

Cracks in the Jihad

Al Qaeda and the Taliban are at odds, and even Internet jihadis are taking fewer cues from Osama bin Laden. Yet it is only growing more difficult to defeat the global jihad.

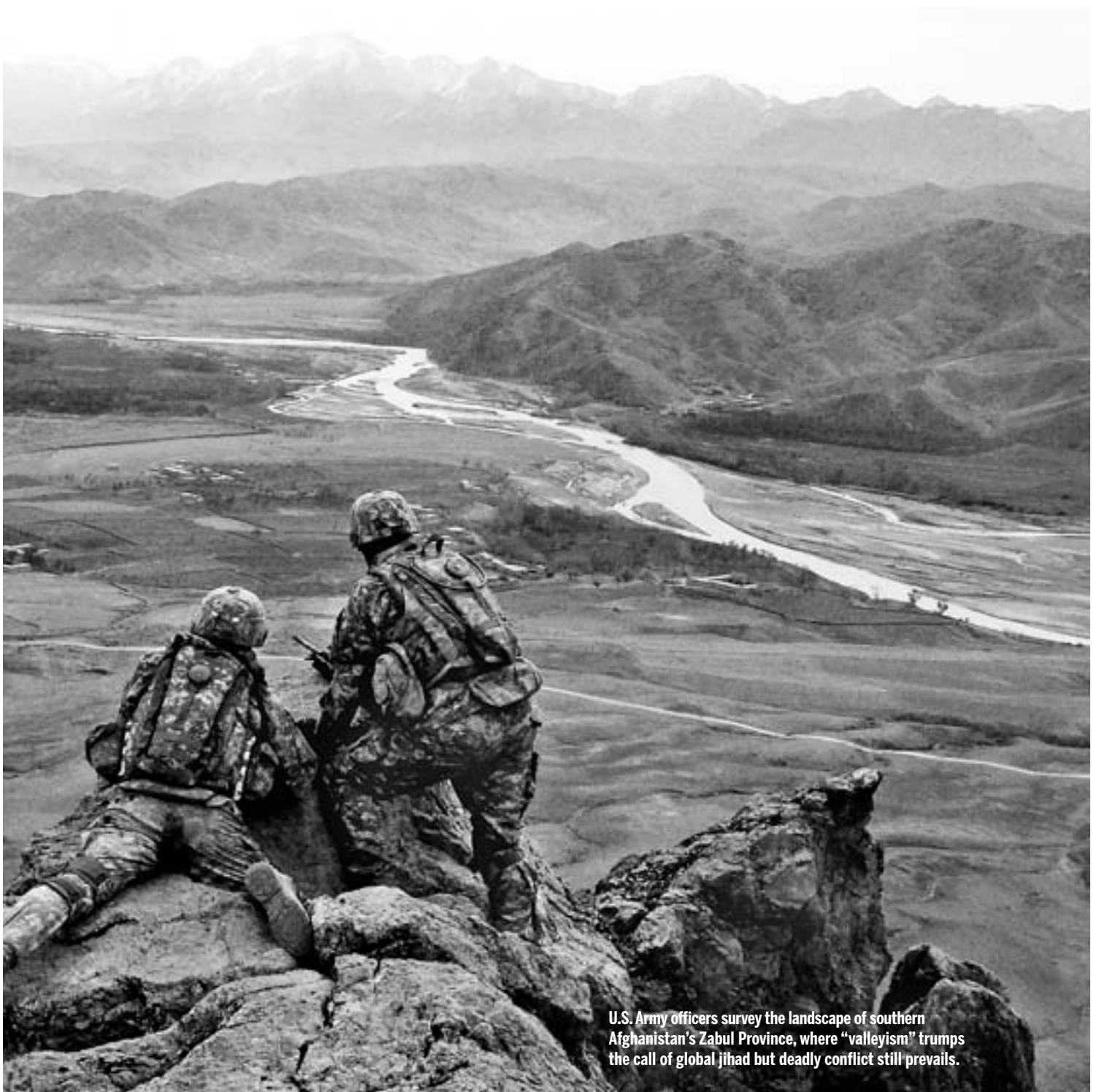
BY THOMAS RID

“GET READY FOR ALL MUSLIMS TO JOIN THE HOLY war against you,” the jihadi leader Abd el-Kader warned his Western enemies. The year was 1839, and nine years into France’s occupation of Algeria the resistance had grown self-confident. Only weeks earlier, Arab fighters had wiped out a convoy of 30 French soldiers en route from Boufarik to Oued-el-Alèg. Insurgent attacks on the slow-moving French columns were steadily increasing, and the army’s fortified blockhouses in the Atlas Mountains were under frequent assault.

Paris pinned its hopes on an energetic general who had already served a successful tour in Algeria, Thomas-Robert Bugeaud. In January 1840, shortly before leaving to take command in Algiers, he addressed the French Chamber of Deputies: “In Europe, gentlemen, we don’t

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U.S. Army officers survey the landscape of southern Afghanistan's Zabul Province, where "valleyism" trumps the call of global jihad but deadly conflict still prevails.

just make war against armies; we make war against interests.” The key to victory in European wars, he explained, was to penetrate the enemy country’s interior. Seize the centers of population, commerce, and industry, “and soon the interests are forced to capitulate.” Not so at the foot of the Atlas, he conceded. Instead, he would focus the army’s effort on the tribal population.

FORMER FIREBRAND IMAMS have started questioning the theological justifications of holy war.

Later that year, a well-known military thinker from Prussia traveled to Algeria to observe Bugeaud’s new approach. Major General Carl von Decker, who had taught under the famed Carl von Clausewitz at the War Academy in Berlin, was more forthright than his French counterpart. The fight against fanatical tribal warriors, he foresaw, “will throw all European theory of war into the trash heap.”

One hundred and seventy years later, jihad is again a major threat—and Decker’s dire analysis more relevant than ever. War, in Clausewitz’s eminent theory, was a clash of collective wills, “a continuation of politics by other means.” When states went to war, the adversary was a political entity with the ability to act as one body, able to end hostilities by declaring victory or admitting defeat. Even Abd el-Kader eventually capitulated. But jihad in the 21st century, especially during the past few years, has fundamentally changed its anatomy: Al Qaeda is no longer a collective political actor. It is no longer an adversary that can articulate a will, capitulate, and be defeated. But the jihad’s new weakness is also its new strength: Because of its transformation, Islamist militancy is politically impaired yet fitter to survive its present crisis.

In the years since late 2001, when U.S. and coalition forces toppled the Taliban regime and all but destroyed Al Qaeda’s core organization in Afghanistan, the bin Laden brand has been bleeding popularity across the Muslim world. The global jihad, as a result, has been torn by mounting internal tensions. Today, the holy war is set

to slip into three distinct ideological and organizational niches. The U.S. surge in Afghanistan, whether successful or not, is likely to affect this development only marginally.

The first niche is occupied by local Islamist insurgencies, fueled by grievances against “apostate” regimes that are authoritarian, corrupt, or backed by “infidel” outside powers (or any combination of the three). Filling the second niche is terrorism-cum-organized crime, most visible in Afghanistan and Indonesia but also seen in Europe, fueled by narcotics, extortion, and other ordinary illicit activities. In the final

niche are people who barely qualify as a group: young second- and third-generation Muslims in the diaspora who are engaged in a more amateurish but persistent holy war, fueled by their own complex personal discontents. Al Qaeda’s challenge is to encompass the jihadis who drift to the criminal and eccentric fringe while keeping alive its appeal to the Muslim mainstream and a rhetoric of high aspiration and promise.

The most visible divide separates the local and global jihadis. Historically, Islamist groups tended to bud locally, and assumed a global outlook only later, if they did so at all. All the groups that have been affiliated with Al Qaeda either predate the birth of the global jihad in the early 1990s or grew later out of local causes and concerns, only subsequently attaching the bin Laden logo. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, for example, started out in 1998 as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, an offshoot of another militant group that had roots in Algeria’s vicious civil war during the early 1990s. Pakistan’s Lashkar-e-Taiba, the force allegedly behind the 2008 attacks in Mumbai, India, that killed more than 170 people, was formed in the 1990s to fight for a united Kashmir under Pakistani rule. In Somalia, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and other countries, the Al Qaeda brand has been attractive to groups born out of local concerns.

By joining Al Qaeda and stepping up violence, local insurgents have long risked placing themselves on the target lists of governments and law enforcement organizations. More recently, however, they have run what may be an even more consequential risk, that of removing themselves from the social mainstream and losing popular support. This is what happened to Al Qaeda in Iraq during the Sunni Awakening, which began in 2005 in violence-ridden al-Anbar Province and its principal city, Ramadi. Al Qaeda had declared Ramadi the future capital of its Iraqi "caliphate," and by late 2005 it had the entire city under its control. But even conservative Sunni elders became alienated by the group's brutality and violence. One prominent local leader, Sheikh Sattar Abdul Abu Risha, lost several brothers and his father in assassinations. Others were agitated by the loss of prestige and power to the insurgents in their traditional homelands. In early 2006, Sattar and his sheikhs decided to cooperate with American forces, and by the end of the year they had helped recruit nearly 4,000 men to local police units. "They brought us nothing but destruction and we finally said, enough is enough," Sattar explained.

The awakening (*sahwa* in Arabic) was not limited to al-Anbar. One after another, former firebrand imams, in so-called revisions, have started questioning the theological justifications of holy war. The trend may have begun with Gamaa al-Islamiya, Egypt's most brutal terrorist group, which was responsible for the assassination of Egyptian president Anwar el-Sadat in 1981 and the slaughter of 58 foreign tourists in Luxor in 1997. As the Iraq war intensified during the summer of 2003, several of Gamaa al-Islamiya's leaders advised young men not to participate in Al Qaeda operations and accused the organization of "splitting Muslim ranks" by provoking hostile reactions against Islam "and wrongly interpreting the meaning of jihad in a violent way."

Another notable revision came in September 2007, when Salman al-Awda, an influential Saudi cleric who had previously declared that fighting Americans in Iraq was a religious duty, spoke out against Al Qaeda. He accused bin Laden in an open letter of "making terror a synonym for Islam." Speaking on a popular Saudi TV show on the sixth anniver-

sary of 9/11, al-Awda asked, "My brother Osama, how much blood has been spilt? How many innocent people, children, elderly, and women have been killed . . . in the name of Al Qaeda?"

Other ideologues have followed, including Sajjid Imam al-Shareef, one of Al Qaeda's founding leaders, who used the nom de guerre Dr. Fadl. "Every drop of blood that was shed or is being shed in Afghanistan and Iraq is the responsibility of bin Laden and Zawahiri and their followers," he wrote in the London-based newspaper *Asharq Al Awsat*.

In Afghanistan, coalition soldiers see the global-local split replicated as a fissure between what they call "big T" Taliban and "small t" Taliban. The "big T" ideologues fight for more global spiritual or political reasons; the "little t" opportunists fight for power, for money, or just to survive, to hedge their bets. A family might have one son fighting for the Taliban and another in the Afghan National Army; no matter which side prevails, they will have one son in the right place. U.S. Marines in Helmand Province say that 80 to 85 percent of all those they fight are "small t" Taliban. The U.S. counterinsurgency campaign aims to co-opt and reintegrate many of these rebels by creating secure population centers and new economic opportunities, spreading cleared areas like "inkblots." But the Taliban have long been keen to spread their own inkblots, with a similar rationale: attracting more and more "accidental" guerrillas, in the famous phrase of counterinsurgency specialist David Kilcullen, not just hardliners.

Yet even Afghanistan's "big T" Taliban, the ideologues, cannot simply be equated with Al Qaeda. Last fall, Abu Walid, once an Al Qaeda accomplice and now a Taliban propagandist, ridiculed bin Laden in the Taliban's official monthly magazine *al-Sumud*, for, among other things, his do-it-yourself approach to Islamic jurisprudence. A number of veterans had criticized bin Laden in the past, among them such towering figures as Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, one of the key architects of the global jihad. But Abu Walid's criticism was more biting. Bin Laden's organization lacks strategic vision and relies on "shiny slogans," he told Leah Farrell, an Australian counterterrorism specialist, in a much-noted dialogue she reported on her blog. Consequently the Taliban would no longer welcome the ter-

rorists in Afghanistan, he said, because “the majority of the population is against Al Qaeda.”

At the root of the disagreement between the two groups is the question of a local, or even national, popular base. Last September, Mullah Omar, the Taliban’s founding figure and spiritual overlord, issued a message in several languages. He called the Taliban a “robust

promise of good neighborliness and future cooperation with Afghanistan’s neighbors, including China, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan—all of whom face their own jihadi insurgencies and are on Al Qaeda’s target list.

The Taliban’s new tactics are throwing an “ideological bridge” not only to nearby countries but to parts of the current Kabul elite, most notably politically mobilized university students, notes Thomas Ruttig of the Afghanistan Analysts Network. Even the newly moderate Taliban, it should

THE TALIBAN IS MODERATING its tone and throwing an “ideological bridge” to parts of the Kabul elite.

be clear, remains wedded to inhumane and medieval moral principles. Yet Omar’s pragmatism immediately affects the question of who and what is a desirable target of attacks.

Perhaps the greatest tension between the local and global levels of the jihad

grows out of a divide over appropriate targets and tactics. Classical Islamic legal doctrine sees armed jihad as a defensive struggle against persecution, oppression, and incursions into Muslim lands. In an attempt to mobilize Muslims around the world to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan, Abdallah Azzam, an influential radical cleric who was assassinated in 1989, helped expand the doctrine of jihad into a transnational struggle by declaring the Afghan jihad an individual duty for all Muslims. Azzam also advocated *takfir*, a practice of designating fellow Muslims as infidels (*kaffir*) by remote excommunication in order to justify their slaughter. Al Qaeda ideologues upped the aggressive potential of such arguments and expanded the defensive jihad into a global struggle, effectively blurring the line between the “near” enemy—the Arab regimes deemed illegitimate “apostates” by the purists—and the “far” enemy, these regimes’ Western supporters.

Islamic and nationalist movement” that had “assumed the shape of a popular movement.” Probably realizing that pragmatism and a certain amount of moderation offer the best chance of a return to power, Omar vowed “to maintain good and positive relations with all neighbors based on mutual respect.”

Al Qaeda’s reaction was swift and harsh. Turning the jihad into a “national cause,” in the purists’ view, was selling it out. Prominent radicals, in a remarkable move, compared the Taliban’s turnabout to the efforts by Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza to distance themselves from Al Qaeda. Hamas in particular, perhaps because it is, like Al Qaeda, a Sunni organization, has been the subject of “relentless” criticism in Al Qaeda circles, says Thomas Hegghammer of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. When a self-proclaimed Al Qaeda faction appeared in Gaza, Hamas executed one of its leading imams and many of his armed followers. Jihadi ideologues were aghast. The globalists shuddered at the thought that local interests could compromise their pan-Islamic ambitions. “Nationalism,” declared Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda’s number two, “must be rejected by the *umma* [Muslim community], because it is a model which makes jihad subject to the market of political compromises and distracts the *umma* from the liberation of Islamic lands and the establishment of the Caliphate.”

A few weeks later, Mullah Omar pointedly reiterated his

In the remote areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan that produce many of today’s radicals, however, local and tribal affiliations are powerful. One U.S. political adviser who worked in Afghanistan’s Zabul Province, a hotbed of the insurgency, describes prevailing local sentiment as “valleyism” rather than nationalism. It is a force that drives the tribes to oppose anybody who threatens their traditional power base, foreign or not—a problem not just for the Taliban and Al Qaeda but for any Afghan government. Al-Zawahiri complained of this in a letter after the invasion of



Cuneyt Ciftci, a German-born jihadi of Turkish descent, staged a suicide bombing in Afghanistan in March 2008, killing two U.S. soldiers and two Afghans. Many of the global jihad's latest recruits are Western-born but rootless, drawn to the identity-building certainties of radical Islam.

Afghanistan: “Even the students (*talib*) themselves had stronger affiliations to their tribes and villages . . . than to the Islamic emirate.” The provincial valleyists, to the distress of Al Qaeda’s more cosmopolitan agitators, are selfishly eyeing their own interests, with little appetite for international aggression and globe-spanning terrorist operations.

The contrast with the character of jihad in the Muslim diaspora could not be starker. For radical Islamists in Europe, the local jihad doesn’t exist. And they understand that toppling governments in, say, London or Amsterdam is a fantasy. These radicals are less interest driven than identity driven. Many young European Muslims are out of touch with their ancestral countries, yet not fully at home in France or Sweden or Denmark. For some, the resulting identity crisis creates a hunger for clear spiritual guidelines. The ideology of global jihad, accord-

ing to a report by EUROPOL, the European Union’s police agency, “gives meaning to the feeling of exclusion” prevalent among the second- and third-generation descendants of Muslim immigrants. For these alienated youth, the idea of becoming “citizens” of the virtual worldwide Islamic community may be more attractive than it is for first-generation immigrants, who tend to retain strong roots in their native countries.

The identity problems of these young people seem to have affected the character of the jihad itself. Like the disoriented Muslim youth of the diaspora, the global jihad has loose residential roots and numb political fingertips. One sign of this disconnection from the local is that Al Qaeda’s rank and file does not include many men who could otherwise join a jihad at home: There seem to be few Palestinians, Chechens, Iraqis, or Afghans among the traveling jihadis, who tend to come from countries where jihad has failed, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Syria.

Al Qaeda's identity crisis is also illustrated by how it treats radicalized converts, often people without religious schooling and consolidated personalities. Olivier Roy, one of France's leading specialists on radical Islamism, has pointed out that convert groups assume responsibilities "beyond all comparison with any other Islamic organization." Roy has put the proportion of converts in Al Qaeda

past decades, from emotional pulse beats and scattered reactions into a phenomenon which is guided and utilized, and whereby the project of jihad is advanced so that it becomes the Islamic Nation's battle, and not a struggle of an elite." The global jihad was to function like an "operative system," without vulnerable, old-fashioned organizational hierarchies. That method is intuitively attractive for a Face-

book generation of well-connected young sympathizers, but the theory contains an internal contradiction. Self-recruited and "homegrown" terrorists present a wicked problem for Al Qaeda. As a bizarre type of self-appointed elite, they undermine the move-

AL QAEDA'S LATEST RECRUITS look more like a self-appointed elite than representatives of the Muslim "masses."

at between 10 and 25 percent, an indicator that the movement has become "de-culturalized."

These contrary trends, in turn, create chinks in Al Qaeda's recruitment system. The most extreme Salafists, deprived of identity and cultural orientation, have an appetite for utopia, for extreme views that appeal to the margin of society, be it in Holland or Helmand. Recruitment in the diaspora, as a result, follows a distinctive pattern, not partisan and political but offbeat and outré. The grievances and motivations of European extremists and the rare American militants tend to be idiosyncratic, the product of unstable individual personalities and a history of personal discrimination. Many take the initiative to join the movement themselves, and because they are not recruited by a member of the existing organization, their ties to it may remain loose. In 2008 alone, 190 individuals were sentenced for Islamist terrorist activities in Europe, most of them in Britain, France, and Spain. "A majority of the arrested individuals belonged to small autonomous cells rather than to known terrorist organizations," EUROPOL reports.

As a result of the change in its membership, the global Al Qaeda movement is encountering strong centrifugal forces. The rank and file and the center are losing touch with each other. The vision of Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, who laid much of the ideological foundation for Al Qaeda's global jihad, blends a Marxist-inspired focus on popular mass support with 21st-century ideas of networked, individual action. Al-Suri's aim was to devise a method "for transforming excellent individual initiatives, performed over the

ment's ambition to represent the Muslim "masses."

The problem is embodied in the online jihad. For Al Qaeda, Web forums operated by unaffiliated Islamists have been the most important distribution platform for jihadi materials. But after the arrest of a top-tier online activist in London two years ago, the connection between the forums and Al Qaeda's official media center, al-Sahab, began to loosen. Al Qaeda has lost more and more control of the online jihad. And, just like others online, jihadi Web administrators face increasingly tough competition for visibility. Within the forums the tone has become harsher. Brynjar Lia, a specialist on Salafism at the Norwegian Defense Research Establishment, says that "interjihadi quarrels seem to have become more common and less 'brotherly' in tone in recent years."

Some far-flung jihadi groups are enjoying newfound independence of another kind, as a result of criminal ventures they have established to fund their efforts. This too is intensifying the centrifugal forces within the global movement. Some groups are tipping into a more purely criminal mode.

A cause is what distinguishes an insurgency from organized crime, as David Galula, an influential French author on counterinsurgency, noted decades ago. Organized crime does not have to be incompatible with jihad. It may even be justified in religious terms: Baz Mohammed, an Afghan heroin kingpin and the first criminal ever extradited from Afghanistan, bragged to his co-conspirators that selling heroin in the United States was jihad because

it killed Americans while taking their money.

A budding insurgency has only a limited window of opportunity to grow into a serious political force. If the cause withers and loses its popular gloss, what remains as a rump may be nothing but a criminal organization, attracting a following with criminal energy rather than religious zeal, thus further damaging jihad's status in the eyes of the broader public. For some groups, this already appears to be happening. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb funds itself through the drug trade, smuggling, extortion, and kidnappings in southern Algeria and northern Mali. Indonesia's Abu Sayyaf Group and the Philippines' Jamiyah Islamiyah engage in a variety of criminal activities, including credit card fraud. The terrorist cell behind the 2004 Madrid bombings earned most of its money from criminal activities; when Spanish police raided the home of one of the plotters, they seized close to \$2 million in drugs and cash, including more than 125,000 Ecstasy tablets, according to *U.S. News and World Report*. The Madrid bombings had cost the terrorists just \$50,000.

The goal of leading Islamists has always been to turn their battle into "the Islamic Nation's battle," as al-Suri wrote. Far from reaching this goal, the jihad is veering the other way. Eight years after 9/11, support for Islamic extremism in the Muslim world is at its lowest point. Support for Al Qaeda has slipped most dramatically in Indonesia, Pakistan, and Jordan. In 2003, more than 50 percent of those surveyed in these countries agreed that bin Laden would "do the right thing regarding world affairs," the Pew Global Attitudes Project found. By 2009 the overall level of support had dropped by half, to about 25 percent. In Pakistan, traditionally a stronghold of extremism, only nine percent of Muslims have a favorable view of Al Qaeda, down from 25 percent in 2008. Even an American failure to stabilize Afghanistan and its terror-ridden neighborhood would be unlikely to ease Al Qaeda's crisis of legitimacy.

But it would be naive to conclude that the cracks in Al Qaeda's ideological shell mean that the movement's end is near. Far from it. Islamist ideology may be losing broad appeal, and the recent global crop of extremists may be disunited and drifting apart. Yet in the fanatics' own view, the ideology remains a crucial cohesive force that binds together an extraordinarily diverse extremist elite. Salafism, despite its crisis, continues to be attractive to those at the social margins. One of the ideology's

most vital functions appears to be to resolve the contradictions of jihad in the 21st century: being a pious Muslim, yet attacking women and children; upholding the authority of the Qur'an, yet prospering from crime; depending on Western welfare states, yet plotting against them; having no personal ties to any Islamic group, yet believing oneself to be part of one.

Al Qaeda's altered design has a number of immediate consequences. The global jihad is losing what David Galula called a strong cause, and with it its political character. This change is making it increasingly difficult to distinguish jihad from organized crime on the one side and rudderless fanaticism on the other. This calls into question the notion that war is still, as Clausewitz said, "a continuation of politics by other means," and therefore whether it can be discontinued politically. Second, coerced by adversaries and enabled by the Internet, the global jihadi movement has dismantled and disrupted its own ability to act as one coherent entity. No leader is in a position to articulate the movement's will, let alone enforce it. It is doubtful, to quote Clausewitz again, whether war can still be "an act of force to compel the enemy to do our will." And because jihad has no single center of gravity, it has no single critical vulnerability. No matter what the outcome of U.S.-led operations in Afghanistan and other places, a general risk of terrorist attacks will persist for the foreseeable future.

In combating terrorism, therefore, quantity matters as much as quality. But some numbers matter more than others. How many additional American and European troops are sent to Afghanistan matters less than the number of terrorist plots that don't happen. Success will be found subtly in statistics, in data curves that slope down or level off, not in one particular action, one capitulation, or even one leader's death. It will be marked not by military campaigns and other events but by decisions not taken and attacks not launched. Because participation in the holy war in both its local and global forms is an individual decision, these choices have to be the unit of analysis, and influencing them must be the goal of policy and strategy. As in crime prevention, measuring success—how many potential terrorists did not join an armed group or commit a terrorist act—is nearly impossible. Success against Islamic militancy may wear a veil. ■