February 6, 2003

What does al Qaeda want?

This is an important question. Perhaps, if an answer could be found, a way could be found to either defeat this organization, or to address the root causes of its existence in such a way that it would no longer have a reason to exist. Here we will look at the question mainly from the inside, examining what al Qaeda says it wants. Of great interest to us is that the answer may be fundamentally a geographical one.

To begin, it is useful to know what al Qaeda is. Al Qaeda (“the Base” in Arabic) is a transnational organization that seeks to unite Islamist militant groups worldwide in a common effort to achieve its goals (for more background on militant Islam, see your textbook page 237). An Islamist or jihadist organization is one that employs Islamic faith, culture and history to legitimize its philosophy and actions.\(^1\) The principal sources Islamists cite are the Qur’an (the holy book of Islam; see your textbook page 234); the Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), and the writings of earlier Islamic militants such as Ibn Taymiyya, Sayyid Qutb, and Muhammad al-Faraj. According to Rohan Gunaratna, the leading academic authority on the organization, al Qaeda is “above all else a secret, almost virtual, organization, one that denies its existence in order to remain in the shadows.”\(^2\) This desire for secrecy explains why we do not see al Qaeda taking direct responsibility for terrorist acts. Instead, these are attributed to the other names and identities employed by al Qaeda, particularly the “World Islamic Front for the Jihad Against the Jews and the Crusaders,” a coalition of seven Islamist militant groups (three Egyptian, two Pakistani, one Bangladeshi and one Afghan). The figurehead of this organization, and of al Qaeda, is Osama bin Laden, formerly a Saudi national and now thought to be in hiding in western Pakistan.

Al Qaeda certainly is a terrorist organization, if one employs the U.S. State Department’s definition of terrorism: “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.”\(^3\) Ayman al-Zawahiri, al Qaeda’s second in command, called recently for an escalation of attacks with “the need to inflict the maximum casualties against the opponent, for this is the language understood by the West, no matter how much time and effort such operations take.”\(^4\) Osama bin Laden, as you will see in his own words below, has called for the killing of American and other Western civilians. Gunaratna regards al Qaeda as an extremely unusual terrorist group in the category he calls “apocalyptic,” one that believes “it has been divinely ordained to commit violent acts, and likely to engage in mass casualty, catastrophic terrorism.”\(^5\) He warns that al Qaeda “will have no compunction about employing chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear weapons against population centers.”\(^6\)

But why? Why do they want to kill Western, and particularly American, civilians? Let us look at the reasons as al Qaeda’s leaders have explained them.

As Osama bin Laden tells it, the main reason for the terrorist attacks is to convince the U.S. that it should withdraw its military forces and other interests from the Islamic Holy Land. In the following statement, the “Land of the Two Holy Places” means Saudi Arabia. The two holy places are the Saudi Arabian cities of Mecca (site of the Ka’aba, and Islam’s most sacred city) and Medina (Islam’s second holiest place, where the Prophet Muhammad is buried; for information on both, see your textbook page 234). The Dome of the Rock is the shrine in Jerusalem containing the sacred rock from where the Prophet Muhammad was said to have ascended into heaven on the “night journey.” This event established Jerusalem as Islam’s third holiest place. (The rock within the Dome is also almost certainly the place where the First and Second Temples of the Jews stood, and where the Ark of the Covenant rested, and is thus the holiest place of Judaism; see your textbook page 232, including Figure 8.12).

The Arabian Peninsula has never—since God made it flat, created its desert, and encircled it with seas—been stormed by any forces like the crusader armies spreading in it like locusts, eating its riches and wiping out its plantations...The latest and greatest of these aggressions, incurred by the Muslims since the death of the Prophet...is the occupation of the Land of the Two Holy...
What Does Al Qaeda Want?

Places—the foundation of the house of Islam, the place of the revelation, the source of the message, and the place of the noble Kaaba, the qibla of all Muslims—by the armies of the American crusaders and their allies. We bemoan this and can only say “No power and power acquiring except through Allah”... To push the enemy—the greatest kufr [infidel]—out of the country is a prime duty. No other duty after Belief is more important than this duty. Utmost effort should be made to prepare and instigate the umma [Islamic community] against the enemy, the American–Israeli alliance—occupying the country of the two Holy Places...to the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem...The crusaders and the Jews have joined together to invade the heart of Dar al-Islam—the Abode of Islam: our most sacred places in Saudi Arabia, Mecca and Medina, including the prophet’s mosque and Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, al-Quds.

In what was arguably his most important policy statement, announcing the formation of the “Islamic World Front for the Jihad against Jews and Crusaders,” bin Laden used the occupation of Islamic sacred space as the principal justification for war against the United States:

In compliance with God’s order, we issue the following fatwa [religious injunction] to all Muslims: The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa mosque and the holy mosque [in Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim.

In an earlier fatwa (1996), bin Laden laid out these goals for al Qaeda: to drive U.S. forces out the Arabian Peninsula, overthrow the Saudi government, and liberate the holy places of Mecca and Medina. Overthrowing the Saudi government and the other autocratic dynasties of the Persian Gulf region, along with other secular and pro-Western regimes of the Middle East—notably Mubarak’s Egypt—is clearly identifiable in al Qaeda ideology as another of the organization’s main objectives.

What is al Qaeda’s ultimate goal? What would be achieved if all Western interests were driven from the Islamic Holy Land, and all of the governments sympathetic to the West were overthrown? According to Gunaratna, the ultimate aim is to reestablish the Caliphate—the empire of Islam’s early golden age—and thereby empower a formidable array of truly Islamic states to wage war on the United States and its allies.

With these goals in mind, what should the United States do? Bin Laden and al Qaeda’s other strategists clearly hope that terrorism will inflict unacceptable losses of American lives, forcing the U.S. to withdraw its troops from Saudi Arabia and neighboring countries. That conviction may stem from the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Somalia after the loss of 18 American soldiers in Mogadishu in 1993 (the “Blackhawk Down” episode; see your textbook page 469) and the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Lebanon following the suicide bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 (see your textbook page 250). Al Qaeda thinks the U.S. has no stomach for sustained sacrifice.

Al Qaeda poses a dilemma for the United States. If the U.S. were to withdraw its troops from the Arabian Peninsula, it might only reaffirm al Qaeda’s belief that its adversary is weak and vulnerable, and encourage more attacks. And, if al Qaeda’s ultimate goal is to take on the U.S. once it has established an Islamic empire, there is no reason to believe that a unilateral withdrawal from the Peninsula would bring a cessation of hostilities. On the other hand, if the U.S. conducts a war on al Qaeda and a broader war against terrorism in a host of Muslim countries, as it is doing now, it offers al Qaeda the best possible grist for its mill of inciting widespread hatred and violence directed against the United States. Al Qaeda will take enormous pleasure in a U.S. war against Iraq (by all indications, to begin in late February or March) because in its view that conflict will affirm to a vast audience that Osama bin Laden was right: the “Crusaders” are waging a war against Muslims and the Islamic world, and it is time to use terrorism because violence is the only language they understand.

We can look forward to two wars in the coming months: one focused on Iraq, and one on the United States. Gunaratna says that al Qaeda alone maintains a reserve of at least 100 targets worldwide. Where are most of these? Suleiman Abu Ghaith, one of bin Laden’s top aides, offers a clue, along with a geographical answer to the question of what al Qaeda wants: “Let the United States know that with God’s permission, the battle will continue to be waged on its territory until it leaves our lands.”

-Joe Hobbs

Discussion questions

1. Read up on and be prepared to talk about and identify the following terms and places: Muslim, Islamist, jihadist, Qur’an, Hadith, Mecca, Medina, Ka’aba, the Dome of the Rock, al-Aqsa, the First and Second Temples, terrorist, apocalypse, sacred space.
What Does Al Qaeda Want?

2. What is al Qaeda?

3. What is terrorism?

4. What do al Qaeda leaders say they want to accomplish with violence? Why do they think violence will help them to achieve their goals? What are the explicitly geographical goals they apparently want to achieve?

5. What are the options of the U.S. in dealing with al Qaeda? What are the potential outcomes of each option? What do you think the U.S. should do?

6. What is the relationship, if any, between the war on terrorism and a war against Iraq? You might look at this from the points of view of the U.S. government, al Qaeda, and Muslim civilians around the world.

7. What is your opinion of al Qaeda’s plan to attack targets in the United States?

References Cited

6 Ibid., p. 11.
8 Bin Laden 2002b, op. cit. footnote vii, p. 150.