occurred as part of this leadership transition as both leaders were influential in the institutionalisation of a more extreme takfiri ideology.

In area Khaldan was approximately one and a half football fields, providing mainly basic training in small arms, but its doctrinal influence has proven much greater than its limited size would suggest. Unlike other camps it was never run by a single organisation, but welcomed recruits from all over, although its main constituency was Algerians. Hence, it was perhaps no surprise that Algeria a few years later became the first place to witness an organised expression of the Jalalabad ideology.⁴³ Under the leadership of Ibn Shaikh al-Libi and Abu Zubaydah, Khaldan became the strongest critic of and competitor to al-Qaida and its alliance with the Taliban.⁴⁴ Perhaps the main reason behind this was the presence of the Egyptian Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir (born Muhammad Ibrahim al-Saghir), a critically understudied Egyptian figure who was a fierce opponent of al-Qaida and bin Laden during his time at Khaldan.⁴⁵ Abu Rumman and Abu Hanieh were the first to show the close connection between al-Muhajir and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi arguing that al-Zarqawi considered al-Muhajir his main ideological mentor. At Khaldan, al-Muhajir became the camp's shari'ah official (*mas'ul shara'i*) in charge of the religious Beliefs Battalion Institute.⁴⁶ As in other camps, the religious component was complementary to the military training and thus al-Muhajir's extreme ideology and hostility towards others either who disagreed or whose views simply differed⁴⁷ influenced the Arab recruits joining the camp as it conveyed some level of anti-Taliban and al-Qaida discourse.⁴⁸ It has been claimed that "the students at the al-Muhajir's institute began to expose what they see as deviances from Bin Ladin"⁴⁹ and according to Mustafa Hamid, as quoted by Kévin Jackson, "the most tolerant of them [the Algerian

39 Hamid and Farrall, *The Arabs at War in Afghanistan*.

40 "Countering Misconceptions About Training Camps in Afghanistan, 1990–2001," 2006.

41 Hamid and Farrall, 230.

42 Testimony Noor Uthman Muhammad, 2. Backed up by Gitmo file on Abu Zubaydah, see <https://wikileaks.org/gitmo/prisoner/10016.html>.

43 Hamid and Farrall, 167.

44 *ibid.*, 259. The opposition towards the Taliban by some Arabs is confirmed by the account by Abd al-Hadi al-Iraq retrieved from <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/notes-from-abd-al-hadi-english-translation-2>

45 Kévin Jackson, "Abu Mus'ab Al Zarqawi under Influence: One Mentor?," May 2012, <https://alleyesonjihadism.wordpress.com/2012/05/15/abu-musab-al-zarqawi-under-influence-one-mentor/>. As will be described later, al-Muhajir later changed his views, coming much closer to al-Qaida and eventually joined bin Laden. See also Hamming, "The Hardline Stream of Global Jihad: Revisiting the Ideological Origin of the Islamic State."

46 Jackson.

47 Hassan Abu Hanieh and Mohammad Abu Rumman, *The "Islamic State" Organization: The Sunni Crisis and the Struggle of Global Jihadism* (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2015), 141.

48 Hamid and Farrall, 229–30. Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al Qaeda Strategist Abu Musab Al-Suri* (London: Hurst, 2008), 242–3.

49 Jackson.

and Tunisian factions at Khaldan] saw the Taliban as infidels ... Their stance was the most easily comprehensible, simple and contrarian; it began with excommunicating [takfir] the Taliban and ended with excommunicating everyone in their vicinity.”⁵⁰ The strong focus on an extremely rigid doctrine and, especially the issue of takfir, was corroborated by other Jihadi groups present in Afghanistan at the time. For instance, the Uyghurs from Turkestan were initially training in the camp, but quit as the takfiri trend became too dominant.⁵¹ A similar account has been offered by the Indonesian Jama’ah Islamiyya, who refrained from frequenting Khaldan.⁵² The increasing importance and influence of takfir was evident in Algeria in the following years, but there are also examples in Afghanistan pointing to this. Some Arab Salafis, for instance, found it difficult to fight Masoud in the 1997 battle for Kabul as his fighters were nominally Muslims and the Salafis would only continue the fight if the enemy was declared kafir. Thus in order to keep the fighting on track, al-Qaida eventually excommunicated Masoud’s forces. Another example involves fighters from Libya known for their strict creed, which led them to pronounce takfir on the Taliban.⁵³

The shift in a more ideologically extreme direction prompted by the emergence of the Jalalabad School was the main source of division within Sunni Jihadism. Struggles were not exclusively ideological, however, as competition for power, scarce resources, recruits and funding⁵⁴ continued to play a role, not least in the Afghan civil war. But the post-Jalalabad period certainly did witness a division between pragmatists – or strategists – and doctrinarians (as Brynjar Lia has referred to them)⁵⁵ that had immediate repercussions in Algeria, later in Iraq, and finally is now seen in an organised form as part of the Islamic State. This extended to a more general contempt among many Arab Afghans towards the Taliban. As Lia explains, letters and documents found at guesthouses in Afghanistan revealed criticism, especially from Salafis, of the Taliban and its mistaken manhaj. The dividing issue was to what extent the Taliban could be considered a legitimate Islamic emirate and a starting point for a future caliphate.⁵⁶ The feeling among many Arab fighters in Afghanistan and senior Jihadi ideologues in London was that this was not the case. It should be noted that the takfiri trend was not exclusive to the hardcore Khaldan trainees as it is a central notion in Salafi theology and Wahhabi activism. Mustafa Hamid recounts how during a lecture he and Abu Musab al-Suri delivered at the al-Qaida-run Jihadwal camp a fierce argument broke out, which eventually led to people proclaiming takfir on others.⁵⁷

The early 1990s Jihadi melting pot in Afghanistan was truly a battlefield. Parties fought not only over the definition of the proper ideological foundation for Jihad, but also over its more basic priorities and objectives. In a survey around 1990 of some of the most senior Arab Jihadists in Afghanistan, the question “what is your position on battle participation in Afghanistan and for what reasons?” produced

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ Abdullah Mansour in Voice of Islam numbers 3 and 4.

⁵² Hamid and Farrall, 166.

⁵³ *ibid.*, 228–29. A similarly instrumental use of takfir was seen by the Islamic State against Jabhat al-Nusra.

⁵⁴ Farrall says that competition between the two groups was exacerbated because of competition for resources and financing, see Hamid and Farrall, 231.

⁵⁵ Brynjar Lia, “Jihadi Strategists and Doctrinarians,” in *Self Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within Al Qa’ida and Its Periphery*, edited by Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2010), 100–131.

⁵⁶ Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al Qaeda Strategist Abu Musab Al-Suri*, 239–44.

⁵⁷ Mustafa Hamid, ‘The Airport 1990’, Document titled *AFGP-2002-600090*, accessible here: <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2013/09/The-Airport-1990-Translation.pdf>

a wide range of strategic differences and priorities, as displayed vividly in the table below:⁵⁸

Abdallah Azzam	Token participation for the purpose of raising the Afghans' morale, training the Arabs and spreading the spirit of Jihad among the Arabs, with the long-term goal being the waging of Jihad against the Jews in Palestine.
Usama bin Laden	Deep participation in the battles in accordance with the political and strategic vision of the leadership in Peshawar, with the long-term goal being the liberation of South Yemen from communism.
Egyptian Al Jihad	Participation in battles for the purpose of training personnel in a battlefield environment. Nothing is to be hoped for from the war in Afghanistan, nor will there arise an Islamic state there, on account of doctrinal/ideological defects among the leaders and the masses. Egypt is the heart of the Islamic world and it is necessary to establish the Caliphate there first.
Abu Musab al-Suri	Participation for the purpose of training cadres and for forming a Jihadi organisation or coordinated organisations. Fighting in Afghanistan is a religious duty, though it is a lost cause.
Mustafa Hamid	Total participation with the Islamic mujahideen forces in Afghanistan for the purpose of achieving a military and political victory for the sake of Islam and for transforming Afghanistan into a base (<i>qa'ida</i>) of support for the Muslim peoples, providing them with military cadres and expertise, and shelter and support for the needy.

While the 1980s saw a rise in mobilisation to Jihad on an international scale, the 1990s witnessed the most critical changes in the Jihadi environment. Even during the early days of Jihad in Afghanistan, problems within and between groups were present, but it was mainly about access to resources and dominance of certain territories. In the leadership vacuum that emerged after the defeat at Jalalabad when Azzam was killed and bin Laden left for the Gulf (and later Sudan), a more purist and extreme ideological trend emerged as a result of Salafis from the Gulf and North Africa and the ideological development in the Khaldan Camp. Despite the internal hostilities, the Jihadists were still operating on a common base, but the family was slowly

⁵⁸ CTC Harmony Project, "Cracks in the Foundation: Leadership Schisms in Al-Qaida from 1989–2006", Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2007, 8–9.

becoming a more problematic one. In general there exists a myth of unity among the Arabs in Afghanistan,⁵⁹ but with a closer look it is clear that the field suffered from severe fragmentation. Not only did competing factions – often divided according to their nationalities – fight for influence, resources and recruits but from the early 1990s onwards, ideological fault lines emerged and became a central source of division. The increasing number of Arabs migrating to Afghanistan around 2000-2001 aggravated the already fractured field of Jihadi actors, even adding anti-Shi'ite attitudes to the equation. Hamid explains how such anti-Shia sentiments grew as Arabs, mainly from the Gulf, arrived with the objective of fighting Shi'ites in the north⁶⁰. Similar sentiments were present in al-Qaida but on orders from bin Laden any such sentiments were curbed within the movement. This trend only grew stronger in al-Zarqawi's Iraq in later years.

59 Hamid and Farrall, 262.

60 *ibid.*, 270–71.

Algeria: The First Manifestation of the 'Jalalabad Ideology'

Far from Afghanistan in Algeria, the first organisational manifestation of these ideological divisions occurred. The reliance on takfir was already dominant in the writings of such early Jihadi ideologues as Qutb and Faraj, although implicitly, and had been instrumental as a tool to legitimise killings of 'moderate' Muslims in Afghanistan.⁶¹ But in Algeria it started to cause problems between Jihadi groups.⁶²

The history of the *Groupe Islamique Armé* (GIA) is well described.⁶³ In the years 1994–6 during the terror campaign under the leadership of the 30-years old Djamel Zitouni, the GIA's attitude towards other Jihadi groups radicalised.⁶⁴ The group had operated since 1992 but was formally established in May 1994 as it merged with a faction from the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) and the *Mouvement de l'État Islamique* (MEI). Already in the two years leading up to the merger, the increasing violence of the GIA had forced other Islamist groups to step up their campaigns of violence in order to compete.⁶⁵ Camille Tawil reports of a steady stream of Arab Afghans returning from Afghanistan who were central to the GIA's establishment, as prominent Afghan veterans like Qari Saïd and Abu Leith al-M'sili were among the founders of the group while the *Bayt al-Mujahideen* guesthouse in Peshawar facilitated the transfer and training of GIA fighters.⁶⁶ Initially, the GIA's main enemy was the Algerian state and its French patron and in these efforts the movement was supported by al-Qaida and other Jihadi groups.⁶⁷ Jihadi authorities like Abu Qatada al-Filastini, Abu Hamza al-Masri and Abu Musab al-Suri either ran the group's weekly magazine *Usrat al-Ansar* or legitimised the GIA's jihad through *fatwa* (religious ruling). The GIA's hierarchy of enemies and its external support changed, however, when Zitouni took leadership and started a campaign of attacks against everyone less rigid in doctrine than himself.⁶⁸ When Zitouni was killed in 1996, Antar Zouabri, a 26-year-old close associate of Zitouni, took over the leadership of the group and continued the escalation of violence.

Although neither Zitouni nor Zouabri themselves spent time in Afghanistan, it seems fair to assume that the relatively high number of Algerians training in Khaldan, and with experience from Afghanistan

⁶¹ Hamid and Farrall, 140.

⁶² Mohammed M Hafez, "Fratricidal Rebels: Ideological Extremity and Warring Factionalism in Civil Wars," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.1389726>; Mohammed M Hafez, "Fratricidal Jihadists: Why Islamist Keep Losing Their Civil Wars," *Middle East Policy* 25, no. 2 (2018): 86–99.

⁶³ Camille Tawil, *Brothers in Arms: The Story of Al-Qaida and the Arab Jihadists* (London: SAQI, 2010); Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*; Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of Al Qaeda Strategist Abu Musab Al-Suri*, 111–31. For more on the Algerian War, see Luis Martinez, *The Algerian Civil War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

⁶⁴ Two aspects in particular characterise the GIA, especially from 1994 onwards. The first is the young age of its senior leadership. The age of the GIA emirs the year they took charge of the group ranged between 26 and 32. The second is the vivid lack of religious training and knowledge among its leaders.

⁶⁵ Kepel, 264.

⁶⁶ Tawil, 67–75.

⁶⁷ Hegghammer explains how in 1996 Ayman al-Zawahiri praised the GIA for its Jihadi Salafi methodology in an article titled 'al-kalima al-munawa'a: hiwar al-shaykh al-zawahiri ma' jaridat al-hayat – 1417 [Quality Speech: Sheikh al-Zawahiri's Conversation with al-Hayat in 1996]', see Thomas Hegghammer, "Violent Islamism in Saudi Arabia, 1979–2006: The Power and Perils of Pan-Islamic Nationalism" (PhD thesis, Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris – Ecole Doctorale de Sciences Po, 2007), 62. See also Lia, 127–8.

⁶⁸ Tawil, 86.

in general, did play a part in the radicalization of the GIA's stance towards other groups. The same ideological tenets that characterised the Jalalabad School⁶⁹ informed the GIA after Zitouni assumed its leadership and this started to cause internal dissent within the GIA in late 1995. The GIA's escalating extremism did not go unnoticed among supporting groups and ideologues, but when it started to launch attacks against fellow mujahideen who did not follow a similarly rigid doctrine, refused to join the GIA or simply disrespected the GIA leadership's view of its own authority, Jihadi groups and ideologues started to oppose it.⁷⁰ Tellingly, by 6 June 1996 the Egyptian groups Al Jihad and JI, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and the two ideologues Abu Qatada and Abu Musab al-Suri had all withdrawn their support,⁷¹ claiming Zitouni was "guilty of 'deviations' in the implementation of the Jihad".⁷² The GIA's extremism reached its high point when Zouabri in September 1997 proclaimed takfir on the whole Algerian population except people fighting in the ranks of his own group,⁷³ thus ensuring the Algerian Jihadi project lost all popular support.⁷⁴

But, the direct aggression against Islamists and Jihadists began earlier. In 1994, the FIS merged with the *Mouvement Islamique Armé* (MIA) to establish the *Armée Islamique du Salut* (AIS) which, in contrast to the GIA, had a long-term Jihad campaign as its objective. As the AIS was perceived as a competitor, the GIA started to attack the group that year⁷⁵ and in November 1995 even targeted allied Jihadis originally from the FIS who had joined the GIA as part of the merger in 1994. When Zouabri took over, this internal purge only intensified. Eventually, senior Jihadi figures like bin Laden and al-Zawahiri began to consider the GIA a harm to the general Jihadi project. The vision of Algeria as a new base for Jihad slowly crumbled.

One tangible example of the animosity of the GIA towards other Jihadists took place when the LIFG sent several delegations to Algeria to assess the GIA and enquire about the possibilities of setting up camps in the country. A delegation of 15 LIFG members travelled to Algeria in 1994 to fight alongside the GIA against the Algerian army, but as soon as the delegation arrived all contact with the group ceased and it was later discovered that all the fighters had been killed by the GIA, the group they were sent to aid.⁷⁶ Following the disappearance of the 15 Libyans, a story was reported that the GIA's mufti Redouane Makador paid a visit to bin Laden in Sudan and directly threatened the al-Qaida leader not to get involved in the Algerian Jihad.⁷⁷ In another instance, without consideration for the actual proposals, he rejected recommendations from al-Zawahiri.⁷⁸

The GIA leadership opposed any Jihadi project that differed from or interfered with its own. Zitouni clearly perceived a competition for power as well as a religious imperative to oppose less rigorous Muslims. Similar to the discourse of the Islamic State today, Zitouni claimed that other Jihadi groups were too moderate and had

69 Extreme doctrinal rigidity, contempt for pragmatism in creed (*'aqida*) and methodology (*manhaj*) and enmity towards less puritanical groups.

70 Lia, 128.

71 Tawil, 120.

72 Kepel, 270–71. Abu Hamza stayed supportive of Zouabri until late September 1997 when he finally withdrew his support after Zouabri declared the entire Algerian society apostate.

73 *ibid.*, 273.

74 *ibid.*, 255.

75 *ibid.*, 265.

76 Tawil.

77 *ibid.*, 96; Lia, 128.

78 *ibid.*, 128.

abandoned the true Jihadi methodology. The GIA was the first organisation after Shukri Mustafa's Jama'at al-Muslimeen that focused so rigorously on doctrine that it became directly counterproductive for the broader Jihadi movement. This mainly happened by using powerful concepts like takfir and *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* (loyalty and separation). These concepts are traditionally applied by Jihadis to distinguish between pious Muslims and apostates and to manage the relationship with the latter, but instead the GIA began systematically applying them to delegitimise competing Jihadi actors. During the reign of Zitouni, the GIA was finally accused of being *khawarij*,⁷⁹ but – as is also the case with the Islamic State – such an accusation was fiercely rejected by Zitouni, who claimed that the GIA killed any person with khawariji tendencies they came across.⁸⁰

79 Al-khawarij, or *al-haruriyyah/muhakkima*, refers to ancient Islamic sects¹ that initially became infamous for killing Uthman and Ali, the third and fourth caliphs after the prophet Muhammed, due to the perceived deviance of Uthman and Ali's acceptance to arbitration in his conflict with Muawiya.² Unsurprisingly, this made the khawarij hugely unpopular within the Muslim community due to their alleged *extremism*, which has made it a term applied in modern times to vilify one's opponent. There are discussions about how many sects the khawarij divided into, but Crone mentions the four best known which are the Ibadiyya (only khariji sect to survive today), Najdiyya (originally from Basra, but mainly active in Arabia and was suppressed in 693, but managed to survive a few centuries), Azariqa (originally from Basra but fled to Iran where they disappeared after suppression in 699) and Sufriyya (active in North Africa until 10th century). These four sects were divided in relation to the status of non-khariji Muslims and the legality regarding living under kufr rule (some believed one should emigrate and establish their own polity, while others believed it was acceptable to live in kufr territory as long as one did not follow their rules). For more on the khawarij, see Patricia Crone, *God's rule: government and Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). Jeffrey T. Kenney, *Muslim Rebels: Kharijites and the Politics of Extremism in Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). J. Meric Pessagno, "The Murji'a, Ima'n and Abū 'Ubayd," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 95, no. 3 (1975). The notion of khawarij is also discussed by classical Islamic figures. Ibn Taymiyya discusses the sect in his *majmu' al-fatawa* and al-Tabari in his 40-volume *tarikh al-Tabari*.

80 Kepel, 269.

Personal Power Ambitions: Mullah Umar, Abu Musab al-Suri and Ibn Khattab

Back in Afghanistan the competition and fragmentation within the Jihadi environment of the 1990s was not just a result of the emerging ideological division, but also driven by personal power struggles among senior individuals at the time. Bin Laden had extensive leadership ambitions and that put him at odds with other senior and popular Jihadi figures, such as the Taliban's Mullah Umar, Abu Musab al-Suri and his Saudi compatriot Ibn Khattab.

When bin Laden and the majority of his al-Qaida members relocated back to Afghanistan in May 1996 after spending several years in Sudan, he sought to revive his organisation and cement his own position as the most authoritative figure within the Sunni Jihadi movement. A challenge to this objective was Mullah Umar, who was heading the Taliban's newly established emirate and had claimed the authoritative title of *amir al-mu'minin* (leader of the faithful). The competition with and dislike of Mullah Umar can be divided in two distinct areas: on the one hand the relationship between bin Laden and Mullah Umar; on the other, how Mullah Umar was perceived by the broader Jihadi Salafi trend.

It seems unlikely, as some sources argue, that bin Laden did not know of the Taliban when he arrived in Afghanistan.⁸¹ During his exile in Sudan he must have been a keen follower of events in Afghanistan, where he had spent many years and still had fighters and camps, although in reduced numbers. To explain the initial friendliness of Mullah Umar to bin Laden it is necessary to understand how the Saudi was perceived by the Taliban regime upon his return. First, he was seen as an Arab mujahideen who fought bravely for Afghanistan in the 1980s. Second, and perhaps more important for a new and struggling regime, bin Laden was also a Saudi businessman whom they hoped would help revitalise the Afghan economy and infrastructure. From the insider account of Mustafa Hamid, who was close to both bin Laden and the Taliban, it is obvious that bin Laden seemed neither to respect nor to care much about Mullah Umar. This was not so much because bin Laden as a Salafi had doctrinal issues with Mullah Umar, but more because he simply saw himself as the leader of the Jihadi movement and had his eyes fixed on his own activities. The latter became the key issue between the two as bin Laden saw a strong media presence as central to his project, much to the annoyance of his Afghan host.⁸² On several occasions bin Laden gave interviews without the permission of Mullah Umar and acted directly against his orders, most provocatively, undoubtedly, in the 1998 press conference at which bin Laden announced the 'World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders'. These provocations and bin Laden's

81 Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman, eds., *Self Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within Al Qa'ida and Its Periphery* (West Point: CTC Harmony Project, 2010), 140.

82 *ibid.*, 140–46.

global agenda led Mullah Umar to put the Saudi under surveillance and on one occasion he allegedly even confiscated bin Laden's phone.⁸³ Mullah Umar pleaded for bin Laden to understand the Taliban's delicate situation and how the Saudi's activities were harmful. Mustafa Hamid narrates from one of the discussions between the two leaders:

*"he [Mullah Umar] told Abu Abdullah [bin Laden], 'Please don't talk. Keep quiet. We are in a dangerous position here now. Everything is against us. We have troubles everywhere, from every place. We have a lot of problems. We have no money ... Please wait; we are going to help you and help all the Muslims. But wait.' ... he said frankly, 'Look I can't help you now. I am just like this,' and he motioned to how he was crouching. He said, 'I am not sitting and not standing; and this position is a very hard position. Leave things until I stand or sit'."*⁸⁴

To end the meeting on a polite note, Mullah Umar concluded, "You are in your country; you can do whatever you want."⁸⁵ Bin Laden chose to understand this literally, continuing to carry out his Jihadi project. The story shows how bin Laden clearly had issues with subordinating himself to Mullah Umar. This is also evident from his hesitancy to pledge allegiance to the Taliban leader as was expected of him; when he finally acquiesced, he did it through a proxy.⁸⁶

The criticism from the hard-core Jihadi-Salafi contingent in Afghanistan against Mullah Umar took a more doctrinal focus. As has been discussed already, at Khaldan an anti-Taliban rhetoric was espoused from the mid-1990s onwards. Such a stance was not shared by all Arabs in Afghanistan, but in the eyes of purist Salafis, the Taliban's religious practices were a point of criticism and a potential problem when fighting on the same side. Documents captured in Afghanistan containing surveys from 2001 conducted in al-Qaida-run camps show how trainees asked questions about the religious legitimacy of the Taliban and the ruling on fighting next to them.⁸⁷ Al-Zawahiri and his fellow Egyptians in Al Jihad were particularly against the idea of pledging allegiance to the Taliban due to their perceived doctrinal faults.⁸⁸ Similar objections were widely present among Saudi Jihadis.⁸⁹ Perhaps the strongest voice against the Taliban was a coalition of individuals called "the Peshawar Group" who authored pamphlets criticising the Taliban's political deviance in wanting to join the United Nations and its religious *shirk* (polytheist) practices, especially grave-worshipping and the mixing of religious and cultural customs. After the bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania and even more so after 9/11, al-Qaida and what was left of the Jihadi-Salafi movement in Afghanistan became more dependent on the Taliban's protection. Ideological disagreement continued as the Taliban was only focused on its nationalist Jihadi project within the geographical confines of Afghanistan, while al-Qaida, now with Al Jihad and al-Zawahiri onboard, were fully committed to a global Jihad project. Nonetheless, the volatile context made the Salafis more lenient towards the Taliban and saw the alliance as a strategic necessity, so much so that even al-Zawahiri started to support the relationship.

⁸³ *ibid.*, 142. Once Mullah Umar even dispatched a helicopter to bring bin Laden to Kandahar to speak to him; allegedly bin Laden was convinced that he would be killed by the Taliban: Hamid and Farrall, 1.

⁸⁴ Hamid and Farrall, 221.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 222.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*, 5.

⁸⁷ Document titled AFGP-2002-801138 retrieved here: <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2013/10/Various-Admin-Documents-and-Questions-Translation.pdf>

⁸⁸ See Hamming and Roy, "Al-Zawahiri's Bay'a to Mullah Mansoor: A Bitter Pill but a Bountiful Harvest."

⁸⁹ Hegghammer, "Violent Islamism in Saudi Arabia, 1979-2006: The Power and Perils of Pan-Islamic Nationalism."

A second example of leadership ambitions at fault for intra-Jihadi competition is between al-Qaida and Abu Musab al-Suri.⁹⁰ Al-Suri had already found himself in a personal conflict with Abu Qatada al-Filastini during his stay in London in the mid-1990s. As he returned to Afghanistan, bin Laden came to see him as both a competitor and a direct threat although the two men initially were close.⁹¹ Al-Suri allegedly left al-Qaida in 1997⁹² and shifted his allegiance to the Taliban,⁹³ mainly due to his opposition to al-Qaida's strategy of targeting the West, which he was convinced would entail an increased threat to the Taliban's hold in Afghanistan. Time and again, al-Suri criticised bin Laden for not following the rules of conduct set out by the Taliban after the movement had finally established its Islamic Emirate and agreed to host bin Laden. Lia reports how the tensions led to a quarrel between the two in 1996, after which bin Laden suggested that they should "keep away from one another".⁹⁴ Perhaps the best insight we have on the relationship is a letter from al-Suri and his companion Abu Khalid al-Suri in which they criticise bin Laden and emphasise the need to respect Mullah Umar's leadership. In the letter the two Syrians also touch on a raw spot by claiming that bin Laden does not honour *shura* (consultation) and that senior people close to him, including Abu Hafs al-Masri and al-Zawahiri, hold a similar view.⁹⁵

Brian Fishman has provided an informative account of how stark the competition between al-Qaida and al-Suri really was, arguing that the competition between the two was integral in al-Qaida's decision to support Abu Musab al-Zarqawi when he arrived in Afghanistan.⁹⁶ His account confirms that of Hamid, who writes that "Abu Musab al-Suri and al-Qaeda were at this time in heavy competition" and that Arab Afghans at odds with bin Laden sided with al-Suri.⁹⁷ Interestingly, the competition between the two was not born out of ideological disagreement. This is not to say that al-Qaida's leadership did not differ with al-Suri on substantial issues. First, al-Suri was not a Salafi and detested the rigidity and inflexible attitude of Salafis. While al-Qaida was not exclusively Salafi, Salafism was dominant among its senior leadership. Second, al-Suri did not agree that there were strategic benefits to attacking the West at this stage; he believed supporting the Taliban's Islamic Emirate should be the main priority. Rather than these differences, however, it was the conflicting ambitions of al-Suri and senior al-Qaida leaders that was the main trigger for their conflict. Al-Suri was in charge of his own organisation in Afghanistan and had permission from the Taliban, as one of six commanders, to set up a camp in Afghanistan.⁹⁸ Al-Qaida got the impression that al-Suri was stealing their recruits and thus banned him from entering any al-Qaida guesthouse.

Similarly to al-Suri, bin Laden's compatriot Samir Saleh Abdullah al-Suwailem, better known as Ibn Khattab, was seen as a threat to al-Qaida's Jihadi project and bin Laden's own leadership ambitions. Hamid says that "Khattab was a big threat and he refused many

⁹⁰ Hamid and Farrall, 256.

⁹¹ Hamid and Farrall, 254; Aimen Dean, Paul Cruickshank and Tim Lister, *Nine Lives: My Time as MI6's Top Spy inside Al-Qaeda* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2018).

⁹² Some accounts argue he left al-Qaida earlier, when he left Afghanistan for Europe.

⁹³ Lia, 240.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 281–2.

⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 284–90.

⁹⁶ Brian Fishman, "Revising the History of Al-Qa'ida's Original Meeting with Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 10 (2016), <https://ctc.usma.edu/revising-the-history-of-al-qaidas-original-meeting-with-abu-musab-al-zarqawi/>.

⁹⁷ Hamid and Farrall, 274.

⁹⁸ See Arab Liaison Committee of the Islamic Emirate document titled AFGP-2002-0001000-0003 retrieved here: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57a2ce8503596ee87a205a0d/t/57f568325016e1de1071d4e1/1475700788019/ArabLiaisonCmte_AFGP-2002-0001000-0003+.pdf

attempts by al-Qaeda to draw him in” in the period covering 1997–8.⁹⁹ The young Saudi was among the youth that took advantage of the leadership vacuum after the Jalalabad defeat when he moved to Afghanistan in May 1988. Although he never really became particularly fond of Jihad in Afghanistan, even claiming “we didn’t really do jihad in Afghanistan”,¹⁰⁰ he nevertheless spent approximately six years there. During that time, he set up his own very popular camp to train Saudis.¹⁰¹ From bin Laden’s perspective, this was problematic as they were competing for the same recruits. Tired of the competitive nature of the work, Khattab travelled to Tajikistan between 1994 and 1995 and then moved on to Chechnya, where he spent the remaining part of his life as the leader of the Islamic Army. It was in Chechnya that he emerged as a revered leader among his fighters and a legend within the Jihadi movement.¹⁰² Chechnya was an example of classical Jihad fighting against the invading Russian forces and for this reason became perhaps the most important Jihadi arena in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This was not least the case from a Saudi perspective and thus bin Laden had an interest in expanding his own project to Chechnya. Against his wishes, however, this was not possible because soon after Khattab had established himself, he monopolised Arab Jihadi activity in Chechnya, making it impossible for al-Qaida to gain a foothold there.¹⁰³

Unlike al-Qaida, Ibn Khattab never diverted from the classical Jihad of focusing on invading foreign forces in Muslim countries. When bin Laden started to focus more on ‘apostate’ Arab governments or the West, Khattab kept his eyes on the Russian forces.¹⁰⁴ This ideological difference between supporting classical Jihad or global Jihad is important, Thomas Hegghammer notes, and it saw expression within Saudi Arabia where Jihadis were divided between the ‘Khattabists’ and ‘Bin Ladinists’.¹⁰⁵ Another striking difference was how small a role doctrine played for Khattab after he came to Chechnya: he realised most of the Muslims there were Sufis and thus he could not expect people suddenly to adopt a Salafi creed. Studying religion was important, but he expected only the minimum from his recruits, such as praying, fasting and reading the Quran. He acknowledged this himself in his memoirs, noting the challenge of up to 60 to 80 per cent of his trainees being Sufis: “I wanted to leave the issue of disagreement, dispute or extremism about the Madhahib, this is Shafee, or Hanbali, or Hanafi. Although I didn’t have knowledge to convince or comprehend much of these matters, I mentioned to them this matter and they agreed to continue in the camp”.¹⁰⁶

When in Chechnya, the popularity of Ibn Khattab’s front exceeded that of bin Laden’s Jihad in Afghanistan, both in the eyes of many young recruits, but also among Saudi clerics and businessmen. The latter group’s support was not least the result of bin Laden’s critique of the Saudi regime. This was problematic for bin Laden since he considered Khattab a competitor not only for authority and leadership but also

99 Hamid and Farrall, 169. His popularity is emphasised by a survey on the Jihadist forum Shumukh al-Islam in 2011 on the reasons why forum members ‘loved Jihad’. Ibn Khattab came in second only to ‘religious upbringing’ and thus above bin Laden. Muhammad Al-‘Ubaydi, “Khattab – Jihadi Bios Project,” 2015, 1.

100 Samir Saleh Al-Suwailem, “Memories of Amir Khattab: The Experience of the Arab Ansar in Chechnya, Afghanistan and Tajikistan,” n.d., 6.

101 When Khattab’s camp was closed, his recruits for Chechnya were then trained at Khaldan, see Hamid and Farrall, 200.

102 An example of his popularity is the nasheed entitled “‘Khattab’ Sword of Islam”.

103 Al-‘Ubaydi, 23.

104 *ibid.*, 4.

105 Hegghammer, 57. For a discussion of the importance of enemy prioritisation, see also Thomas Hegghammer, “Global Jihadism after the Iraq War,” *The Middle East Journal* 60, no. 1 (2006): 11–32.

106 Al-Suwailem, “Memories of Amir Khattab: The Experience of the Arab Ansar in Chechnya, Afghanistan and Tajikistan.”

for Saudi recruits and funding. In a letter from the senior al-Qaida figure 'Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi, written in 1999 to the al-Qaida leadership, he mentions the competition al-Qaida is facing from Khattab and his Jihad in Chechnya. In the letter, al-Iraqi argues that most of the Jihadi youth in Afghanistan would leave for Chechnya if they were allowed to.¹⁰⁷ However, this was soon to change, not least for practical reasons. Khattab was victorious in the first Chechen war, but as the second Chechen war broke out in 1999 the situation was different. This time Russia wanted to win in Chechnya and it basically sealed off the country, thus limiting the entrance of new foreign fighters who were eager to join a conflict against the invading unbelievers. What was Ibn Khattab's misfortune turned out to be bin Laden's luck as many of the recruits looking to join Khattab eventually ended up in bin Laden's arms in Afghanistan.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi's letter retrieved from <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/notes-from-abd-al-hadi-english-translation-2>.

¹⁰⁸ Hegghammer, 56–7.

Internal Conflict in the Egyptian Jihadi Movement and the Emergence of Jihadi Revisionism

In Egypt, two Jihadi groups emerged in the 1970s from the country's contentious Islamist environment and would eventually have an immense impact on the evolution of Sunni Jihadism.

Both groups shared an ambition to establish an Islamic state and a rejection of the reformist approach of the Muslim Brotherhood, which had categorically failed in the Jihadists' eyes. Despite their common aim they differed substantially in theology and in matters of organisation and mobilisation. *Al-Jama'at al-Islamiyya* (JI) emerged in university circles in Upper Egypt initially as a loose non-violent student organisation focusing on dawa activities. *Jama'at al-Jihad*, which later became known simply as Al Jihad, started as loosely connected cells in Cairo and in northern Egypt under the ideological tutelage of Abd al-Salam Faraj. Organisationally, one aimed to become a mass movement while the other was a clandestine elitist vanguard that aimed to mobilise members. JI's radicalisation to accept violence was partly the result of the closing of political opportunities in Egypt in the 1970s and partly President Anwar Sadat's rapprochement with the USA and Israel; for Al Jihad the process to violence was led by group leaders framing Jihad as the sole successful way to establish an Islamic state.

It was after the operation in October 1981 when the two groups briefly allied under the tutelage of Faraj¹⁰⁹ and Umar Abd al-Rahman¹¹⁰ to assassinate Sadat that internal divisions between the groups started to emerge. Both groups were severely targeted by mass repression, with many leaders and members imprisoned or forced to operate clandestinely. In prison tensions between senior figures of the two groups intensified, relating to issues of strategy and leadership according to the account by Al Jihad member Hani Siba'i.¹¹¹ In terms of strategy, JI's decision to launch the attack against the security directorate in Asyut two days after Sadat's death was considered a critical mistake by Al Jihad leaders since it did not follow a greater plan, but only deteriorated the situation for the Jihadis. In terms of leadership, the groups could not decide between JI's al-Rahman and Al Jihad's Aboud Zomour. Al-Rahman was theologically respected, while Zomour was militarily savvy, but the former's blindness was considered a serious handicap to his becoming emir of the groups should they merge.

109 Al-Sibai, *Qissah Jama'at Al-Jihad [The Story of Al Jihad Group]*.

110 Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli, eds., *Al Qaeda in Its Own Words* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2008), 151.

111 Tawil, 109; Al-Sibai.

The tensions between the two groups and within Al Jihad only increased in the mid- and late 1980s when members of the groups fled to Afghanistan and Pakistan after their release from prison. After serving their sentences, JI came out as a relatively united group. Al Jihad was the opposite, plagued by internal division over strategy. The release of second-tier leaders in the mid-1980s was central to this division as many of them travelled to Afghanistan to revive the organisation, which isolated the still-imprisoned traditional leadership. In this period remnants of Al Jihad elected a new emir, Sayyid Imam, better known as Dr Fadl. But, in the eyes of many of the rising stars in the group, Ayman al-Zawahiri¹¹² was considered the real emir because of his central role in the trials in Egypt.¹¹³ The establishment of a new faction with a new leadership naturally caused fragmentation within Al Jihad, with tensions building up between the imprisoned leadership in Egypt and the new leadership in Afghanistan.

In Peshawar the groups once again attempted to merge, largely driven by the efforts of Abu Talal al-Qasimi, but again the groups were not able to find common ground, mainly because of differences in style of organisation that were considered incompatible, and in 1992 JI rejected the proposal. Around the same time, members of JI and Al Jihad were like so many other Jihadists forced to leave the Afghanistan-Pakistan region and relocated to Sudan. Upon arrival, Al Jihad sought to reinvigorate its campaign of violence in Egypt to keep up with JI, which was very active in the early 1990s. First in 1993 and again two years later, Al Jihad attempted high-level attacks against senior Egyptian politicians, including President Hosni Mubarak, but the campaign backfired with the tragic death of an innocent girl. This put pressure on Al Jihad to engage in renewed merger talks to survive. In contrast to the previous discussions in Peshawar, Al Jihad was now suffering from severe internal fragmentation, a lack of resources and a dearth of public support, which weakened its position with regard to JI and ensured that the talks were more serious than before. In particular the internal tensions proved troublesome as an internal power struggle between different factions within the group played out. Hundreds of Al Jihad's members were on trial in Egypt in the famous 'Vanguard of Conquest' (*Tala'al al-Fateh*) case and at the same time rank-and-file members were calling for authorisation to launch attacks in Egypt. Members of the group called on Sayyid Imam, who was still in Peshawar, to join them in Sudan to resolve the conflict. After he refused, Abu Ubaydah al-Banshiri suggested he resign his position as emir of Al Jihad, to which he agreed. While al-Banshiri himself was a strong candidate to succeed Sayyid Imam, group members eventually elected al-Zawahiri.

Hence, in late 1994 or early 1995 the leading figures of the negotiations were al-Zawahiri for Al Jihad and Abu Yassir for JI, but once again the obstacles preventing merging the two groups proved too great. Somehow paradoxically, considering how fragmented Al Jihad was at the time, one of the group's points of criticism was the fragmented nature of JI. The talks ended up dividing Al Jihad in two factions: the hawks, led by Abd al-Hamid, argued that JI needed to elect an internally accepted shura council

¹¹² Al-Zawahiri had at this point been to the region several times before serving as a doctor.

¹¹³ Al-Sibai, 16; Tawil, 100.

before any merger negotiations to ensure the group could speak with one voice, while the pro-unity doves, led by al-Zawahiri, argued that a new shura council including members of both groups should be established.¹¹⁴ This was a minor issue, however, with the real obstacles once again being the leadership of the blind sheikh Umar Abd al-Rahman and the theological question of *al-'adhir bi-l-jahl* (excuse of ignorance). Very briefly, the latter concerns the issue around if a person who commits *shirk* or in another way breaks Islamic law due to ignorance should be considered an apostate.¹¹⁵ While JI accepted ignorance as an excuse (even in matters relating to God's unity) and claimed that one would in fact be an *mubtada'* (innovator) if one did not accept it, Al Jihad took the opposite opinion. At the final meeting, JI was allegedly not willing to compromise on any of the contentious issues and informed Al Jihad that for the merger to go through, it would have to accept all JI's demands.¹¹⁶

For al-Zawahiri the failed merger was clearly a disappointment, as was the decision by the JI's imprisoned leadership in 1997 to launch its initiative to cease violence (*mubadarat waqf al-unf*).¹¹⁷ Even though al-Zawahiri himself in 1995 announced a ceasefire it was only a temporary measure and not an abandonment of Jihad. In contrast, JI's leadership in 2001 published a 'Series for Correcting Ideas' (*silsilat tashih al-mafahim*) consisting of four books that on a theological foundation delegitimised the use of violence through a reality-based jurisprudence (*fiqh al-waqi'*). While Jihad was still a legitimate Islamic concept, they argued, in the context of Egypt (and likely elsewhere) it was prohibited because the harm (*mafsada*) of fighting Jihad was greater than the benefits (*maslaha*).

Al-Zawahiri had continuously opposed groups that renounced the importance of Jihad, let alone those accepting a political process not governed by the law of God. In the early 1990s he had already published a raging critique of the Muslim Brotherhood, titled *Bitter Harvest*, and a decade later, after joining al-Qaida, his criticism was now directed at JI in the book *Knights under the Prophet's Banner*. He dedicates a substantial portion of the 200-page book to criticising JI's decision and outlining how the initiative divided the group internally. Al-Zawahiri leaves no doubt that he does not respect the decision of JI. He narrates the hadith of Abdallah bin al-Zubayr, a companion of the prophet, who went to his mother's house and told her that everyone, even his sons and relatives, was letting him down and joining his enemy, al-Hajjaj, and that his opponents were willing to give him all worldly goods if he abandoned his struggle. Al-Zubayr's mother replied, "Son, you know yourself better. If you are convinced that you are right and that you are advocating a rightful course of action, then endure." In response, al-Zubayr kissed his mother's head. Al-Zawahiri continues quoting Sayyid Qutb saying, "Brother, push ahead,

¹¹⁴ Tawil, 101–2; Al-Sibai.

¹¹⁵ This would eventually become a major issue within the Islamic State in 2014–18 and the key source of factionalism within the group.

¹¹⁶ Tawil, 103–6.

¹¹⁷ Jérôme Drevon, "Assessing Islamist Armed Groups' De-Radicalization in Egypt," *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 27, no. 3 (2015): 296–303; Sherman A. Jackson, *Initiative to Stop the Violence (Mubadarat Waqf Al-'unf): Sadat's Assassins and the Renunciation of Political Violence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015); Amr Hamzawy and Sarah Grebowski, "From Violence to Moderation: Al-Jama' Al-Islamiya and Al-Jihad," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 2010; Paul Kamolnick, "The Egyptian Islamic Group's Critique of Al-Qaeda's Interpretation of Jihad," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, no. 5 (2013): 93–110. Also the LIFG recanted their violent views. In 2000, Umar Abd al-Rahman – the spiritual guide of JI – withdrew his support for the initiative.

for your path is soaked in blood. Do not turn your head right or left but look only up to heaven.”¹¹⁸ This clearly shows the fault line that emerged between Egypt’s two major Jihadi groups and also how the initiative affected JI internally. Even JI’s spiritual leader, Umar Abd al-Rahman, withdrew his support for the initiative, which was clearly important for al-Zawahiri as he had tremendous respect for the US-imprisoned sheikh.¹¹⁹ The late 1990s, with JI’s cessation of violence and Al Jihad’s increasing focus on distant enemies, thus represented the final break between the two groups as their paths diverted for good.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Al-Zawahiri, 136–7.

¹¹⁹ In 2002, al-Zawahiri continued with his criticism in the publication ‘Loyalty and Separation’ (*al-wala’ wa-l-bara’*) that, through the concept of *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’*, attempted to discredit groups theologically that did not support their Muslim brethren and instead took unbelievers as allies. As Lacroix points out, the latter text was of extreme importance because it underlined how al-Zawahiri had gone from being an Egyptian Jihadist focusing on *hakimiyya* (the sovereignty of God) and overthrowing the near enemy to a global Jihadist mainly aiming at the far enemy through a focus on *al-wala’ wa-l-bara’*. See Kepel and Milelli, 166–7.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*, 159.

9/11 and Debate on the Legitimate Jihadi Ideology

With Al Jihad's campaign failing in Egypt and bin Laden returning to Afghanistan, the leaders of the two faltering groups agreed to steer their focus away from national or regional revolutionary projects to instead focus on the USA and its Western allies. The period between 1996 and 2001 is thus central to understanding a key ideological¹²¹ development within Sunni Jihadism, specifically concerning the political preferences and enemy hierarchy of the Jihadi movement, and not least al-Qaida's rise. Although al-Qaida somehow managed to turn the reprioritisation of the Jihadi enemy hierarchy to its advantage and emerge as the primary recruiter of young Jihadis, it was nonetheless an extremely contentious issue that several senior Jihadi figures, even within al-Qaida, initially opposed and contested.

When bin Laden returned to Afghanistan in the summer of 1996 he sought to revive al-Qaida and expand its influence with the aim of becoming the primary Jihadi organisation. In Sudan, bin Laden had been more of a farmer and entrepreneur than a Jihadist¹²² and al-Qaida's organisational infrastructure in Afghanistan had declined during his absence. From 1992 to bin Laden's return in 1996, it was allegedly only al-Qaida's Jihadwal camp that was still in operation, though bin Laden himself had ordered everything closed when he left Pakistan in 1992.¹²³ Upon his return to Afghanistan, he authored his first fatwa explicitly identifying the USA and its allies as the main enemy of al-Qaida. Steven Brooke's article 'Jihadist Strategic Debates before 9/11' provides a good chronological overview of the strategic and ideological development of Jihadi groups, from the different expressions of a *revolutionary approach* in Egypt to Azzam, who favoured *classical defensive Jihad* and conquest of former Muslim land, and finally to the *global Jihad* of al-Qaida. The revolutionary trend was already a break with classical defensive Jihad as a communal duty, which Azzam later pronounced as an individual duty, but bin Laden's redefinition of the enemy hierarchy was of equal if not greater significance. The shift from the 'near enemy' to the 'far enemy' has already been well described by several scholars,¹²⁴ but perhaps less attention has been given to the opposition within the Jihadi movement that followed this shift in ideological prioritisation.

In the early 1990s, bin Laden was under pressure from the Egyptian Jihadi groups to adopt a revolutionary approach preferably with a focus on Egypt. During his stay in Saudi Arabia between 1989 and 1991, bin Laden contemplated initiating a campaign in Yemen; after the Saudi regime rejected his help to fight Saddam Hussein,

121 Ideology is here understood quite narrowly along the lines of Thomas Hegghammer's definition: "as a set of principles that guides the political behavior of a subset of militant Islamist groups. A shorter term would be 'rationale for Islamist violence'"; see Thomas Hegghammer, "The Hybridization of Jihadi Groups," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 9 (2009): 26–45.

122 Anas and Hussein.

123 Hamid and Farrall, 196.

124 See, for example, Fawaz A. Gerges, *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy* (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Inc., 2007).

his animosity also turned towards his native Saudi Arabia. However, bin Laden never fully dedicated to the revolutionary fight. Rather he shifted from a defensive Jihad in Afghanistan to a prioritisation of global Jihad. Experience garnered from Saudi Arabia, Bosnia and Somalia were undoubtedly important in this strategic shift as they made him realise that the way to Jerusalem did not go through Cairo (or any other Arab capital), as al-Zawahiri famously argued, but rather through the Western world, by cutting the 'head of the snake'.¹²⁵ The first step in his turn towards the far enemy was his 1996 fatwa, 'A Declaration of Jihad against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Sanctuaries (Expel the Infidels from the Arabian Peninsula).' Approximately 30 pages long, the fatwa had the task of convincing Jihadists and Muslims in general that the USA was in fact the primary enemy: it had either occupied the Muslim world or through its support ensured the survival of tyrant Muslim rulers. Criticising the Al Saud regime the fatwa justified a defensive Jihad against US forces initially stationed in the country to fight Saddam's Iraq.¹²⁶ Two years later bin Laden authored a new fatwa entitled 'Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders', published by a new Jihadi alliance called the *World Islamic Front*. Only two pages long this fatwa was a much more direct attack against the USA and its allies, proclaiming the killing of both civilians and military personnel from these countries an "individual duty incumbent on every Muslim in all countries".¹²⁷

With the two fatwas the change in enemy hierarchy of al-Qaida and a few other individuals was cemented. At the time, al-Qaida was numerically extremely small, lacked funding and found itself as a guest in an Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban. In this context it was particularly surprising that bin Laden actually succeeded in changing the discourse around what constituted legitimate Jihad in the face of staunch opposition from fellow Jihadis. The Taliban was not fond of bin Laden's media offensive during the late 1990s and it unsuccessfully attempted to govern and limit his activities. But the group was not the only ones disagreeing with al-Qaida's new strategic outlook. The opposition to the shift in political preferences and more specifically to 9/11 can be divided into three groups, depending on the main source of opposition: on strategic grounds, on theological grounds or as a matter of authority. Within al-Qaida were examples of the first two types of opposition, while objections based on authority came mainly from external sources. By the early 2000s, several years after bin Laden started to focus on the global enemy, he had won over only a fraction of the Jihadists to his cause; the majority still favoured local Jihad.¹²⁸ This was even the case within al-Qaida: the decision to strike the USA was one that divided al-Qaida's leadership, as vividly demonstrated by the 9/11 attack. Those in favour of the attack included bin Laden, al-Zawahiri and the youth affiliated with the group, while the remaining part of the senior leadership to a great extent opposed it. It is well known that Saif al-Adl, Abu Hafs al-Mauritani and Abu al-Yazid all disagreed with the attack,¹²⁹ but in his 2012 interview with Al Jazeera, al-Mauritani also claimed that Mohammed Atef, al-Qaida's military chief, similarly opposed it even though he had duly

125 Mark Fineman and Steven Braun, "Life inside Al Qaeda: A Destructive Devotion," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 September 2001, <http://articles.latimes.com/2001/sep/24/news/mn-49201>.

126 Steven Brooke, "Jihadist Strategic Debates before 9/11," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 3 (2008): 214.

127 1998 fatwa entitled "World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders," 1998, English translation can be accessed here: [https://www.911memorial.org/sites/default/files/Osama bin Laden%27s 1998 Fatwa declaring war against the West and Israel.pdf](https://www.911memorial.org/sites/default/files/Osama%20bin%20Laden%27s%201998%20Fatwa%20declaring%20war%20against%20the%20West%20and%20Israel.pdf).

128 Tawil, 170–71.

129 Project, "Cracks in the Foundation: Leadership Schisms in Al-Qaida from 1989–2006" West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 18; "The 9/11 Commission Report," 2004, 250–52, <https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>; Hamid and Farrall, 281.

supported bin Laden in the preparations for the operation. The case of Saif al-Adl is particularly interesting as he served as a high-ranking member of al-Qaida and at the time of the attack was in charge of the group's training operations and from November 2001 also headed its military committee. While there is no doubt that al-Adl opposed the 9/11 attack,¹³⁰ there are even indications that he did not favour foreign attacks against the West at all. In a letter to Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, he pleads with him to stop all foreign activities, as they harm the Jihadi project since people lose faith in al-Qaida. He does this by referring to the difficult conditions al-Qaida is operating in after the 9/11 attacks and states that he did criticise the attack even before it took place but that this critique was not widely seen.¹³¹ Despite his opposition, however, he publicly supported al-Qaida and 'the blessed attacks'.¹³² For al-Adl, the main objection was not on ideological grounds, but rather strategic. He rightly feared a strong US response that would decimate the Jihadists' position in Afghanistan. A similar line of argument was adopted by Abu Musab al-Suri.

Abu Hafs al-Mauritani, head of al-Qaida's Shari'ah Committee, also opposed the attack but this time on theological grounds.¹³³ In a 2012 interview, he explains how he was the strongest opposition to the 9/11 attack as he found the attack religiously illegitimate.¹³⁴ His objection allegedly took the form of a letter to bin Laden prior to the attacks in which he discouraged it. His arguments were that Jihad was not about pointless killing, that the attack would involve things prohibited by Islamic law (civilians would be killed and transgression of the 'treaty of protection' in Islam) and that al-Qaida was a guest of the Taliban who opposed the attack. Al-Mauritani says that, as a result of the attacks going ahead, he decided to resign from all his positions in al-Qaida.

Opposition to the shift in enemy hierarchy was not only an internal challenge for al-Qaida. In 2000, a meeting was held in Kandahar in Afghanistan where representatives from different Jihadi organisations discussed al-Qaida's new strategic outlook. The LIFG heavily disagreed with al-Qaida and even urged the group to pledge not to attack the USA.¹³⁵ Unsurprisingly, the imprisoned leadership of JI in Egypt disagreed with the global focus.¹³⁶ But the group that would suffer most from al-Qaida's strategy of attacking the West was the Taliban and its Afghan emirate. The Taliban was not necessarily against attacks outside Afghanistan, but to launch an attack that would risk a forceful retaliation from the USA was not favoured by the group. Time and again al-Qaida overstepped this boundary, first through bin Laden's statements and then with the attacks against Western targets in East Africa, Yemen and finally on the US homeland. Individuals like Mustafa Hamid and Abu Musab al-Suri similarly had

130 Ari Weisfuse, "Negotiating Oblivion. Sayf al-Adl: Al Qaeda's Top Operative" (2014), 59, <http://bir.brandeis.edu/handle/10192/27590>; "The 9/11 Commission Report," 251.

131 See Saif al-Adl letter which can be retrieved here: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-adl-letter-english-translation-2>.

132 For example, see "Message to our people in Iraq and the Gulf specifically, and to our Islamic ummah in general", which can be accessed here: <https://intelcenter.com/Qaeda-Guerrilla-Iraq-v1-0.pdf>.

133 In November 2010 Sulayman Abu Graith, the former spokesperson of al-Qaida, published a 121-page-long book entitled "20 commandments on the path of Jihad" with a foreword by Abu Hafs al-Mauritani. The book, which was written while Abu Graith was still under house arrest in Iran, was intended to educate Muslims generally and Jihadists specifically in order to correct mistakes that had been made. As such, the book should be viewed as a critique of bin Laden's re-focusing of the West through terrorist attacks.

134 See first part of the Al Jazeera 'Special Encounters' interview here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPXsiu96QqI> and second part here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbFH92LT2ow> [Accessed 15/02/2017]. A transcript of part of the interview concerning the 9/11 events can be found here: http://www.biyokulule.com/view_content.php?articleid=5302.

135 Project, "Cracks in the Foundation: Leadership Schisms in Al-Qaida from 1989–2006", West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 18.

136 Diaa Rashwan, "Struggle within the Ranks," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, November 1998, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/1998/402/op5.htm>.

objections that were based on al-Qaida overstepping the authority of its host and the repercussions an attack would prompt. By way of example of how controversial the attack actually was, Hegghammer explains how even clerics around Yusuf al-Uyairi, the first leader of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula,¹³⁷ doubted the legitimacy of the attack.¹³⁸ In contrast, more hard-core Jihad-Salafi ideologues, such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi,¹³⁹ Abu Qatada al-Filastini, and the Shuaybi school led by the Saudi Hamoud al-Uqla al-Shuaybi and his prominent students Ali bin Khudair al-Khudair, Sulayman al-Ulwan, and Nasr al-Fahd were supportive of the attack.¹⁴⁰

Despite the opposition, al-Qaida went through with several attacks against Western targets in the period between 1998 and 2001 and, perhaps surprisingly, the effects were arguably positive for the group. First, the attacks, especially 9/11, had the effect of uniting Jihadi groups in Afghanistan that had until then been fragmented and, from time to time, competed and fought each other. Second, the attacks and the post-9/11 Jihadi environment finally established al-Qaida as the dominant Jihadi organisation. While the primary objective was the symbolic attack on the USA, important side effects were to satisfy the Jihadi youth and unify the Jihadi movement in support of al-Qaida's war on the West.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ R. Meijer, "Yusuf Al-Uyairi and the Making of a Revolutionary Salafi Praxis," *Die Welt Des Islams* 47, no. 3–4 (2007): 422–59, <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/brill/dwi/2007/00000047/F0020003/art00008>.

¹³⁸ Hegghammer, 148.

¹³⁹ Joas Wagemakers, "Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi," *CTC Sentinel* 1, no. 6 (2008).

¹⁴⁰ Hegghammer, 148.

¹⁴¹ Hamid and Farrall, 286.

The Schism Between al-Zarqawi, al-Maqdisi and al-Qaida

The debate on the correct strategy to pursue would continue inside al-Qaida, mainly between its AfPak-based leadership and its Iraqi affiliate led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a leading Jordanian Jihadi ideologue and a mentor of al-Zarqawi, weighed in as well on the side of al-Qaida, criticising his former student. Al-Zarqawi's personal experience with al-Qaida began in late 1999. Having spent five years in a Jordanian prison he was released in early 1999 and quickly emigrated to Afghanistan for the second time with his two deputies Abu al-Qassam and Abdul Hadi Daghlis.¹⁴² Within al-Qaida, it was mainly Saif al-Adl who saw an opportunity, if not even a shining light, in al-Zarqawi. According to its founding ideals, al-Qaida was interested in supporting other Jihadis and al-Zarqawi was no exception. If the collaboration might curb the ambitions of bin Laden's rival Abu Musab al-Suri by supporting another Jihadi leader with a Levantine support base, that made it only more attractive from an al-Qaida perspective.¹⁴³

Much of what we know about the early cooperation is from al-Adl's 2005 testimony.¹⁴⁴ At first, al-Qaida did not demand allegiance from al-Zarqawi in the form of a *bay'ah* (legally binding pledge), but simply 'coordination and cooperation', which materialised in al-Qaida supporting al-Zarqawi to establish a base in Herat. Not only was this in the organisational spirit of al-Qaida at the time (it had not embarked on its expansion-through-affiliates) but it also provided the group with a 'trial' period for al-Zarqawi. Already at this time, al-Qaida as an organisation involved actors with quite diverse religious and political outlooks. This was also the case with al-Zarqawi and it apparently worried bin Laden. From al-Adl we know that initially the most critical issue between al-Qaida and al-Zarqawi was that the latter insisted on pronouncing takfir on the Saudi regime, an issue where the influence of al-Maqdisi was evident. A few observations from al-Adl about al-Zarqawi's character and al-Qaida's attitude to the collaboration are interesting. About al-Zarqawi, he notes that the Jordanian was "uncompromising" and intractable in his beliefs. Al-Adl and his superiors were aware of the doctrinal and ideological differences between al-Zarqawi and al-Qaida's senior leaders even at this early stage,¹⁴⁵ but as al-Adl recounts, "we listened to him, but we did not argue since we wanted to win him over to our side in the first place". He elaborated, saying, "The reason was the diverse understanding of some aspects of the faith that pertain to

¹⁴² Al-Zarqawi's first experience in Afghanistan was from 1989 to 1993 where he also met Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi for the first time.

¹⁴³ Fishman, "Revising the History of Al-Qa'ida's Original Meeting with Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi."

¹⁴⁴ In 2005 Saif al-Adl published a history of al-Qaida's encounter with al-Zarqawi; although it was later rejected as a fake by bin Laden in a letter to Attiyah and al-Rahman dated 26 October 2010, bin Laden's argument was rather unconvincing and it appears likely that al-Adl did indeed write it while under house arrest in Iran.

¹⁴⁵ See also Fu'ad Husayn, "Al-Zarqawi: The Second Generation of Al-Qa'ida," June 2006, <http://atc2005.blogspot.com/2006/06/al-zarqawi-second-generation-of-al.html> on the initial disagreement between al-Zarqawi and bin Laden.

the al wala and the al bara and the subsequent issues of takfir".¹⁴⁶ Even during his time in Herat, al-Zarqawi's character and vision evolved. Al-Adl reports how the Jordanian became more assertive as a leader and clearly had higher ambitions than managing a camp in western Afghanistan. These ambitions would later make it difficult for al-Zarqawi to accept the lavish criticism from al-Qaida leaders of his project in Iraq.

It was during his experiences in Afghanistan that al-Zarqawi was influenced by the Jalalabad school. It is likely that during his first visit between 1989 and 1993 he was in contact with some of the youth that opposed the established Jihadi leadership at the time and wanted to fight on the battlefield. But it was during his second visit that he really familiarised himself with the more radical ideas present in the Jihadi community and propagated among others by Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir, a radical Egyptian ideologue who authored several influential works legitimising takfir and suicide bombings.¹⁴⁷ Already at this point, al-Zarqawi distinguished his group from most others. He did not send fighters to the Taliban front lines while in Afghanistan, as most other groups operating in the country did.¹⁴⁸ In fact he even considered Taliban and other Jihadi fronts misguided.¹⁴⁹ The US response to 9/11 made it untenable for al-Zarqawi to remain in Afghanistan and forced him to relocate through Iran to Iraqi Kurdistan. It was in Iraq that al-Zarqawi's vision and strategy would really reveal itself. On several occasions he displayed his vivid anti-Shia attitude¹⁵⁰ and willingness to escalate the barbarity of the conflict with the Shi'ites, government and coalition forces. The 29 August 2003 bombing of the Imam Ali shrine in Najaf killing prominent Shia cleric Mohammad Baqir al-Hakim and the 7 May 2004 decapitation of Nick Berg are clear testimonies to that.

Al-Zarqawi did not try to hide his differences with al-Qaida. As part of the negotiating process to become an al-Qaida affiliate, he authored a letter in February 2004 to bin Laden and al-Zawahiri. The letter, which was basically al-Zarqawi's roadmap, had two purposes; to cement his view of Jihad in Iraq, including his prioritisation of enemies, and to provide an update to the al-Qaida leadership as a first step towards assessing the possibility of a future closer cooperation in the form of a bayah.¹⁵¹ On the Shia, al-Zarqawi claims that they are the most important enemy and that his aim is to drag them into a sectarian war to rouse the Sunni masses. Hence, there could be no doubt within al-Qaida leadership circles regarding al-Zarqawi's priorities when, later that year, they finally made it official that al-Zarqawi's group had become al-Qaida's affiliate in Iraq. Al-Zarqawi finishes his letter, "If you agree with us on it, if you adopt it as a program and road, and if you are convinced of the idea of fighting the sects of apostasy, we will be your readied soldiers, working under your banner, complying with your orders, and indeed swearing fealty to you publicly ... If things appear otherwise to you, we are brothers, and the disagreement will not spoil our friendship."

146 Saif Al-Adl, "Jihadist Biography of the Slaughtering Leader Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi," *Global Islamic Media Front*, 2005, 3.

147 Hamming, "The Hardline Stream of Global Jihad: Revisiting the Ideological Origin of the Islamic State."

148 Anne Stenersen, *Al-Qaida in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 124.

149 See document titled AFGP-2002-601693 which can be retrieved here: <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/status-of-jihad-original-language-2/>.

150 At this early point, Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi, a senior al-Qaida member now held at Guantanamo, was informed through Hassan Ghul about al-Zarqawi's desire to attack Shiites in Iraq. Opposed to such a sectarian focus, al-Hadi allegedly advised al-Zarqawi against this type of operation.

151 Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, "Letter from Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi to Sheikh Usama Bin Laden" [Risala Min Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi Ila Al-Sheikh Usama Bin Laden], 15 February 2004.

Arguably, the al-Qaida leadership should have been able to predict that affiliation with the Jordanian would entail trouble. Al-Qaida has always played down doctrinal differences and been more interested in collaboration with a broad range of people and this probably encouraged the leadership to strengthen the relationship by incorporating the Iraqi group as an official affiliate with a legally binding bayah. Initially, the alliance did make sense for both parties. For al-Zarqawi, official affiliation with al-Qaida provided him with funding and legitimacy vital for his efforts to establish a Jihadi base in Iraq and dominate the country's competitive insurgency environment. Being bin Laden's man on paper would thus support his ambition of becoming the dominant rebel group and make it attractive for other mujahideen to join him. For al-Qaida, there were several arguments to accept al-Zarqawi's pledge. With circumstances difficult in Afghanistan, Iraq was seen as the most important Jihadi arena at the time.¹⁵² Al-Zarqawi's group would help al-Qaida to remain relevant, to extend and expand its Jihadi project and ensure that it had a successful Jihadi entrepreneur in a Jihadi hotspot. The two groups were bound together by roughly similar ideologies, but differences existed in terms of strategy and Islamic jurisprudence. Focusing on the potential benefits of the alliance, it was al-Qaida's hope that al-Zarqawi's action and rhetoric could be curbed through internal consultation.

On 17 October 2004 al-Zarqawi's organisation *Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad* (the Group of God's oneness and Jihad) officially became al-Qaida's Iraqi affiliate. The statement was first published by al-Zarqawi's group and immediately reprinted by al-Qaida in its online magazine *Mu'askar al-Battar*. One comment, in particular, from the pledge of allegiance is noteworthy to understand the process leading up to the announcement and the relationship between the two groups:

*"Numerous messages were passed between 'Abu Musab' (God protect him) and the al-Qaeda brotherhood over the past eight months, establishing a dialogue between them. No sooner had the calls been cut off than God chose to restore them, and our most generous brothers in al-Qaeda came to understand the strategy of the Tawhid wal-Jihad organization in Iraq, the land of the two rivers and of the Caliphs, and their hearts warmed to its methods and overall mission."*¹⁵³

Al-Zarqawi was on paper al-Qaida's representative in Iraq, but the al-Qaida leaders were in no position to tell him how to behave, not to say correct him or advise him. The Jordanian was now finally an official part of al-Qaida, but the initial doubts al-Qaida had about him quickly became a reality. Saif al-Adl was the one who first believed in al-Zarqawi and who was in charge of the liaison between the Jordanian and al-Qaida and thus it was only appropriate that al-Adl also provided the first guidelines to al-Zarqawi. In the final three pages of his biography of al-Zarqawi, he offers four specific pieces of advice to al-Zarqawi. Al-Adl, in captivity in Iran, has not been in contact with al-Zarqawi for years, but he has heard about his ventures in Iraq and finds it necessary to guide his ally to avoid exacerbating the situation

¹⁵² Hegghammer, "Global Jihadism after the Iraq War."

¹⁵³ Jeffrey Pool, "Zarqawi's Pledge of Allegiance to Al-Qaeda: From Mu'askar Al-Battar, Issue 21," *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor* 2, no. 24 (16 December 2004), <https://jamestown.org/program/zarqawis-pledge-of-allegiance-to-al-qaeda-from-muasker-al-battar-issue-21-2/>.

in Iraq. Al-Adl advises that 1. every action should have a clear goal; 2. there should be a clear banner in the form of leadership; 3. there should be a plan guiding actions from the very beginning; and 4. one should take advantage of the available opportunities.¹⁵⁴

By emphasising these four points, it is clear that al-Adl is not satisfied with how al-Zarqawi is managing his Iraq project. However, this point had already been raised the previous year by al-Zarqawi's former mentor Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and would be explicated through numerous letters from high-ranking al-Qaida leaders in the following years.

Al-Maqdisi was an intellectual mentor to al-Zarqawi during their time in Jordan although how special the bond between the two in fact was would be questioned by al-Zarqawi himself. Nonetheless, it came as a blow when al-Maqdisi targeted his criticism against his former student. Probably because of the sensitive nature of the criticism, it came in a letter titled 'Al-Zarqawi: Advice and Support' (*Al-Zarqawi: munaseha wa munasara*).¹⁵⁵ In the letter, al-Maqdisi points out several major errors that he believes al-Zarqawi committed due to his inexperience and immaturity and especially mentions the mistake of leaving for Afghanistan in 1999, the mistake of proclaiming takfir on the Shia as a group and the strategic failure of attacks carried out by al-Zarqawi's group after relocating to Iraq.¹⁵⁶ The last point was caused by al-Zarqawi's careless disregard for protecting Muslim blood and avoiding civilian casualties. Al-Zarqawi, in the eyes of al-Maqdisi, was not just incapable of instilling a correct ethical attitude in his followers but more importantly lacked a viable vision and programme necessary for a successful Jihad. Although al-Maqdisi probably had personal reasons for his verbal attack, such as reclaiming intellectual leadership, the points he made turned out to be valid in the following years.¹⁵⁷

Approximately a year later al-Maqdisi turns up again, this time not only with criticism and but also with praise for al-Zarqawi. In a taped Al Jazeera interview, al-Maqdisi repeats some of his criticism from the year before. On the same day, however, al-Maqdisi published a short message to calm down the disagreement. Commenting on two articles about him published in Arab newspapers, he claims that they are either made up or omit important details in order to sow conflict between the mujahideen. Although al-Maqdisi stands by his previous critique of al-Qaida in Iraq, he feels the need "to close the door on any fitna". Referring to al-Zarqawi as "our beloved brother the hero of the mujahideen", he claims that despite their disagreements they share the Jihadi struggle.¹⁵⁸ At this point, al-Maqdisi would have no interest in escalating the conflict more than necessary, partly because al-Zarqawi was enjoying success but also because he finds such conflict illegitimate.

154 Al-Adl, "Jihadist Biography of the Slaughtering Leader Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi."

155 Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi, "Al-Zarqawi: Munasaha Wa Munasara (Al-Zarqawi: Advice and Support)," July 2004. The text can be accessed here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20130209070528/http://www.tawhed.ws/r/?i=dtwiam56>.

156 In 1998, al-Maqdisi wrote Al-Risala al-Thalathiniyya fi'l-Tahdhir min al-Ghulu fi'l-Takfir, which deals with 33 separate issues in the proclamation of takfir and shows that he already at this point saw a tendency of too loosely applying the concept.

157 For a thorough examination of the feud between al-Maqdisi and al-Zarqawi, especially in the context of Jordan, see Hassan Abu Hanieh and Mohammad Abu Rumman, *The Jihadi Salafist Movement in Jordan after Zarqawi: Identity, Leadership Crisis and Obscured Vision* (Amman: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2009); Nibras Kazimi, "A Virulent Ideology in Mutation: Zarqawi Upstages Maqdisi," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 2 (2005): 59–73; Joas Wagemakers, "Reclaiming Scholarly Authority: Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi's Critique of Jihadi Practices," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, no. 7 (2011): 523–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2011.578549>; Eli Alshech, "The Doctrinal Crisis within the Salafi-Jihadi Ranks and the Emergence of Neo-Takfirism," *Islamic Law and Society* 21 (2014): 419–52.

158 Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi, "No Title," 5 July 2005. The author has the statement by al-Maqdisi.

As if the criticism from his former mentor was not enough, the al-Qaida leadership started to reprimand al-Zarqawi. The critique, which took the form of personal letters, first came from Ayman al-Zawahiri and should be seen in the context of the mounting dissatisfaction felt by other Iraqi insurgency groups with al-Zarqawi's group and the increasingly brutal sectarian killings. In a letter dated 9 July 2005 and written in a friendly tone, al-Zawahiri explains that al-Zarqawi needs to focus more on winning the support of the Muslim public if Jihad in Iraq is to be successful. In the words of al-Zawahiri the "mujahed movement must avoid any action that the masses do not understand or approve."¹⁵⁹ At this point, he is not driven by an ambition to re-balance the authority between the two movements but to correct what he considers a problematic strategy that is doomed to fail. Al-Zawahiri's main point is that al-Qaida in Iraq needs to think more strategically about its military engagement and become more politically conscious. To al-Zawahiri this implies strengthening the bonds of alliance and cooperation throughout the Iraqi Sunni landscape, uniting the mujahideen, gaining the support of the ulema and, arguably most importantly, halting the indiscriminate attacks on the Shia. Although just one of several points raised by al-Zawahiri, al-Qaida's rebuke of al-Zarqawi's sectarian approach has undoubtedly been the most extensively discussed.¹⁶⁰ Al-Zawahiri's argument is not that the Shia are not a legitimate target and should not be considered an enemy but, reiterating his earlier argument, that the Muslim masses do not necessarily understand this and thus indiscriminate attacks on the Shia and their holy places risks decreasing support for the Jihadists.

Al-Zawahiri was clearly aware of the sensitivity of raising these issues, especially being far away from Iraq, but as he acknowledges this he also remarked that "monitoring from afar has the advantage of providing the total picture and observing the general line without getting submerged in the details, which might draw attention away from the direction of the target. As the English proverb says, the person who is standing among the leaves of the tree might not see the tree."¹⁶¹ At the end of the letter, al-Zawahiri, along the lines of al-Maqdisi, implicitly calls for mature and responsible leadership from al-Zarqawi to manage the enthusiasm of his supporters, especially the youth. From the perspective of al-Zawahiri and the al-Qaida leadership, the following years would only prove that al-Zarqawi and his successors had not been up to the task. As history showed, Al-Zarqawi and his group did not follow al-Zawahiri's advice to change their attitude towards the Shi'ite population,¹⁶² which not only outlines important differences in their view of reality (*waqi'*) but also shows a pragmatism on the side of al-Qaida that proved to be characteristic during the further schisms between the two groups in the years to come.

¹⁵⁹ See al-Zawahiri's letter to al-Zarqawi, which was made public in October 2005 by US authorities. The letter can be found here: <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-original-language-2/>.

¹⁶⁰ See, for example, Moghadam and Fishman, *Self Inflicted Wounds: Debates and Divisions within Al Qa'ida and Its Periphery*.

¹⁶¹ See Al-Zawahiri's letter to Zarqawi, 9.

¹⁶² Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, al-Zarqawi's successor as AQI leader who had close bonds to the AQ leadership, said in his first speech as new leader in reference to Iraq's Shia: "You who partnered with the Lord of the two worlds, attacked the honour of the best of messengers, and insulted the honorable companions. You spent your efforts serving the Crusaders ... We will apply the same rules of Abu Bakr al-Sadiq with you when he fought the converters. We will continue what Sheikh Abu Musab – may Allah forgive him – started with you. We will fight you so that the Tawhid word will prevail and your devil's word will descend."

It was an entire year before al-Zarqawi responded to the criticism from al-Maqdisi, but in a letter dated 12 July 2005 he makes no remarks about the criticism he had just received from al-Zawahiri.¹⁶³ Clearly provoked by al-Maqdisi's continued reproach, he felt obliged to respond. Al-Zarqawi does not hide that al-Maqdisi's attack came as a surprise because it came from a person he used to hold dear and with whom he shares a common creed. He begins the letter explaining how al-Maqdisi's criticism, hidden as advice, is helping the enemies of Jihad – a similar argument is made years later by al-Qaida in the context of the Islamic State's aggression towards it. Al-Zarqawi does acknowledge, however, that al-Maqdisi was a teacher of his, saying that he "is indeed indebted to Sheikh Abu Muhammad, may Allah preserve him, he was one of those whom I learned details of *Tawhid* [unity of Allah] from, and my position with respect to many issues was similar to his". But in an attempt to delegitimise his mentor, al-Zarqawi claims that their relationship was not a matter of *taqlid* (blind following) but that he believed al-Maqdisi was preaching the correct creed and methodology. Al-Zarqawi continues, "This does not mean that I have to implement everything Maqdisi says, besides, he does not and should not have a monopoly on knowledge, and not everything he says is correct, especially when it comes to jihad and the current state of affairs of the Ummah in view of the crusader's campaign against Islam". Al-Zarqawi's argument illustrates how he took al-Maqdisi's accusations personally, which prompts him to undermine his former teacher by claiming that he has little knowledge of practical affairs, which is valued higher by al-Zarqawi and his followers than scholarly knowledge. This point is underlined when al-Zarqawi scolds al-Maqdisi, saying, "Allah knows that I keep constant communication with some righteous scholars who are far more knowledgeable than Maqdisi to get their opinion on most of what I am faced with on daily bases".¹⁶⁴ Provoking al-Maqdisi, al-Zarqawi is almost suggesting that his senior cares more about his own standing than committing to tawhid when al-Maqdisi in his letter speaks of his own sheikhdom and the Manhaj of Abu Muhammad. On the matter of al-Maqdisi's criticism of attacks on the Shia, al-Zarqawi blasts him for comparing the ordinary Sunni to the ordinary Shi'ite. In a bold move, he continues his attempt to tarnish al-Maqdisi's standing within the Jihadi movement, arguing that he is disagreeing with the al-Qaida leaders and the aforementioned Jihadi scholars regarding the importance of the Iraqi Jihad. In this way, al-Zarqawi implicitly raises the question of how al-Maqdisi can be correct if all other respected Jihadi leaders and scholars are of another opinion.

In the meantime, the al-Qaida leadership grew increasingly annoyed with the lack of response from al-Zarqawi and the lack of signs of moderation (the November 2005 Amman hotel bombings are one example). In reaction, two senior al-Qaida lieutenants, Abu Yahya al-Libi and Atiyyah Abd al-Rahman, both addressed al-Zarqawi in late 2005. Abu Yahya's 20-page-long letter is the more subtle of the two.¹⁶⁵ He emphasises that now that Iraq has overtaken Afghanistan as the most important Jihadi arena sound behaviour is essential. The letter is structured as five points but framed in a way that makes it difficult to perceive it as a direct critique unless already aware of

¹⁶³ It is likely that al-Zarqawi simply had not received al-Zawahiri's letter yet as communication between the AfPak region and Iraq was complicated at times.

¹⁶⁴ Al-Zarqawi says that these scholars are currently imprisoned and therefore he cannot disclose their names.

¹⁶⁵ The author has not been able to find a full version of Abu Yahya's letter to al-Zarqawi but has obtained a summary of the letter.

the context. The first point Abu Yahya raises is that the enemies of Islam are seeking to instigate fragmentation between groups from within and that it is the leader's responsibility to keep together his group and be open to pragmatic solutions. He then notes the importance of consulting other groups and individuals. The third point was already raised by al-Zawahiri, but Abu Yahya reiterates it in much more subtle language: Jihadi groups need to act and communicate in a manner that people understand, even though it means abstaining from actions that are correct according to religion. He urges al-Zarqawi to remain focused on the important targets and not to expand the struggle to include too many enemies, as it risks overstretching the mujahideen. In his last point, Abu Yahya opens a door for al-Zarqawi, pointing out that the mujahideen must have the courage and the determination to recover from a mistake. Considering the personality of al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian most likely took this as provocation.

But less than a month later, al-Zarqawi received another letter, this time authored by Atiyyah, who was already an important liaison between the leadership and other groups.¹⁶⁶ Atiyyah's letter stands in stark contrast to Abu Yahya's, as it is far more explicit in its criticism and in the orders, still hidden as "advice and instruction", Atiyyah has for al-Zarqawi. Congratulating al-Qaida in Iraq with posing the greatest threat to the enemy, he explains that such success is followed by scrutiny and necessitates mature leadership. In such a context, seeking support and advice from the overall leadership is imperative and very straightforward: he tells al-Zarqawi that "you need to keep in mind that you are leader in the field that is under a greater leadership that is more potent and more able to lead the Muslim nation". Echoing Abu Yahya and al-Zawahiri,¹⁶⁷ he continues, "Policy must be dominant over militarism". This comes in reference to the experience in Algeria in the 1990s and Atiyyah is beginning to see similar excesses in Iraq. In Algeria, he writes, "their enemy did not defeat them, but rather they defeated themselves". To prevent this, al-Zarqawi needs to change or even reform his group and to exercise leadership. Clearly annoyed that al-Zarqawi has not yet responded to the al-Qaida leadership or changed his approach, Atiyyah toughens up the rhetoric and lists orders for al-Zarqawi":

- Do not stop your Jihad, but correct your mistakes [he even keeps the door open for the possibility that someone else should take over the leadership of al-Qaida in Iraq]¹⁶⁸
- Abstain from making any decision on bigger issues before you have consulted with the al-Qaida leadership
- Begin consulting with other Jihadi groups in Iraq
- Begin consulting with non-Jihadi Sunnis in Iraq such as tribes and religious scholars [a reiteration of al-Zawahiri]
- Establish a stronger connection between al-Qaida in Iraq and al-Qaida central leadership
- Seek to win the sympathy of the people through behaviour that the general Sunni masses understand

¹⁶⁶ See Atiyyatullah al-Libi's letter to Zarqawi published by US authorities in 2006. The letter can be accessed here: <https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/atiyahs-letter-to-zarqawi-original-language-2/>.

¹⁶⁷ Atiyyah also confirms that al-Zawahiri's letter, which was published by the USA, is authentic and that it represents the feeling of the al-Qaida commanders.

¹⁶⁸ Deploying Abd al-Hadi al-Iraqi to Iraq was a way for bin Laden to counter al-Zarqawi.

- Start paying attention to the religious scholars of Iraq
[he emphasises that one of al-Zarqawi's most important jobs is to bring closer together the people of scholarship and the people of Jihad]
- Educate the people in the organisation "in good conduct, by providing them with a good model in manners, respect, modesty, the giving of advice, accepting advice, admitting mistakes, respecting others, proficiency in dialogue, politeness with those who disagree, mercy, justice, kindness"
- Abstain from foreign attacks until you have coordinated with al-Qaida's leadership

Atiyyah's 'advice' is an important illustration of the differences in thinking between al-Qaida's central leadership and al-Qaida in Iraq at the time, the former following a much more nuanced political approach in contrast to al-Zarqawi's focus on military success and rigidity in creed. This is captured in Atiyyah's recommendation "do not act alone and do not be overzealous". The al-Qaida leaders were asking al-Zarqawi for quick communication, even instructing him in how to contact them through internet fora. Al-Zarqawi's answer would come shortly afterwards, not in the form of words, but in action. In early 2006, before al-Zarqawi's death in June that year, al-Qaida in Iraq merged with several other Jihadi groups in Iraq to establish the Mujahideen Shura Council; in October the same year, it finally announced the formation of the Islamic State of Iraq. Rather than heeding the advice of al-Qaida leaders, these steps were the first in a process of leaving al-Qaida.

Sayyid Imam's Revisionism and Attack on al-Qaida

In the mid 2000s, al-Qaida had established itself at the top of the Sunni Jihadi movement, but it was about to experience another attack from within. JI was the first group to embark on a revisionist project to delegitimise violence, but for al-Qaida the arguably more threatening efforts came in 2007 from Imam 'Abd al-Aziz al-Sharif, also known as Sayyid Imam or, more famously, Dr. Fadl. It came as a shock when the former Al Jihad leader, close friend of al-Zawahiri and author of one of the most influential Jihadi tracts issued a condemnation of al-Qaida and its violence. Although many dismissed Sayyid Imam's prison writings as the work of Egyptian intelligence, it nonetheless represents another important example of Jihadi revisionism and of discursive contestation between two of Sunni Jihadism's most senior ideologues; namely Sayyid Imam and al-Zawahiri.

In order to understand the importance of Sayyid Imam's revisionism it is necessary to know a little of his history. Alongside al-Zawahiri, in the late 1960s Sayyid Imam established¹⁶⁹ a group that would later become Al Jihad, which he led for a period, serving as its emir until he resigned in 1993¹⁷⁰ due to disagreement regarding the editing of one of his books and his unwillingness to leave Peshawar for Sudan to settle internal tensions within his group.¹⁷¹ Despite his resignation he still commanded much respect in Egyptian militant circles and as a result was invited to join his countrymen in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s. He rejected the invitation and instead left for Yemen. Due to an Egyptian arrest order issued in 1999, however, he was finally brought into custody in Yemen in 2001 and extradited to Egypt in 2004.¹⁷² The critique from Sayyid Imam is important and interesting because of his theological credentials within militant circles and his previously very close relationship to al-Zawahiri, to whom he initially served as a mentor. In his prime, he was considered one of the most important theoreticians of Jihad and argued meticulously in favour of proper financial and military preparation for Jihad,¹⁷³ an argument he explained in his strategic work 'Manual for Planning the Necessary Provisions to Mount Jihad in the Cause of God' (*al-'Umda fi-l'dad al-Udda li-al-Jihad fi Sabil Allah*), published in either 1987 or 1988, which was used by many as a textbook on the laws of Jihad.¹⁷⁴ Together with Faraj, he was the main ideological and strategic mastermind of Al Jihad and, in a similar fashion to his fellow ideologue, he elevated Jihad from a matter of fiqh to a matter of doctrine.

¹⁶⁹ Lahoud, 132.

¹⁷⁰ When Sayyid Imam resigned, Ayman al-Zawahiri took over the leadership of Al Jihad.

¹⁷¹ Not only did al-Zawahiri remove portions critical of Al Jihad and al-Jama'at al-Islamiyya, but he even changed the title of the book.

¹⁷² Lahoud, 131–7.

¹⁷³ This is a main point dividing Sayyid Imam and Faraj, the latter not believing preparation was necessary.

¹⁷⁴ For more on al-'Umda, see Lahoud, 132–7.

The debate between Sayyid Imam and al-Qaida played out mainly in 2007 and 2008 and took the form of three books: Sayyid Imam's 'Advice Regarding the Conduct of Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World' (*tarshid al-'amal al-jihadi fi misr wa al-'alam*, known as the 'Advice' or the 'rationalisation document') from November 2007, al-Zawahiri's response 'The Exoneration: A Letter Exonerating the Ummah of the Pen and Sword from the Unjust Allegation of Feebleness and Weakness' (*tabri'at 'a'imat al-qalam wa al-sayef min manqasat tuhmat al-khawar wa al-da'f*, known as 'Exoneration') from March 2008, and, finally, a direct answer to al-Zawahiri from Sayyid Imam entitled 'Treatise on Exposing the Exoneration' (*Mudhakkirat al-Ta'riya li Kitaab al-Tabri'a*, known as 'Exposure') and published in November 2008, one year after his first book.

The so-called rationalisation document is a thorough critique of al-Qaida's approach to Jihad, its excessive violence and what Sayyid Imam calls the distorted religious interpretations of its two leaders. Interestingly he begins the document by delegitimising himself, declaring that he is not a *mujtahid*, a person qualified to do *ijtihad* (religious interpretation), but simply a person transmitting knowledge. Nonetheless, he does not hold back in condemning specific strategies of al-Qaida. The points Sayyid Imam especially focuses on are the decision to strike the far enemy, the practice of using civilians as human shields (*al-tatarrus*), which leads him to a rejection of killing non-combatant civilians in Western countries, and the prohibition of martyrdom operations.¹⁷⁵ Unlike JI, Sayyid Imam does not delegitimise Jihad as such, maintaining it is a holy duty, but he revises the preconditions for Jihad to the extent that it becomes an impossible endeavour. For example, he argues that only Muslims who have been granted permission by their parents and received religious training can perform Jihad and that Jihad cannot be justified based on the nationality of one's opponent. When the harm (*mafsada*) is greater than the common good (*maslaha*), which it is in our era, Sayyid Imam claims, then military Jihad is not legal.¹⁷⁶ Furthermore, he seeks to set limits for when a person can be considered an unbeliever (*kafir*), exploring under what circumstances the proclamation of takfir is legal.¹⁷⁷ It is important to note, however, that the 'Advice' is not a retraction of Sayyid Imam's previous works including *al-'umda* and *al-jami'*, but a distinction between theory and its application in practise. According to Sayyid Imam, the 'Advice' thus simply instructs Jihadists how to behave in the specific context of Egypt at the time of writing.

Al-Zawahiri responded with his 'Exoneration'. He begins the book, which stretches to over 200 pages, claiming it has been is the most difficult thing he has ever written,¹⁷⁸ but that it was necessary to protect the Jihadi creed. He continues by saying the document only serves the interest of the US-Israeli alliance and that it is "an attempt to sedate their mujahidin enemies, make them doubt their methods, and drive them from the battlefield".¹⁷⁹ According to al-Zawahiri the 'Advice' was perhaps authored by Sayyid Imam, but it was orchestrated by US and Egyptian intelligence. He is not

175 Sayyid Imam, "Tarshid Al-'amal Al-Jihadi Fi Misr Wa Al-'ala" [Advice Regarding the Conduct of Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World], November 2007.

176 This last point is similar to the revisionist argument of al-Jama'at al-Islamiyyah.

177 Shehadeh, "Weakening Al-Qaeda: Literature Review Challenges Its Authority," 30–31.

178 Surpassing a previous letter he wrote to Hamas.

179 Ayman Al-Zawahiri, "The Exoneration: A Letter Exonerating the Ummah of the Pen and Sword from the Unjust Allegation of Feebleness and Weakness," *English Translation*, 2008, 1.

surprised by Sayyid Imam's criticism, however. Perhaps influenced by their common history, al-Zawahiri claims the retractions are not new as Sayyid Imam, he says, already withdrew from Jihad in 1994.¹⁸⁰ This assessment clearly stems from the fallout between the two when Sayyid Imam gave up leadership of Al Jihad in 1993 and in the same year directed his anger towards al-Zawahiri, after the latter, without permission, edited Sayyid Imam's encyclopaedia, "The Compendium in Pursuit of Divine Knowledge" (*al-Jami' fi talab al-'ilm al-sharif*).¹⁸¹ Although al-Zawahiri does not consider Sayyid Imam's critical views to be new, he goes on to question the contradictions between arguments in the book and Sayyid Imam's older opinions, among other things whether he still considers supporters of the regime to be unbelievers.¹⁸²

Abu Yahya al-Libi, at the time a senior al-Qaida commander, takes a different approach to al-Zawahiri in his criticism of Sayyid Imam.¹⁸³ On 10 March 2008, but probably produced as early as January the same year, a video statement by al-Libi entitled 'I Am not a Deceiver nor Will I Allow Someone to Deceive Me' was posted to a Jihadi forum. In the statement, he defiantly claims that Sayyid Imam's book has been authored by Egyptian intelligence services, concluding no one should give its content any consideration. He gives three reasons why the intelligence service would create it: 1. to intensify the military battle against the Jihadists; 2. To "flood the battlefields of jihad with deviated fatwas", making it illegitimate to join Jihadi groups; and 3. To soften the view on Jihad and spread doubt among Muslims about its reasons. In December the same year al-Libi expands on his criticism in an 85-page-long book entitled 'Eliminating the Falsehood of the Document of Rationalization, Part One'. He maintains that the document is the work of the intelligence service, but in the book focuses more on the substance of Sayyid Imam's retraction, criticising it for abandoning the Jihadi cause and directly opposing it through a religious language.

The final part of the debate came in the form of the 'Exposure', a second book from Sayyid Imam that, in stark contrast to his first book, developed a substantial criticism of al-Qaida's Jihadi ideology and theology. The 'Exposure' was, more than anything, a scathing personal attack to delegitimise al-Zawahiri and bin Laden. Kamal Habib describes the change from the first to the second book as a move "from the level of ideas to the level of personalities, from the level of sources and derivations of religious law to the level of slander, accusations of treason, lies and deception".¹⁸⁴ This change in tone, Habib argues, influenced its reception and the lack of power it had as a counter-narrative

¹⁸⁰ Lahoud, 236–7.

¹⁸¹ According to Wright, in 1995 al-Zawahiri allegedly travelled to Yemen and appealed to Sayyid Imam for forgiveness, but Sayyid Imam refused to see him, saying, "I do not know anyone in the history of Islam prior to Ayman al-Zawahiri who engaged in such lying, cheating, forgery, and betrayal of trust by transgressing against someone else's book"; see Lawrence Wright, "The Rebellion Within," *The New Yorker*, 23 May 2008.

¹⁸² For elaboration of the debate, see Lahoud, 232–9. In total al-Zawahiri formulates 35 questions to Sayyid Imam for which he wants answers.

¹⁸³ For other reactions to Sayyid Imam's revisions, see Daniel J. Law, "Jihadists and Jurisprudents: The 'Revisions' Literature of Sayyid Imam and Al-Gama'a Al-Islamiyya," in *Political Islam from Muhammad to Ahmadinejad: Defenders, Detractors, and Definitions*, edited by Joseph Morrison Skelly (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2009), 111–12; Abd-al-Hakim Al-Afghani, "Our Honorable Shaykh," *Abbottabad Documents Batch 2*, 12 February 2008.

¹⁸⁴ Kamal Habib, "Another Wave of Jihadist Adjustment: Internal Debates of the Movement," *Arab Insights* 2, no. 6 (2009): 38. That the personal attack on al-Zawahiri is central in the book is evident from the titles of its four chapters: 1. 'Exposing the lies and slanders of Zawahiri,' 2. 'Exposing the errors in religious law made by Zawahiri,' 3. 'Exposing Zawahiri's obfuscation of the issues for the reader,' and 4. 'Exposing Zawahiri as a seeker of fame and stardom.'

to Jihad.¹⁸⁵ Not only is he slandering the personalities of the two al-Qaida leaders by comparing them to the devil, but he also calls al-Qaida's ideology criminal and warns the youth of the temptations of joining.¹⁸⁶

The authenticity of Sayyid Imam's criticism has been doubted and discussed ever since its publication. People differ on whether it is an orchestrated attempt by the Egyptian intelligence service, probably aided by Western actors, to discredit Jihad, or in fact an attempt from Sayyid Imam to launch a new ideological project for Jihad.¹⁸⁷ Hani Siba'i, a former Al Jihad member and close friend of Sayyid Imam, has explained how in mid-2007 he received a phone call from Sayyid Imam's son, Ismail, who had an important message from his father. Ismail warned that Siba'i would soon hear news from Sayyid Imam in the media, but warned him against believing a word of what would be published.¹⁸⁸ Sayyid Imam's criticism never had the intended effect on al-Qaida and the broader Jihadi movement's legitimacy, but it did initially pose a challenge to the authority of al-Qaida's Jihadi discourse. For the al-Qaida leaders the criticism was not simply a matter of *ikhtilaf* (differences of opinion on religious matters) but an attack against a fundamental part of Islam and therefore the leaders were forced to react. To this day, Sayyid Imam's publications stand out as one of the foremost example of Jihadi revisionism.¹⁸⁹

185 Kamal Habib explains the change in tone from a psychological point of view saying it is "a response to the psychological wound inflicted on him by Zawahiri's 'Exoneration'." Habib, 43.

186 *ibid.*, 42–3.

187 Marwan Shehadea is an example of the latter; see Shehadea, "Weakening Al-Qaeda: Literature Review Challenges Its Authority."

188 For more on the legitimacy of Sayyid Imam's words and especially the view of Hani Siba'i, see Lahoud, 232–9.

189 Sayyid Imam was not the only senior Jihadi criticising his former colleagues. Examples include Noman Benotman and Abu Hafs al-Mauritani.

The Purge Within al-Shabaab

In Somali talking was not enough: the al-Shabaab group between 2011 and 2013 experienced an internal purge that eventually took on a violent hue. The internal conflict is often portrayed as a purge against foreigners in the ranks of al-Shabaab or as tensions between global-oriented and local-oriented Jihadists,¹⁹⁰ but it is in fact better understood as a power struggle between two wings of the movement, represented by 'Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr' Godane and Mukhtar 'Abu Mansur' Robow respectively, with diverging visions for how Jihad in Somalia should proceed. Tensions go as far back as 2008¹⁹¹ or 2009¹⁹² when Ethiopian troops pulled out of Somalia, but really blossomed in 2010 and turned violent in 2013 when the leadership initiated a campaign to kill senior opposing voices.

The two wings of the group can with some justification be divided into a hardline wing and a more moderate wing. Al-Shabaab emir Godane represented the hardliners and held an uncompromising view of the implementation of Islamic law in the territory controlled by the group. His opponents differed and argued that some Islamic rulings should wait until the population would be ready for them and that suicide bombings in populated areas should be abandoned. The debate resembles to a great extent the disagreement between al-Qaida and its Iraqi affiliate in the mid-2000s and an ongoing internal debate within al-Qaida leadership circles. Prior to his death, bin Laden's main preoccupation was revising his group's strategy to ensure more public support. This is evident from the letter he exchanged with Atiyyatullah al-Libi.¹⁹³ The Pakistani Taliban¹⁹⁴ and the al-Qaida affiliate in North Africa, AQIM,¹⁹⁵ also faced reprimands from the al-Qaida leadership for their hardline and violent practices, which did not fit into bin Laden's new vision for the organisation.

In 2010, Godane's internal popularity further suffered, not least because of an unsuccessful Ramadan offensive in Mogadishu, and the emir began to centralise his power and suppress internal dissent. Reacting to the tensions, an internal council was created to solve differences and in mid-2011 it announced a ruling that largely went against Godane and provided him with six months to leave the post as emir of al-Shabaab. Godane initially showed willingness

190 Bill Roggio, "Omar Hammami's Personal Dispute with Shabaab," *Long War Journal*, 6 January 2013; Jeremy Scahill, "The Purge: How Somalia's Al Shabaab Turned Against Its Own Foreign Fighters," *The Intercept*, 19 May 2015. It has been claimed that foreign fighters in particular were targeted, but most of these were in fact killed in drone strikes, while some argue that information about their location was passed on by rival al-Shabaab members, see Raffaello Pantucci and A. R. Sayyid, "Foreign Fighters in Somalia and Al-Shabaab's Internal Purge," *Terrorism Monitor* 11, no. 22 (2013), <https://jamestown.org/program/foreign-fighters-in-somalia-and-al-shabaabs-internal-purge/>.

191 Christopher Anzalone, "The Life and Death of Al-Shabab Leader Ahmed Godane," *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 9 (2014).
192 Harun Maruf and Dan Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).

193 See, for example, the letter from bin Laden to Atiyyah, dated May 2010, and discovered in the Abbottabad raid (titled SOCOM-2012-0000019). The letter can be retrieved here: <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2013/10/Letter-from-UBL-to-Atiyatullah-Al-Libi-4-Original.pdf>.

194 See the letter from Abu Yahya al-Libi and Atiyyah to TTP leader Hakimullah (titled SOCOM-2012-0000007), dated 3 December 2010, which can be accessed here: <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/352594-socom-2012-0000007-trans.html>.

195 See two letters written by AQAP's emir, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, to AQIM's emir, Abdelmalek Droukdel, advising AQIM to pursue a gradual approach in the implementation of shariah, especially mentioning hudud punishment, in conquered areas as the local population was not ready for such radical changes. The letters can be found as part of the so-called Timbuktu Papers.

to leave the post, but under the radar he worked to cement his internal power base further through firing his two deputies, Robow and Ibrahim al-Afghani, both founding members of al-Shabaab with strong clan-relations. It has been claimed that what essentially held al-Shabaab together at this point was the widespread respect for bin Laden, and al-Qaida more generally, and no wing was willing to jeopardise the evolving relationship with al-Qaida.¹⁹⁶

In March 2013, the debate, so far kept internal, went public when Omar al-Hammami, a senior American foreign fighter in al-Shabaab, issued a video explaining that differences over Islamic law and strategy were prevalent within the group. In a second video, issued in October but likely filmed in March, al-Hammami added that tensions existed between globally and locally oriented Jihadists in al-Shabaab. Al-Hammami's characterisation of the tensions was likely coloured by his personal experience of being increasingly sidelined within al-Shabaab,¹⁹⁷ but his decision to make the internal tensions publicly known escalated the conflict further. In an attempt to defuse the situation, the figures in opposition to Godane (at this point led by al-Afghani as Robow had effectively left al-Shabaab) suggested that al-Qaida should mediate. It should be noted that at the time al-Shabaab had just become an official affiliate of al-Qaida, eventually accepted into its fold by al-Zawahiri who had taken over the reigns of the group after the death of bin Laden. However, Godane would not accept al-Qaida's interference.

In January 2013, al-Hammami took to Twitter to tell the world that al-Shabaab had given him 15 days to surrender or be killed. The American decided to flee, but was nonetheless exposed to an assassination attempt in April. This led al-Afghani to write at least three letters to al-Zawahiri. In one of the letters al-Afghani once again asked al-Qaida to intervene to save the group.¹⁹⁸ Opposing senior figures allegedly also issued a fatwa instructing al-Shabaab fighters not to follow the emir due to his transgressions of the Quran.¹⁹⁹ Godane had previously stated that he would not tolerate members of al-Shabaab contacting the al-Qaida leadership without his permission. From that point on, tensions only escalated.

Godane's imminent internal crackdown was facilitated by a supportive Somali-Kenyan ideologue who, during a lecture in Nairobi, legitimised fighting rebellious Jihadists (*bughat*). The following month the al-Shabaab emir issued a direct threat to his internal opponents and in June 2013 began arrests of senior rivals. The first major figure to be assassinated was none other than Ibrahim al-Afghani, a founding member of al-Shabaab, its former media chief and the most vocal opponent to Godane's internal authoritarianism. On his way to a mosque for evening prayer, al-Afghani was assaulted by a team of al-Shabaab *amniyat* (intelligence) who shot him in the head from behind while screaming "*munafiq*" (hypocrite).²⁰⁰ In *The Neglected Duty*, Faraj wrote about the "necessity to cleanse the ranks", referring to the permissibility of killing such hypocrites for the benefit of Islam. A similar argument was employed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in January 2014 in his speech 'God Knows and You Do Not Know', saying, "It's from

196 Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally*.

197 Roggio, "Omar Hammami's Personal Dispute with Shabaab."

198 Pantucci and Sayid, "Foreign Fighters in Somalia and Al-Shabaab's Internal Purge."

199 Stig Jarle Hansen, "An In-Depth Look at Al-Shabab's Internal Divisions," *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 2 (2014).

200 Maruf and Joseph, *Inside Al-Shabaab: The Secret History of Al-Qaeda's Most Powerful Ally*.

God's tradition and wisdom that the rows of believers and Mujahids is mingled with hypocrites. God will not leave this row mixed with those hypocrites and pretenders and therefore creates Fitnah and trials for them. The row must be melted so that the maliciousness leaves, and be pressured so that the weak building blocks crumble and the lights must shine at it exposing the intricacies and inner personalities." In September 2013, Omar al-Hammami faced a similar fate to al-Afghani.

Conclusion: Contemporary Conflict in a Historical Perspective

In early February 2014, conflict erupted between al-Qaida and the Islamic State. Tensions had been brewing since April of the previous year when the Islamic State of Iraq, as it was known at the time, expanded its area of operations into neighbouring Syria, but it was the territorial control over Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa that pitted the two groups against one another militarily. The two groups had already criticised each other in public statements, trying to delegitimise each other, but al-Qaida also made serious efforts to de-escalate infighting and discursive contestation. Since then, at least five thousand Jihadists have been killed at the hands of other Jihadists, thus ensuring that the Sunni Jihadi movement is more fragmented than ever before and internal conflict has become a normalised practice.

While the internal conflict within the Jihadi movement since 2014 is exceptional in terms of its scope and its impact, this report endeavours to illustrate that internal conflict as a phenomenon is not unprecedented. Since the 1970s Jihadists have discussed, debated, competed and sometimes fought with each other. Most often contestation has occurred between groups or rival individuals, but in some cases it has in fact occurred within a group. Tracing this history of contestation and conflict through the most important inter- and intra-group examples no singular tendency emerges. Rather, it becomes clear that the continuous debates and competition have been caused by myriad reasons and have dealt with a wide range of issues. That said, it is possible to boil down the sources of conflict to four main issues: one source of controversy has centred around the de-territorialised ideological development offered by Qutb to al-Qaida's more globally oriented Jihad and how to strategically approach the Jihadi struggle. Then there is the controversies related to doctrine, particularly visible, although not exclusively, in international Jihadi melting pots. A third source is struggles over the access to funding, recruits and territory, which have been almost constantly present in national and international contexts. The fourth and last source is power struggles and leadership ambitions that similarly have been almost ever-present. The general impact of these sources of contestation is an extremely competitive environment where groups and individuals employ a substantial part of their focus to 'family affairs', not only diverting focus from their primary enemies, but also resulting in Jihadi casualties and a textual corpus of de-legitimation *from within*. The period between 2014 and 2019 has contributed more negatively to these trends than any other historical period.

Despite the clear continuity of specific sources of contestation from the emergence of the modern Sunni Jihadi movement in the 1960s to present day, we can nonetheless make a distinction between the pre- and post-9/11 periods. The pre-9/11 period distinguishes from the immediate period after the attack in several ways. One important way is the higher level of competition, as a vast number of groups,

produced mainly as the result of the Afghan war and the return of Afghan Arabs to their countries of origin to establish nationally focused groups, were battling to define the correct Jihadi ideology and strategy, in addition to the leadership ambitions of certain individuals. Often this has been caused by a generational divide with the aggressive youth exercising pressure on the older generation of Jihadists. Al-Qaida's trajectory is interesting and telling in this regard. Since its establishment in the late 1980s it has managed to manoeuvre through these challenges, eventually appearing as a uniting structure. The group initially suffered a severe hit to its popularity and the authority of its leadership after the Jalalabad defeat. But after a period of isolation (1992–6), bin Laden took advantage of the failing national Jihadi campaigns and favourable opportunity structures, represented mainly by the Taliban's control in Afghanistan and external intervention in Muslim countries, and succeeded in enforcing a tolerable ideological alliance between the youth and more senior Jihadists. The support al-Qaida received from within Jihadi circles in the wake of the 9/11 attack, its alliance with al-Zawahiri's Al Jihad and the ensuing strategy of formal network expansion through affiliates rocketed al-Qaida to the top of the Jihadi hierarchy and ensured some level of cohesion and stability within the movement. Since then the group has managed to shuttle between uncompromising extremism and pragmatism through a discursive strategy of universalisation.²⁰¹ This is an achievement the Islamic State never accomplished or appeared particularly interested in, creating tensions for it both externally and internally.

201 Ernesto Laclau, "Democracy and the Question of Power," *Constellations* 8, no. 1 (2001): 3–14.

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