

# **Terrorists or Statesmen?**

**Hamas, Hezbollah, al-Qaida and the  
Prospects for Political Engagement with  
Violent Non-State Actors**

Josh Levinger

17.586

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b> Hamas</b>	<b>3</b>
<i>Foundation in the Muslim Brotherhood</i>	<b>3</b>
<i>Charter and Evolution of Goals</i>	<b>4</b>
<i>Scope of Actions</i>	<b>5</b>
<i>Community Support</i>	<b>6</b>
<i>Political Engagement</i>	<b>7</b>
<b> Hezbollah</b>	<b>9</b>
<i>Foundations in the Lebanese Civil War</i>	<b>9</b>
<i>Withdrawal and ‘Lebanonization’</i>	<b>11</b>
<i>A Miscalculated War</i>	<b>12</b>
<b> Al-Qaida</b>	<b>14</b>
<i>Changing Transnational Goals</i>	<b>14</b>
<i>Global Reach</i>	<b>15</b>
<i>Foreign Fighters</i>	<b>16</b>
<b> Conclusion</b>	<b>17</b>

# Introduction

Thomas Ricks, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and former military correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Post*, describes politics in the Middle East as “profoundly Clausewitzian. It's either armed politics or political warfare.” He places groups on a continuum between “militias with political wings, and political parties with armed wings.”<sup>1</sup> This paper aims to analyze this assertion and determine potential distinguishing factors between terrorist groups and armed political actors. This distinction is critical as a new American strategy in the region emerges. In the aftermath of transformative elections in the United States, Israel, Palestine and Lebanon, we stand at a historical crossroads. Whether this results in a permanent peace or continued conflict depends on the ability of all parties to resolve their differences in the political arena instead of on the battlefield.

This paper examines the goals, scope and ties of three groups: Hamas, Hezbollah and al-Qaida. Do they seek specific geographical concessions or the destruction of the global order? Are they a local, regional or transnational actor? Are they rooted in a community, comprised of foreign fighters, or sponsored by an external state? Each of the three examples lies somewhere between these extremes. Acknowledging the subtleties and gradations inherent in these groups is critical to a full understanding of their conflict. In a field filled with vitriol and unsourced accusations from both sides, this paper investigates this complex issue by relying on knowledgeable local journalists and primary sources when available.

---

<sup>1</sup> As interviewed by Michael Totten. “The Dissidents’ War”. April 15, 2009. <http://www.michaeltotten.com/archives/2009/04/the-dissidents.php> Retrieved May 1, 2009.

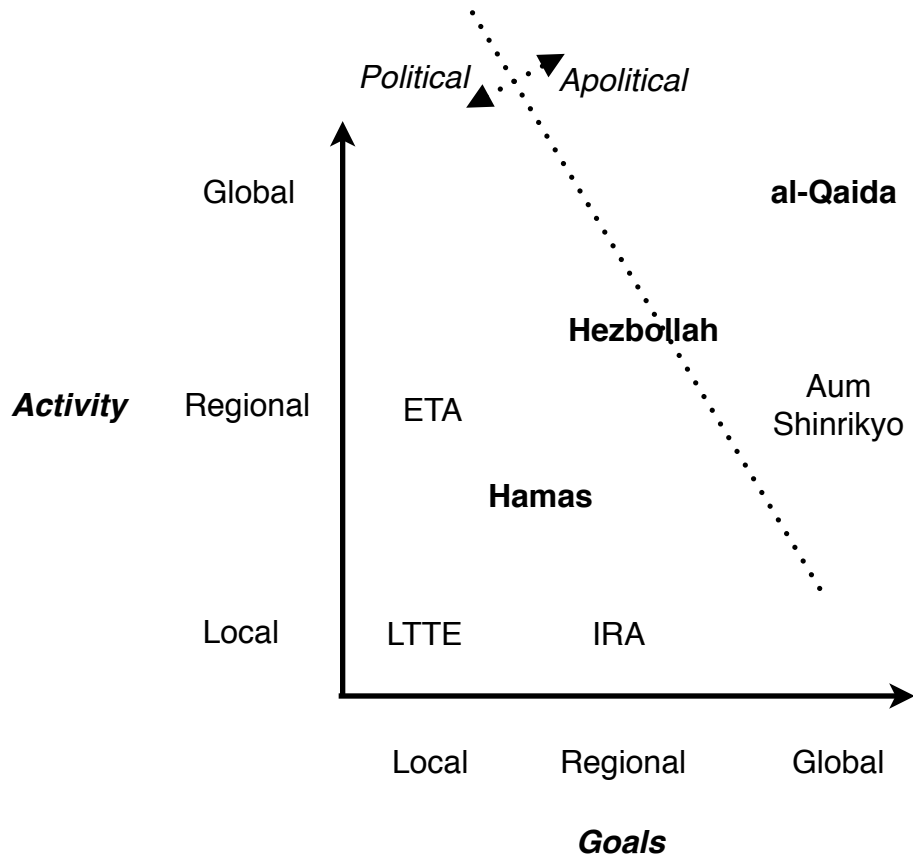


Chart 1: Scope of Goals and Activities vs. Political Engagement of VNSAs

By focusing on three groups along the central axis, all from the same part of the world, I hope to remove many external variables that might complicate the analysis. Hamas, Hezbollah and al-Qaida run the gamut from a local party to a transnational terror network. Working in order of size, I will discuss each group's formation, goals, scope of action, and community ties in turn.

# Hamas

## ***Foundation in the Muslim Brotherhood***

The Islamic Resistance Movement (*Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah*) is better known by the arabic acronym Hamas, which translates as “zeal”. Officially founded in 1987, the group grew out of the Gaza branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, and was initially a community organization to promote Islamic values in Palestinian society and resist Israeli occupation. Dr. Abdul Aziz Rantisi, cofounder along with Sheik Ahmed Yassin and Mohammad Taha, told journalist Zaki Chehab that “like many successful movements, it began at the grassroots and was not a military organization at the outset.”<sup>2</sup> Hamas focused on creating an Islamic social and political entity first, with the goal to eventually “reclaim Palestine for the Palestinians.”<sup>3</sup> While some analysts see Hamas’ social work as an ideal cover for terrorist activity,<sup>4</sup> this view ignores the institutional history of the Muslim Brotherhood and the *da’wah* network.

The military wing, known as the *Ez Ed Din al Qassam* Brigades, was founded in 1991 although their capabilities were minimal until 2000.<sup>5</sup> Statements issued after an attack typically disclaim any connection with the political leadership, although their guidance is “considered and implemented.”<sup>6</sup> Orders for ceasefires by political leaders

---

<sup>2</sup> Chehab, Zaki. *Inside Hamas: The Untold Story of the Militant Islamic Movement*. New York: Nation Books. 2007. p 25.

<sup>3</sup> Zuhur, Sherifa. *Hamas and Israel: Conflicting Strategies of Group-Based Politics*. Strategic Studies Institute. December 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Levitt, Matthew. “Hamas Social Welfare: In the Service of Terror.” in *The Making of a Terrorist: Recruitment, Training and Root Causes*. New York: Praeger Publishers. 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Chehab. p 43.

<sup>6</sup> Chehab, p 53.

have been generally been heeded, with some exceptions perpetrated by other unaffiliated militants. A six-month ceasefire in rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip held until its expiration in December 2008,<sup>7</sup> followed by a surge of fire in late December and the massive Israeli response in January.<sup>8</sup> As of May 2009, Hamas enacted a unilateral cease fire, described by Khaled Meshal, the political leader exiled in Damascus, as “part of an evaluation from the movement which serves the Palestinians’ interest. After all, the firing is a method, not a goal. Resistance is a legitimate right, but practicing such a right comes under an evaluation by the movement’s leaders.”<sup>9</sup>

### ***Charter and Evolution of Goals***

The Hamas Charter of 1988 includes anti-Jewish and anti-Zionist language, references to the forged *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and a quote from the Muslim Brotherhood founder Hasan al-Banna that Israel will be “swept away as other nations have risen and fallen before it.”<sup>10</sup> This is often cited as a primary justification for Israeli and American refusal to meet with the group. However, recent statements by Meshal note that the charter “should not be regarded as the fundamental ideological frame of reference from which the movement takes its positions”<sup>11</sup> and that “we are shaped by

---

<sup>7</sup> Ethan Bronner. “Gaza Truce May Be Revived by Necessity”. New York Times. December 19, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/20/world/middleeast/20mideast.html>

<sup>8</sup> Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center. “Summary of rocket fire and mortar shelling in 2008.” January 1, 2009. [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\\_multimedia/English/eng\\_n/pdf/ipc\\_e007.pdf](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/ipc_e007.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Taghreed El-Khodary and Ethan Bronner. “Addressing U.S., Hamas Says It Grounded Rockets.” New York Times. May 4 2009. A6. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/05/world/middleeast/05meshal.html>

<sup>10</sup> Zuhur. 31.

Other translations use the alternate phrase “obliterate”. Avalon Project. Yale Law School. [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/hamas.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp)

<sup>11</sup> Tamimi, Azzam. *Hamas: A History from Within*. Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press. 2007. p 149.

our experiences.”<sup>12</sup> He recognized in 2007 that “the problem is not that there is an entity called Israel. The problem is that the Palestinian state is non-existent.”<sup>13</sup> The long term goals of Sheik Yassin were unwavering: “to reclaim the whole of Palestine as it had been before 1948, with Jerusalem as its capital, to redraw the borders as they existed prior to 1967, and to dismantle the settlements.”<sup>14</sup> While the current leadership has agreed in principle to a long term truce and a de-facto recognition of Israel, it still demands a return to the 1967 lines and a right of return for refugees.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Scope of Actions***

Hamas is strongly rooted in the Palestinian Territories, particularly the Gaza Strip, and is focused on resistance against Israeli occupation. Sheik Yassin maintained to Chehab in an interview that his group had “no interest in abandoning their battle with Israel to fight abroad and get tied up with Arab, Islamic, or international conflicts.”<sup>16</sup> In this way it differs significantly from other transnational or global actors. Hamas does not intentionally target foreigners or fellow Muslims,<sup>17</sup> constraining its action to Israeli targets. Attacks on civilians began in response to the massacre of worshippers in the Cave of the Patriarchs by Baruch Goldstein in 1994, leading to a wave of suicide bombings choreographed by Yahya Ayyash, known as “the Engineer.” A second wave of

---

<sup>12</sup> el-Khodary and Bronner. 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Silver. “ Hamas softens Israel stance in calls for Palestinian state.” The Independent. January 11, 2007.

<sup>14</sup> Chehab, p 36.

<sup>15</sup> el-Khodary and Bronner. 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Chehab, p 108.

<sup>17</sup> Khalid Amayreh. “ Hamas and al-Qaida: The Prospects for Radicalization in the Palestinian Occupied Territories.” Conflicts Forum. October 2007. p 5.

bombings began in 2001 during the Second Intifada. Hamas proposed a bilateral halt to attacks on civilians in 1998 and 2008 which were ignored.<sup>18</sup>

While Hamas is classified as a terrorist organization by the United States, many European countries distinguish between their legitimate and illegitimate activities, and most Arab countries allow Hamas to raise funds on their soil. Much of the political leadership lives in exile in Damascus, and nearly a third of their elected representatives in the Palestinian Legislative Council are in detention in Israeli jails.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Community Support***

Hamas institutions provide invaluable support to the general Palestinian population, which the Palestinian Authority cannot reproduce on its own. In 1996, it was estimated that 95% of their annual budget of \$70 million went to social services.<sup>20</sup> While more recent data is not available, it can be assumed that a similarly large proportion of their funds continue to be spent on these causes.

Nearly two-thirds of Palestinians live below the poverty line, and Islamic social welfare organisations provide cash assistance, food and medical care as well as educational and psychological services, to perhaps one out of six.<sup>21</sup> Hamas-affiliated organizations run hospitals, dental services and a blood bank. Schools provide education from kindergarten through eighth grade across the Gaza strip. Hamas is

---

<sup>18</sup> Jerusalem Post. "Mashaal Offers to Stop Civilian Attacks." March 31, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Marian Houk. Interview with Dr. Mustafa Barghouti. "Getting the Palestinian Legislative Council out of the freezer." July 10, 2008. <http://www.almubadara.org/new/edetails.php?id=4651>

<sup>20</sup> Glenn E. Robinson, "Hamas as Social Movement," in Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed. *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2004. p 127-128.

<sup>21</sup> International Crisis Group. "Islamic Social Welfare Activism In The Occupied Palestinian Territories: A Legitimate Target?" ICG Middle East Report N°13. 2 April 2003.



present in high schools, universities and professional groups, and even established women's organizations which rivaled and challenged the positions of Palestinian feminist groups.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Political Engagement***

Hamas has steadily grown as a political party, but it has been interested since its founding in the political system as a means to achieving their goals. Sheikh Yassin sent a letter from jail in October 1993, at the start of the Oslo Peace Process, cautioning his followers "not to become marginalized" and "to participate in the scheduled 1996 elections."<sup>23</sup> However, as the talks dragged on with little concrete change, Hamas chose not to participate and remained an opposition party outside the system. Similarly, Hamas did not participate in 2004 presidential elections following the death of Yassir Arafat, believing that it could not win top-level control of the system developed by and for Fatah.<sup>24</sup> Instead, it ran at the municipal level, winning nearly half of the local seats as a stepping stone toward the next general legislative election.

Hamas won an upset victory in the January 2006 Palestinian elections, with higher turnout than many Western or Israeli analysts suspected. Their success has been widely attributed as a response to Fatah corruption and failure to produce any meaningful concessions from Israel. The party's success even in largely Christian areas and among Palestinian Authority police shows their appeal across religious and

---

<sup>22</sup> Zuhur, p 54.

<sup>23</sup> Chehab, p 107.

<sup>24</sup> Khaled Hroub. "A 'New Hamas' through Its New Documents". *Journal of Palestine Studies*. Vol 35, no. 4. Summer 2006. p. 6.

sectarian lines.<sup>25</sup> A reputation for honesty, in contrast to the many Fatah officials accused of corruption, help explain their broad popularity.

Ahmed Yousuf, a top political Hamas political advisor, noted in 2007 that their participation in the Palestinian political process “will encourage the growth and development of pragmatic ideas and instruments of political action.”<sup>26</sup> Electoral statements and draft proposals for a joint government published after the 2006 victory show “an evolution in Hamas’ political thinking toward pragmatism and the Palestinian ‘mainstream,’ with the cabinet platform presented by Haniyeh reflecting very little inclination to radical positions.”<sup>27</sup>

Despite its classification as a terrorist organization, and past involvement in horrific acts, recent changes have shown Hamas to be a flexible and pragmatic voice in the Palestinian political dialogue. This is reflected in its founding principles, constrained geographic goals and scope of actions, and deep community ties. Israel and the United States would be wise to recognize it as the elected representative of the Palestinian people, and give it a seat at the table in any future negotiations.

---

<sup>25</sup> Chehab, pp 1-14.

<sup>26</sup> Amayreh, 2007. p 7.

<sup>27</sup> Hroub, 2006.

# Hezbollah

## ***Foundations in the Lebanese Civil War***

Hezbollah, the party of God, is a Shi'a political and military group based in the south of Lebanon. Formed in response to the Israeli invasion and occupation in 1982, it was "less an organization than a cabal" until 1985.<sup>28</sup> Its founding document, a letter addressed to the "Downtrodden in Lebanon and the World", enumerates three objectives: expelling American and French colonial powers, submitting the Phalange Christian militia to a "just power" for its crimes, and to allow the Lebanese population to freely choose an Islamic government.<sup>29</sup> The document "bears a strong made-in-Tehran coloration"<sup>30</sup> and places Iranian religious leader Ruhollah Khomeini as their "one leader, tutor and jurist."

This document was released following a string of violent attacks against what Hezbollah saw as occupying forces. The first Hezbollah attack against Israeli forces was in November 1982, killing 74 at an intelligence center in Tyre. For years the explosion was officially attributed to a gas leak, but it clearly initiated the tactic of suicide bombings.<sup>31</sup> Twin bombings against foreign targets in 1983 killed over 300 people, the Beirut Embassy in April and the American and French barracks in October. The international troops were intended to be a neutral peacekeeping force, but were seen by

---

<sup>28</sup> Augustus Norton. *Hezbollah: A Short History*. Princeton University Press. 2007. p 34.

<sup>29</sup> "An Open Letter: The Hezbollah Program." published in *The Jerusalem Quarterly*. no 48. Fall 1988.

<sup>30</sup> Norton. 2007. p 35.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Kramer. *Arab awakening and Islamic revival: the politics of ideas in the Middle East*. Transaction Publishers. 1996. p 231.

the Muslim population as siding with the ruling Maronite Catholics.<sup>32</sup> A former CIA agent with extensive regional experience disputes the claim that Hezbollah perpetrated the embassy and barracks bombings, noting that the Hezbollah External Security Organization operates independently from the party apparatus, and is closely linked with Iranian intelligence.<sup>33</sup>

After the withdrawal of the multinational force in 1984 many attacks targeted occupying Israeli or proxy South Lebanon Army forces. Hezbollah largely followed the unwritten “rules of the game,” under which Israel would refrain from killing civilians, and the resistance would fight only in the southern Security Zone.<sup>34</sup> These rules held, despite a few high profile attacks internationally, for the entirety of the eighteen year Israeli occupation. The bombings of Jewish centers in Argentina were again attributed to the Imad Mugniyah and the Iranian sponsored External Security Organization. These attacks prompt some analysts to condemn Hezbollah as a terrorist organization of global reach, perhaps an even greater threat to Western interests than al-Qaida.<sup>35</sup> Much of this perceived threat is due to their two significant victories against the Israelis, feats unmatched by any other Arab army.

The Lebanese Civil War ended in 1989 with the Taif Agreement enshrining a religious balance in the legislature and requiring the disarmament of all militias.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Friedman. *From Beirut to Jerusalem*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux. 1989. p 197.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Baer. Interview in *Christian Science Monitor*. July 7, 2003. Cited in Norton. 2007. p 78.

<sup>34</sup> Daniel Sobelman. *New Rules of the Game: Israel and Hizballah after the Withdrawal from Lebanon*. Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies. Tel Aviv University. 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Matthew Levitt. “Hezbollah: A Case Study of Global Reach.” Remarks to the International Policy Center for Counter Terrorism, Herzliya, Israel. September 8, 2003.

<sup>36</sup> Hassan Krayem. “The Lebanese Civil War and the Taif Agreement”. American University of Beirut. <http://ddc.aub.edu.lb/projects/pspa/conflict-resolution.html>

Hezbollah disagreed with this provision and maintained its arms to fight Israel in the southern zone, claiming it is a resistance group and not a militia. However, after significant internal debate, the party did participate in the 1992 elections, choosing to reform the political system from within rather than remain on the sidelines. The party's platform emphasized non-religious themes, focusing on the long economic exploitation and underdevelopment of the Shi'a areas. Following their initial win of eight seats in 1992, the party gained a reputation for making "pragmatic political bargains with ideological opponents"<sup>37</sup> and significantly less corruption than the secular Amal party. By the 2005 elections, Hezbollah won eleven of the twenty-seven available Shi'a seats.

### ***Withdrawal and 'Lebanonization'***

General Ehud Barak was elected Prime Minister of Israel in 1999 on a platform that promised to withdraw from Lebanon within 12 months. While it was preferable to combine this action with a permanent peace settlement with Syria, disagreements over a small geographic area near the border caused talks to collapse, and the Israelis withdrew unilaterally.<sup>38</sup> The question of the legitimate ownership of the Shebaa farms is complex, and it is unnecessary to discuss in much detail here, but it suffices to say that this small slice of land became a symbol of the larger territorial conflict, and the justification used by Hezbollah to continue fighting Israel.

The end of the occupation of southern Lebanon posed a strategic quandary to Hezbollah's resistance strategy. With the occupation over, who was there to resist? How could the party justify its continued militancy and integration into the political system it

---

<sup>37</sup> Norton. 2007. p 103.

<sup>38</sup> Norton. 2007. p 89.

once denounced as corrupt? The answer came in part with the continued occupation of the Shebaa farms, but also by changing their rhetoric toward an explicit alignment with the Palestinian cause, and the opening of a “northern front” against Israel.

Hezbollah’s platform and ideology goes beyond the geopolitical nature of the conflict with Israel, and aims to create a ‘resistance society’ to counter traditional Shi’a narratives of victimization. Medical centers, schools, micro-finance lenders, and professional media outlets work together holistically to provide meaning to the Shi’a community. Their educational institutions aim to produce a new society that participates “actively in its own reconstruction, in resistance and in economic rebirth.”<sup>39</sup> The fact that they have also won military victories against the seemingly invincible Israelis is only one aspect of their larger appeal.

### ***A Miscalculated War***

Cross border tensions simmered between 2000 and 2006, when Israel intercepted communications between Hezbollah and Hamas urging the Palestinian group not to return captured soldier Gilad Shalit.<sup>40</sup> The subsequent capture of two soldiers by Hezbollah in July lead to a significantly larger Israeli response than was perhaps expected. Israel took the chance to eliminate the group and did not succeed. Failing to kill any of the senior leadership despite heavy bombardment, the IAF extended their target portfolio to include civilian areas on the assumption that the Hezbollah leaders must be hiding there. Hezbollah continued to launch rockets at

---

<sup>39</sup> Mona Harb and Reinoud Leenders. “Know thy Enemy: Hizbullah 'terrorism' and the Politics of Perception.” *Third World Quarterly*. vol 26 no 1. 2005. retrieved via JSTOR.

<sup>40</sup> Norton. 2007. p 133.

Israeli cities and obeyed an 48 hour ceasefire ordered in the wake of the civilian casualties at Qana, indicating that their command and control apparatus was still fully functional. The indiscriminate bombing campaign did not break the morale of the civilian population as intended, and only expanded Hezbollah's base of support in the Shi'a community.<sup>41</sup> A poll in Egypt showed that the most admired political leader overwhelmingly Hassan Nasrallah.<sup>42</sup> Hezbollah was seen as taking a fight to Israel and winning despite being technologically outmatched. Domestically, the party gained support across sectarian lines, and gained veto power in the Parliament.

Hezbollah organized the reconstruction of the destroyed south quickly. At least fifteen thousand families received grants of over \$10,000 to rebuild their damaged houses.<sup>43</sup> As a taxi driver told this author during a trip from Tyre to Arnoun in July 2007, "we Lebanese know how to rebuild."

While the Party of God holds on to its arms and remains an effective fighting force, it is also firmly entrenched in the Lebanese political system. While they are not the global threat to American interests some have claimed, whether they will can promote their "resistance society" with peaceful means remains to be seen.

---

<sup>41</sup> Alastair Cooke and Mark Perry. "How Hezbollah Defeated Israel: Winning the Intelligence War". Asia Times. October 12, 2006.

[http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/HJ12Ak01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/HJ12Ak01.html)

<sup>42</sup> Alastair Cooke and Mark Perry. "How Hezbollah Defeated Israel: The Political War". Asia Times. October 14, 2006.

[http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle\\_East/HJ14Ak01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/HJ14Ak01.html)

<sup>43</sup> Norton. 2007. p 140.

# Al-Qaida

## ***Changing Transnational Goals***

Al-Qaida has a large and diverse set of goals which has changed throughout its existence. Osama bin Laden's first *fatwa* in 1992 called for the killing of American soldiers in Saudi Arabia and the Horn of Africa with little mention of Palestine. Manifestos in 1996 and 1998 emphasized the perceived injustices and violence perpetrated against the Muslim *umma* by Western powers, only really focusing on the plight of the Palestinians in an October 2001 call to arms that tried to unite the Muslim world behind their global *jihad*.<sup>44</sup> More recent missives have dwelled on the failure of the United States to ratify the Kyoto Accords, abuses of prisoners at Guantanamo, and the influence of money on politics in American elections. Needless to say, these are not al-Qaida's real grievances against the West, merely rallying points to gather their fellow Muslims into a single coherent struggle between good and evil.<sup>45</sup>

Unfortunately, the American response to the September 11 attacks played into this "clash of civilizations" narrative. By literally calling the war on Afghanistan a "crusade," starting the unrelated war in Iraq, and failing to resolve the Palestinian issue, America united global Muslim public opinion behind al-Qaida's goals, although not their methods. Large majorities in a recent poll agreed that the United States seeks to weaken and divide the Islamic world, spread Christianity, maintain control over energy

---

<sup>44</sup> Jessica Stern. "The Protean Enemy." *Foreign Affairs*. Volume 82. Issue 4. July 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Reza Aslan. *How to Win a Cosmic War: God, Globalization, and the End of the War on Terror*. Random House: New York. 2009. p 55.



resources in the Persian Gulf, and fails to follow international law.<sup>46</sup> If al-Qaida were a political party, and used less violent means of spreading their platform, they might have a wide base of support. However, they are not a political party, and despite their rhetoric about sweeping away the social order, “no attempt is ever made to provide anything akin to an alternative social program.”<sup>47</sup>

### ***Global Reach***

Since their inception in 1988, al-Qaida has launched attacks across the world. A 1992 attack on a hotel in Yemen aimed at American soldiers on their way to Somalia started a string of attacks unparalleled in the history of terrorism. Targets included the World Trade Center in 1993, the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996, American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998, the USS Cole in 2000, and a the ultimate symbols of American financial and military might, the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001. After the worldwide military response that followed, al-Qaida relied less on a top-down structure and transitioned to “franchise operations.” Bombings in Bali, London, and Madrid were perpetrated by people with only tenuous links to the formal organization, but who shared their apocalyptic worldview. Part of the Iraq insurgency took the al-Qaida name, and tried to foment a civil war between Sunni and Shia, with reasonably successful results. The group is willing to kill civilians indiscriminately, both Muslims and infidels, without regard to their status as combatants.

---

<sup>46</sup> WorldPublicOpinion.org “Public Opinion in the Islamic World on Terrorism, al Qaeda, and US Policies.” February 25, 2009. [http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/feb09/STARTII\\_Feb09\\_rpt.pdf](http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/feb09/STARTII_Feb09_rpt.pdf)

<sup>47</sup> Aslan. 2009. p 7.

## ***Foreign Fighters***

Al-Qaida operatives venture far from their homes to wage *jihad*, and are often ethnic strangers in their new landscape. Dozens of independent groups from Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey, Algeria and Turkmenistan established bases in Afghanistan to fight the Soviet invasion. As Arabs among a Pashtun population, they were not well integrated into the social fabric. Instead of creating a resistance society, they advocate overthrowing corrupt governments, a process that does not endear them to local power structures.

As the insurgency in Iraq developed, large numbers of foreigners came to the battle through Syria. Documents captured by a US military raid on an al-Qaida group in Sinjar revealed that many of the worst suicide bombings in the civil war were committed by foreigners, not Iraqis. A majority were from Saudi Arabia, with Libya, Syria and Yemen also contributing.<sup>48</sup> The devastating attacks on Shia religious festivals in 2004 and 2005 killed hundreds of pilgrims to Karbala, in an apparent attempt to foment civil war.

---

<sup>48</sup> Gordon Lubold, "New look at foreign fighters in Iraq." *Christian Science Monitor*. January 7, 2008. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/0107/p02s01-usmi.html>

## Conclusion

We must condemn violence against civilians by any perpetrator, state or non-state. But labeling groups as terrorists and then categorically refusing to talk with them only impedes a rational understanding of their goals and perpetuates conflict. Many violent non-state actors have legitimate political agendas, a constrained scope of action, and deep community ties. These groups, despite horrific past misdeeds, can be brought into the political system, but only if it will accept them. Transnational groups with maximalist or messianic goals clearly cannot be reasoned with, and must be stopped with force. But smaller groups, whether one agrees with their cause or not, need not be demonized and shunned from the discussion. Their causes are at their heart political, and it is only through constructive dialogue these conflicts can be resolved.

Recent developments have brought some welcome changes. Britain agreed to reopen contact with Hezbollah, encouraging it to “move away from violence and play a constructive, democratic and peaceful role.”<sup>49</sup> Hamas and Fatah reopened talks on forming a national unity government, and Hamas promised to “be part of the solution, period.”<sup>50</sup> And while the Obama administration’s new “AfPak” plan is not fully clear, the appointment of a “counterinsurgent's counterinsurgent”<sup>51</sup> in General McChrystal is a start toward a strategy more focused on Special Forces operations and less on devastating air strikes on civilians. Only time will tell if things will really turn around, but at the moment, there is at least a glimmer of hope on the horizon.

---

<sup>49</sup> Roger Cohen. “Middle East Reality Check.” *New York Times*. March 8, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/09/opinion/09cohen.html>

<sup>50</sup> el-Khodary and Bronner. May 9, 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Spencer Ackerman. “McKiernan Out in Afghanistan, McChrystal In”. *Washington Independent*. May 11, 2009. <http://washingtonindependent.com/42434/mckiernan-out-in-afghanistan-mcchrystal-in>