For the new theorists of jihad, Al Qaeda is just the beginning

Even as members of Al Qaeda watched in exultation while the Twin Towers fell and the Pentagon burned on September 11, 2001, they realized that the pendulum of catastrophe was swinging in their direction. Osama bin Laden later boasted that he was the only one in the group's upper hierarchy who had anticipated the magnitude of the wound that Al Qaeda inflicted on America, but he also admitted that he was surprised by the towers' collapse. His goal, for at least five years, had been to goad America into invading Afghanistan, an ambition that had caused him to continually raise the stakes—the simultaneous bombings of the United States Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, in August, 1998, followed by the attack on an American warship in the harbor of Aden, Yemen, in October, 2000. Neither of those actions had led the United States to send troops to Afghanistan. After the attacks on New York and Washington, however, it was clear that there would be an overwhelming response. Al Qaeda members began sending their families home and preparing for war.

Two months later, the Taliban government in Afghanistan, which had given sanctuary to bin Laden, was routed, and the Al Qaeda fighters in Tora Bora were pummelled. Although bin Laden and his chief lieutenants escaped death or capture, nearly eighty per cent of Al Qaeda's members in Afghanistan were killed. Worse, Al Qaeda's cause was repudiated throughout the world, even in Muslim countries, where the indiscriminate murder of civilians and the use of suicide operatives were denounced as being contrary to Islam. The remnants of the organization scattered and were on the run. Al Qaeda was essentially dead.

From hiding places in Iran, Yemen, Iraq, and the tribal areas of western Pakistan, Al Qaeda's survivors lamented their failed strategy. Abu al-Walid al-Masri, a senior leader of Al Qaeda's inner council, later wrote that Al Qaeda's experience in Afghanistan was "a tragic example of an Islamic movement managed in an alarmingly meaningless way." He went on, "Everyone knew that their leader was leading them to the abyss and even leading the entire country to utter destruction, but they continued to carry out his orders faithfully and with bitterness."

In June, 2002, bin Laden's son Hamzah posted a message on an Al Qaeda Web site: "Oh, Father! Where is the escape and when will we have a home? Oh, Father! I see spheres of danger everywhere I look. … Tell me, Father, something useful about what I see."

"Oh, son!" bin Laden replied. "Suffice to say that I am full of grief and sighs. … I can only see a very steep path ahead. A decade has gone by in vagrancy and travel, and here we are in our tragedy. Security has gone, but danger remains."

In the view of Abu Musab al-Suri, a Syrian who had been a member of Al Qaeda's inner council, and who is a theorist of jihad, the greatest loss was not the destruction of the terrorist organization but the downfall of the Taliban, which meant that Al Qaeda no longer had a place to train, organize, and recruit. The expulsion from Afghanistan, Suri later wrote, was followed by "three meager years which we spent as fugitives,"  dodging the international dragnet by "moving between
safe houses and hideouts.” In 2002, he fled to eastern Iran, where bin Laden's son Saad and Al Qaeda's security chief, Saif al-Adl, had also taken refuge. There was a five-million-dollar bounty on his head. In this moment of exile and defeat, he began to conceive the future of jihad.

Suri was born into a middle-class family in Aleppo, Syria, in 1958, the year of bin Laden's birth. Red-haired and sturdily built, he has a black belt in judo; his real name is Mustafa Setmariam Nasar. He became involved in politics at the University of Aleppo, where he studied engineering. Later, he moved to Jordan, where he joined the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist group that opposed Syria's dictator, Hafez al-Assad. In 1982, Assad decided that the Brotherhood posed a threat to his authority, and his troops slaughtered as many as thirty thousand people in the city of Hama, one of the group's strongholds. The ruthlessness of Assad's response shocked Suri. He renounced the Brotherhood, which he held responsible for provoking the destruction of Hama, and took refuge in Europe for several years. In 1985, he moved to Spain, where he married and became a Spanish citizen; two years later, he found his way to Afghanistan, where he met Osama bin Laden.

The two men have had a contentious relationship. Although Suri became a member of Al Qaeda's inner council, he grew disillusioned by the fecklessness and the disorganization that characterized Al Qaeda's training camps in Afghanistan. "People come to us with empty heads and leave us with empty heads," he wrote. "They have done nothing for Islam. This is because they have not received any ideological or doctrinal training."

In 1992, he moved back to Spain, where he helped to establish a terrorist cell that played a part in the planning of September 11th. Two years later, Suri moved to England. He soon became a fixture in the Islamist press in London, writing articles for the magazine Al Ansar, which promoted the insurgency in Algeria that resulted in more than a hundred thousand deaths. The magazine's editor was Abu Qatada, a Palestinian cleric who has been characterized as Al Qaeda's spiritual guide in Europe. Al Ansar was, in many ways, the first jihadi think tank; Suri and other strategists suggested tactics for undermining the despotic regimes in the Arab world, and they promoted attacks on the West even as American and European intelligence agencies were largely unaware of the threat that the Islamist movement posed.

Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist who is currently the press aide to the Saudi Ambassador in Washington, Prince Turki al-Faisal, met Qatada and Suri in the early nineties. They smack him as far more radical than Osama bin Laden; at the time, Al Qaeda was primarily an anti-Communist organization. "Osama was in the moderate camp," Khashoggi recalled recently. He coined the phrase "Salafi jihadis" to describe men, such as Abu Qatada and Suri, who had been influenced by Salafism, the puritanical, fundamentalist strain of Islam. "Osama was flirting with these ideas," Khashoggi said. "He was not the one who originated the radical thinking that came to characterize Al Qaeda. He joined these men, rather than the other way around. His organization became the vehicle for their thinking."
Suri later wrote about bin Laden's conversion to his ideas, which took place after bin Laden returned to Afghanistan, in 1996. Salafi jihadis spoke with him about a situation that angered him deeply: the presence of American troops on the holy soil of the Arabian Peninsula. Corrupt Islamic scholars had lent their authority to the Saudi royal family, the jihadis argued, and the royal family, in turn, had given legitimacy to the American incursion. There were two possible solutions: either attack the royal family—which would likely anger the Saudi people—or strike at the American presence. "This would force the Saudi family to defend it, thereby losing its own legitimacy in the eyes of Muslims," Suri writes. "Bin Laden chose the second option."

Suri believed that the jihadi movement had nearly been extinguished by the drying up of financial resources, the killing or capture of many terrorist leaders, the loss of safe havens, and the increasing international cooperation among police agencies. (The British authorities were pursuing him as a suspect in the 1995 Paris Métro bombings.) Accordingly, he saw the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan, in 1996, as a "golden opportunity," and he went there the following year. He set up a military camp in Afghanistan, and experimented with chemical weapons. He also arranged bin Laden's first television interview with CNN. The journalist Peter Bergen, who spent several days in Suri's company while producing the segment, and who recently published an oral history, "The Osama bin Laden I Know," recalled, "He was tough and really smart. He seemed like a real intellectual, very conversant with history, and he had an intense seriousness of purpose. He certainly impressed me more than bin Laden."

In 1999, Suri sent bin Laden an e-mail accusing him of endangering the Taliban regime with his highly theatrical attacks on American targets. And he mocked bin Laden's love of publicity: "I think our brother has caught the disease of screens, flashes, fans, and applause." In his writings, Suri rarely mentioned Al Qaeda and disavowed any direct connection to it, despite having served on its inner council. He preferred to speak more broadly of jihad, which he saw as a social movement, encompassing "all those who bear weapons--individuals, groups, and organizations--and wage jihad on the enemies of Islam." By 2000, he had begun predicting the end of Al Qaeda, whose preeminence he portrayed as a stage in the development of the worldwide Islamist uprising. "Al Qaeda is not an organization, it is not a group, nor do we want it to be," he writes. "It is a call, a reference, a methodology." Eventually, its leadership would be eliminated, he said. (Suri himself was captured in Pakistan in November, 2005. American intelligence sources confirmed that Suri is in the custody of another country but refused to disclose his exact location.) In the time that remained to Al Qaeda, he argued, its main goal should be to stimulate other groups around the world to join the jihadi movement. His legacy, as he saw it, was to codify the doctrines that animated Islamist jihad, so that Muslim youths of the future could discover the cause and begin their own, spontaneous religious war.

In 2002, Suri, in his hideout in Iran, began writing his defining work, "Call for Worldwide Islamic Resistance," which is sixteen hundred pages long and was published on the Internet in December, 2004. Didactic and repetitive, but also ruthlessly candid, the book dissects the faults of the jihadi movement and lays out a plan for the future of the struggle. The goal, he writes, is "to bring about
the largest number of human and material casualties possible for America and its allies." He specifically targets Jews, "Westerners in general," the members of the NATO alliance, Russia, China, atheists, pagans, and hypocrites, as well as "any type of external enemy." (The proliferation of adversaries mirrors Al Qaeda's hatred of all other ideologies.)

And yet, at the same time, he bitterly blames Al Qaeda for dragging the entire jihad movement into an unequal battle that it is likely to lose. Unlike most jihad theorists, Suri acknowledges the setback caused by September 11th. He laments the demise of the Taliban, which he and other Salafi jihadis considered the modern world's only true Islamic government. America's "war on terror," he complains, doesn't discriminate between Al Qaeda adherents and Muslims in general. "Many loyal Muslims," he writes, believe that the September 11th attacks "justified the American assault and have given it a legitimate rationale for reoccupying the Islamic world." But Suri goes on to argue that America's plans for international domination were already evident "in the likes of Nixon and Kissinger," and that this agenda would have been pursued without the provocation of September 11th. Moreover, the American attack on Afghanistan was not really aimed at capturing or killing bin Laden; its true goal was to sweep away the Taliban and eliminate the rule of Islamic law.

In Suri's view, the underground terrorist movement--that is, Al Qaeda and its sleeper cells--is defunct. This approach was "a failure on all fronts," because of its inability to achieve military victory or to rally the Muslim people to its cause. He proposes that the next stage of jihad will be characterized by terrorism created by individuals or small autonomous groups (what he terms "leaderless resistance"), which will wear down the enemy and prepare the ground for the far more ambitious aim of waging war on "open fronts"--an outright struggle for territory. He explains, "Without confrontation in the field and seizing control of the land, we cannot establish a state, which is the strategic goal of the resistance."

Suri acknowledges that the "Jewish enemy, led by America and its nonbelieving, apostate, hypocritical allies," enjoys overwhelming military superiority, but he argues that the spiritual commitment of the jihadis is equally formidable. He questions Al Qaeda's opposition to democracy, which offers radical Islamists an opportunity to "secretly use this comfortable and relaxed atmosphere to spread out, reorganize their ranks, and acquire broader public bases." In many Arabic states, there is a predictable cycle of official tolerance and savage repression, which can work in favor of the Islamists. If the Islamists "open the way for political moderation," Suri writes, they will "stretch out horizontally along the base and spread. So they once again exterminate and jihad grows yet again! So then they try to open things up once again, and Islam stretches out and expands again!"

The Bush Administration has declared a "war of ideas" against Islamism, Suri observes, and has had some success; he cites the modification of textbooks in many Muslim countries. This effort, he writes, must be countered by the propagation of the jihadi creed--and this is what his book attempts to do, offering a minutely detailed account of the tenets of Salafi jihadism. Suri urges his readers to reject their own repressive governments and to rise up against Western occupation and
Zionism. Although the leaders of Al Qaeda have long excused the slaughter of innocents, and many of its attacks have been directed at other Muslims, Suri specifically cautions against harming other Muslims, women and children who may be unbelievers, and other noncombatants.

Suri addresses the issue of Israel, writing that "the Zionist presence in Palestine" is an insult to Muslims; but he also excoriates the secular Palestinian National Authority that governs the country. "Armed jihad is the only solution," he advises. "Every mujahid must wage jihad against all forms of normalization--its institutions, officials, and advocates … destroying them and assassinating those who rely on them … while paying attention not to harm Muslims by mistake."

There are five regions, according to Suri, where jihadis should focus their energies: Afghanistan, Central Asia, Yemen, Morocco, and, especially, Iraq. The American occupation of Iraq, he declares, inaugurated a "historical new period" that almost single-handedly rescued the jihadi movement just when many of its critics thought it was finished.

The invasion of Iraq posed a dilemma for Al Qaeda. Iraq is a largely Shiite nation, and Al Qaeda is composed of Sunnis who believe that the Shia are heretics. Shortly before the invasion, in March, 2003, bin Laden issued his own list of targets, which included Jordan, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen--not Afghanistan or Iraq. Presumably, he regarded the chances of a Taliban resurgence as remote; moreover, he was aware that an Iraqi insurgency could ignite an Islamic civil war and lead to ethnic cleansing of the Sunni minority.

The American occupation posed a major opportunity, however, for a man named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. A former prisoner and sex offender, he was a Bedouin from Jordan. Neither an intellectual nor a strategist, Zarqawi acted largely on brute impulse, but he was a reckless warrior who gained the respect of the Arab mujahideen when he arrived in Pakistan, in the early nineties. In Peshawar, he met a Palestinian sheikh named Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who transformed him from a foot soldier in jihad to a leader who, for a time, rivalled bin Laden.

Maqdisi was already one of the most renowned ideologues of the radical Islamist movement. Incisive, unpredictable, and sharp-tempered, he has a spiritual authority and an originality that make him stand out among jihadi thinkers. His puritanism has led him to denounce many Arab rulers. In "The Evident Sacrileges of the Saudi State," his widely circulated book, Maqdisi declared a fatwa excommunicating the Saudi royal family--in essence, a license for any Muslim to murder them. (The book influenced the men who bombed a Saudi National Guard training center in Riyadh, in 1995, and also those who attacked American troops in Khobar the following year.) "Maqdisi is the most influential jihadi thinker alive," Will McCants, a fellow at West Point's Combatting Terrorism Center, told me.

Maqdisi and Zarqawi formed an immediate bond, an alliance of the man of thought and the man of action. In 1993, they returned to Jordan to start an Islamist group; the following year, both men were picked up by Jordanian authorities, who seized their weapons-grenades and a machine gun--and imprisoned them.
Jordanian prisons were full of radicals and prospective recruits, who were drawn to the cerebral sheikh and his ruthless assistant. Zarqawi soon emerged as the leader of the Islamist group, while Maqdisi continued to be the voice of authority. His decisions were often controversial; for instance, when Hamas began its suicide operations against Israel in 1994, Maqdisi denounced the attacks as unIslamic—a position that Zarqawi supported at the time.

In March, 1999, Jordan's new king, Abdullah II, granted amnesty to political prisoners. Zarqawi went to Afghanistan, but his defiant mentor chose to stay in Jordan, where he felt that he was doing productive work. He was soon back in prison.

Unruly and independent, Zarqawi refused to swear fidelity to bin Laden, and established his own camp in western Afghanistan, populated mainly by Jordanians, Syrians, and Palestinians. He was bluntly critical of Al Qaeda's decision to wage war against America and the West rather than against corrupt Arab dictatorships.

After September 11th, Zarqawi and his followers were flushed out of Afghanistan by the invasion of the coalition forces. He took refuge in Iran and, eventually, in the Kurdish region of Iraq. In April, 2003, after the United States' invasion of Iraq, he set up a new terror group, al-Tawid wal Jihad (Monotheism and Jihad). Unlike the senior members of Al Qaeda, Zarqawi was obsessed with fighting the Shiites, "the most evil of mankind," thinking that he would unite the much larger Sunni world into a definitive conquest of what he saw as the great Islamic heresy. That August, shortly after he began his Iraq campaign, he bombed a Shiite mosque, killing a hundred and twenty-five Muslim worshippers, including the most popular Shiite politician in the country, Ayatollah Muhammad Bakr al-Hakim, who, had he lived, would probably have become Iraq's first freely elected President.

In a letter to bin Laden in January, 2004, which was intercepted by U.S. intelligence, Zarqawi explained that "if we succeed in dragging [the Shia] into the arena of sectarian war it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they fed imminent danger." He said that he would formally pledge allegiance to Al Qaeda if bin Laden endorsed his battle against the Shiites. Bin Laden told Zarqawi to go ahead and "use the Shiite card," perhaps because his son Saad and other Al Qaeda figures were being held in Iran, and he hoped that Zarqawi would persuade the Iranians to hand them over; he hesitated, however, to formally ally himself with Zarqawi.

Meanwhile, Zarqawi's operatives had spread into Europe, where they forged documents and smuggled illegal aliens into the continent while gathering recruits for Iraq. One of his lieutenants, Amer el-Azizi, is a suspect in the March 11, 2004, train bombings in Madrid. Like Zarqawi's organization, the Spanish cell included former prison inmates and operated more like a street gang than like the highly bureaucratic Al Qaeda. Zarqawi and his men were putting into action the vision that Abu Musab al-Suri had laid out for them: small, spontaneous groups carrying out individual acts of terror in Europe, and an open struggle for territory in Iraq.

Suicide bombings became a trademark of Zarqawi's operation, despite Maqdisi's condemnation of the practice. And Zarqawi soon improvised a more gruesome signature: in May, 2004, he was
filmed decapitating Nicholas Berg, a young American contractor. The footage was posted on the Internet, and it was followed by other beheadings, along with bombings and assassinations--hundreds of them.

Within radical Islamist circles, Zarqawi's gory executions and attacks on Muslims at prayer became a source of controversy. From prison, Maqdisi chastised his former protégé. "The pure hands of jihad fighters must not be stained by shedding inviolable blood," he wrote in an article that was posted on his Web site in July, 2004. "There is no point in vengeful acts that terrify people, provoke the entire world against mujahideen, and prompt the world to fight them."

Maqdisi also advised jihadis not to go to Iraq, "because it will be an inferno for them. This is, by God, the biggest catastrophe."

Zarqawi angrily refuted Maqdisi's remarks, saying that he took orders only from God; however, he was beginning to realize that his efforts in Iraq were another dead end for jihad. "The space of movement is starting to get smaller," he had written to bin Laden in June. "The grip is starting to be tightened on the holy warriors' necks and, with the spread of soldiers and police, the future is becoming frightening." Finally, bin Laden agreed to lend his influence to assist Zarqawi in drawing recruits to his cause. In October, 2004, Zarqawi announced his new job title: emir of Al Qaeda in Iraq.

From that time until he was killed by American bombs, in June, 2006, Zarqawi led a murderous campaign unmatched in the history of Al Qaeda. Before Zarqawi became a member, Al Qaeda had killed some thirty-two hundred people. Zarqawi's forces probably killed twice that number.

In July, 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's chief ideologue and second-in-command, attempted to steer the nihilistic Zarqawi closer to the founders' original course. In a letter, he outlined the next steps for the Iraqi jihad: "The first stage: Expel the Americans from Iraq. The second stage: Establish an Islamic authority or emirate, then develop it and support it until it achieves the level of a caliphate. … The third stage: Extend the jihad wave to the secular countries neighboring Iraq. The fourth stage: It may coincide with what came before--the clash with Israel, because Israel was established only to challenge any new Islamic entity."

Zawahiri advised Zarqawi to moderate his attacks on Iraqi Shiites and to stop beheading hostages. "We are in a battle," Zawahiri reminded him. "And more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media."

Zarqawi did not heed Al Qaeda's requests. As the Iraqi jihad fell into barbarism, Al Qaeda's leaders began advising their followers to go to Sudan or Kashmir, where the chances of victory seemed more promising. Al Qaeda, meanwhile, was confronting a new problem, which one of its prime thinkers, Abu Bakr Naji, had already anticipated, in an Internet document titled "The Management of Savagery."

Naji's identity is unknown. Other Islamist writers have said that he was Tunisian, but a Saudi newspaper identified him as Jordanian. Will McCants, the West Point scholar, has translated Naji's
work. He said that "Abu Bakr Naji" might be a collective pseudonym for various theorists of jihad. But, he added, Naji's work has appeared on Sawt al-Jihad, the authoritative Al Qaeda Internet magazine, meaning that it reflects the prevailing views of the organization. Other analysts are cautious about giving too much weight to Naji's words. Speaking at a conference earlier this year, David Kilcullen, the chief counterterrorism strategist at the U.S. State Department, highlighted the tendency of extremist movements to fragment into splinter groups based on ideological differences. "It's important to realize that there are numerous competing points of view within the movement," he said. "Not everything published in jihadist forums has the approval of the senior leadership."

Naji's document, which appeared in the spring of 2004, addresses the crisis and the opportunity posed by the tumult in the Arab world. "During our long journey, through victories and defeats, through the blood, severed limbs and skulls, some of the movements have disappeared and some have remained," he writes. "If we meditate on the factor common to the movements which have remained, we find that there is political action in addition to military action." Many Islamist groups have disparaged the notion of politics, considering it "a filthy activity of Satan," but understanding the politics of the enemy, Naji suggests, is a necessary evil. "We urge that the leaders work to master political science just as they would work to master military science."

Naji argues that Al Qaeda's public image has suffered among Muslims because the organization has failed to carry the battle to the media. "The first step in putting our plan in place should be to focus on justifying the action rationally and through the Sharia," he says. "Second, we must communicate this justification clearly to the people and the masses such that any means or attempt to distort Our action through the media is cut off."

The media is especially important in the chaotic period that the jihadi movement has entered, when people are understandably offended by the carnage. "If we succeed in the management of this savagery, that stage--by the permission of God--will be a bridge to the Islamic state which has been awaited since the fall of the caliphate," he proclaims. "If we fail--we seek refuge with God from that--it does not mean an end of the matter. Rather, this failure will lead to an increase in savagery."

Naji writes in the dry, oddly temperate style that characterizes many Al Qaeda strategy studies. And, like all jihadi theorists, he embeds his analysis in the tradition of Ibn Taymiyya, the thirteenth-century Arab theologian whose ideas undergird the Salafi, or Wahhabi, tradition; bin Laden frequently refers to Ibn Taymiyya in his speeches. The remarks of bin Laden and Zawahiri play only a modest part in Naji's work. Indeed, Naji is a more attentive reader of Western thinkers: the thesis of "The Management of Savagery" is drawn from the observation of the Yale historian Patti Kennedy, in his book "Rise and Fall of the Great Powers" (1987), that imperial overreach leads to the downfall of empires.

Naji began writing his study in 1998, when the jihad movement's most promising targets appeared to be Jordan, the countries of North Africa, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen--roughly the same countries that bin Laden later named. Naji recommended that jihadis continually attack the vital
economic centers of these countries, such as tourist sites and oil refineries, in order to make the regimes concentrate their forces, leaving their peripheries unprotected. Sensing weakness, Naji predicts, the people will lose confidence in their governments, which will respond with increasingly ineffective acts of repression. Eventually, the governments will lose control. Savagery will naturally follow, offering Islamists the opportunity to capture the allegiance of a population that is desperate for order. (Naji cites Afghanistan before the Taliban as an example.) Even though the jihadis will have caused the chaos, that fact will be forgotten as the fighters impose security, provide food and medical treatment, and establish Islamic courts of justice.

After coalition forces overran Al Qaeda compounds in Afghanistan in late 2001, they seized thousands of pages of internal memoranda, records of strategy sessions and ethical debates, and military manuals, but not a single page devoted to the politics of Al Qaeda. Alone among Al Qaeda theorists, Naji briefly addresses whether jihadis are prepared to run a state should they succeed in toppling one. He quotes a colleague who posed the question "Assuming that we get rid of the apostate regimes today, who will take over the ministry of agriculture, trade, economics, etc.?" Beyond the simplistic notion of imposing a caliphate and establishing the rule of Islamic law, the leaders of the organization appear never to have thought about the most basic facts of government. What kind of economic model would they follow? How would they cope with unemployment, so rampant in the Muslim world? Where do they stand on the environment? Health care? The truth, as Naji essentially concedes, is that the radical Islamists have no interest in government; they are interested only in jihad. In his book, Naji breezily answers his friend as follows: "It is not a prerequisite that the mujahid movement has to be prepared especially for agriculture, trade, and industry…As for the one who manages the techniques in each ministry, he can be a paid employee who has no interest in policy and is not a member of the movement or the party. There are many examples of that and a proper explanation would take a long time."

Fouad Hussein is a radical Jordanian journalist who met Zarqawi and Maqdisi in 1996, when, he writes, "a career of trouble led me to Suwaqah Prison." He had published a series of articles criticizing the Jordanian government, and, in response, the authorities locked him up for a month. Since Zarqawi and Maqdisi were being held at the same jail, Hussein sought out interviews with them; eventually, Zarqawi served him tea while Maqdisi talked politics. Zarqawi mentioned that he had been in solitary confinement for more than eight months and had lost his toenails as a result of being tortured. The next week, Zarqawi was sent to solitary again, and his followers staged a riot. Hussein became the negotiator between the prisoners and the warden, who relented—an episode that cemented Hussein's standing among the radical Islamists.

In 2005, Hussein produced what is perhaps the most definitive outline of Al Qaeda's master plan: a book titled "Al-Zarqawi: The Second Generation of Al Qaeda." Although it is largely a favorable biography of Zarqawi and his movement, Hussein incorporates the insights of other Al Qaeda members—notably, Saif al-Adl, the security chief.

It is chilling to read this work and realize how closely recent events seem to be hewing to Al Qaeda's forecasts. Based on interviews with Zarqawi and Adl, Hussein claims that dragging Iran
into conflict with the United States is key to Al Qaeda's strategy. Expanding the area of conflict in the Middle East will cause the U.S. to overextend its forces. According to Hussein, Al Qaeda believes that Iran expects to be attacked by the U.S., because of its interest in building a nuclear weapon. "Accordingly, Iran is preparing to retaliate for or abort this strike by means of using powerful cards in its hand," he writes. These tactics include targeting oil installations in the Persian Gulf, which could cut off sixty per cent of the world's oil supplies, destabilizing Western economies.

In an ominous passage, Hussein notes that "for fifteen years--or since the end of the first Gulf War--Iran has been busy building a secret global army of highly trained personnel and the necessary financial and technological capabilities to carry out any kind of mission." He is clearly referring to Hezbollah, which has so far focussed its attention on Israel. According to Hussein, "Iran has identified American and Jewish targets around the world. This secret army is led by two professional Lebanese men who have pledged full allegiance to Iran and who hold enough of a grudge against the Americans to qualify them to inflict damage on Jewish and American interests around the world."

Iran, he continues, has been cultivating good relations with other Palestinian resistance groups, including Hamas. "Iran views these parties as its entrenched wings in occupied Palestine," Hussein writes, asserting that the peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians at the Egyptian resort town of Sharm al-Sheikh in February, 2005, were secretly aimed at countering Iranian influence on the Palestinian resistance. "Al Qaeda interpreted this as the first step toward launching an attack on Iran," Hussein claims. Both the U.S. and Israel view Hezbollah, the Islamist group in Lebanon, as a creature of the Iranian state, and are intent on eliminating it. "The military campaign against Iran will begin when the United States and Israel succeed in disarming Hezbollah," Hussein predicts.

Hussein claims, without offering evidence, that Iran already has thirty thousand intelligence agents in Iraq. "Since the Americans have not succeeded in eliminating the Sunni resistance, how can they deal with the situation if the Shiites join the resistance? Iran plans to incite its proponents in Iraq to join the anti-U.S. resistance in the event that the United States or Israel launches an attack on Iran. Iran plans to open its border to the resistance and provide it with what it needs to achieve a swift and major victory against the Americans." Al Qaeda, he writes, also expects the Americans to go after Iran's principal ally in the region, Syria. The removal of the Assad regime--a longtime goal of jihadis--will allow the country to be infiltrated by Al Qaeda, putting the terrorists within reach, at last, of Israel.

Hussein observes that Al Qaeda's ideologues have studied the failure of Islamist movements in the past and concluded that they lacked concrete, realistic goals. Therefore, he writes, "Al Qaeda drew up a feasible plan within a well-defined time frame. The plan was based on improving the Islamic jihadist action in quality and quantity and expanding it to include the entire world."

Al Qaeda's twenty-year plan began on September 11th, with a stage that Hussein calls "The Awakening." The ideologues within Al Qaeda believed that "the Islamic nation was in a state of
hibernation," because of repeated catastrophes inflicted upon Muslims by the West. By striking America--"the head of the serpent"--Al Qaeda caused the United States to "lose consciousness and act chaotically against those who attacked it. This entitled the party that hit the serpent to lead the Islamic nation." This first stage, says Hussein, ended in 2003, when American troops entered Baghdad.

The second, "Eye-Opening" stage will last until the end of 2006, Hussein writes. Iraq will become the recruiting ground for young men eager to attack America. In this phase, he argues, perhaps wishfully, Al Qaeda will move from being an organization to "a mushrooming invincible and popular trend." The electronic jihad on the Internet will propagate Al Qaeda's ideas, and Muslims will be pressed to donate funds to make up for the seizure of terrorist assets by the West. The third stage, "Arising and Standing Up," will last from 2007 to 2010. Al Qaeda's focus will be on Syria and Turkey, but it will also begin to directly confront Israel, in order to gain more credibility among the Muslim population.

In the fourth stage, lasting until 2013, Al Qaeda will bring about the demise of Arab governments. "The creeping loss of the regimes' power will lead to a steady growth in strength within Al Qaeda," Hussein predicts. Meanwhile, attacks against the Middle East petroleum industry will continue, and America's power will deteriorate through the constant expansion of the circle of confrontation. "By then, Al Qaeda will have completed its electronic capabilities, and it will be time to use them to launch electronic attacks to undermine the U.S. economy." Islamists will promote the idea of using gold as the international medium of exchange, leading to the collapse of the dollar.

Then an Islamic caliphate can be declared, inaugurating the fifth stage of Al Qaeda's grand plan, which will last until 2016. "At this stage, the Western fist in the Arab region will loosen, and Israel will not be able to carry out preëmptive or precautionary strikes," Hussein writes. "The international balance will change." Al Qaeda and the Islamist movement will attract powerful new economic allies, such as China, and Europe will fall into disunity.

The sixth phase will be a period of "total confrontation." The now established caliphate will form an Islamic Army and will instigate a worldwide fight between the "believers" and the "non-believers." Hussein proclaims, "The world will realize the meaning of real terrorism." By 2020, "definitive victory" will have been achieved. Victory, according to the Al Qaeda ideologues, means that "falsehood will come to an end. … The Islamic state will lead the human race once again to the shore of safety and the oasis of happiness."

Al Qaeda's version of utopia has drawn the allegiance of a new generation of Arabs, who have been tutored on the Internet by ideologues such as Suri and Naji. This "third generation of mujahideen," as Suri calls them, have been radicalized by September 11th, the occupation of Iraq, and the Palestinian intifada. (Suri wrote this before the current struggle in Lebanon.) Those jihadis fighting in the conflict in Iraq have been trained in vicious urban warfare against the most formidable army in history. They will return to their home countries and add their expertise to the
new cells springing up in the Middle East, Central Asia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and many European nations.

With a few troublesome exceptions, America has been free of the kind of indigenous Islamist terrorism that has recently visited Britain. It is a tribute to the American Muslim community, which is more integrated into American society than its counterparts in Europe. Relatively few Muslims in the U.S. have been imprisoned, and the typical Muslim household earns more than the national average. The situation in Europe is starkly different, which means that it will be an ongoing source of trouble, and may continue to be a launching pad for the kind of attacks against America represented by the alleged plot to blow up as many as ten airliners over the Atlantic.

In 2002, the Dutch government commissioned a study of the recruits to the Islamist movement. The report, titled "Recruitment for the Jihad in the Netherlands," divides the jihadis into three groups. First are young men of Dutch descent who have converted to Islam—a phenomenon, noticed elsewhere in Europe, in which traditional forms of worship have lost their allure and radical Islam functions as an all-encompassing identity and as a form of protest. Many of these conversions take place in prison. The second category is composed mainly of illegal Arab immigrants who have little knowledge of the culture and language of their host country. The third and largest category is made up of the sons and grandsons of predominately Moroccan immigrants, native speakers of Dutch who speak little or no Arabic. This group, caught between cultures, identifies most profoundly with radical Islam.

After the murder of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh, in Amsterdam in 2004, the government published another study, "From Dawa to Jihad," detailing the threats from radical Islam. This study notes a sharp difference between "traditional" radical political Islam and what the authors term "radical-Islamic puritanism," which characterizes the new generation. Traditional radical Islam was homogeneous and organized; it had a detailed ideology with a specific vision of a non-Western alternative society. There was, in theory, a peaceful path to this idealized vision, but the traditional radical thinkers believed that this path had been cut off by the West, making jihad—which they saw as a political struggle carried out on the battlefield—the only alternative. The ideology of the new generation, comprising a mixture of ethnic identities, is alarmingly vague. Their only political goal is a return to the ideals of the seventh-century Prophet and his early successors; they spout messianic slogans about the caliphate and imposing Sharia, without a clear idea of what those goals entail. They categorically reject the possibility of a peaceful path. They believe that the world is divided between "sons of light" and "sons of darkness," and that a fight to the end is the will of God.

Al Qaeda's apocalyptic agenda is not shared by all Islamists. Although most jihadi groups approve of Al Qaeda's attacks on America and Europe, their own goals are often more parochial, having to do with purifying Islam and toppling regimes in their own countries which they see as heretical. Many of these groups would be happy to see Al Qaeda disappear, so that their campaigns can be understood as nationalist guerrilla straggles with specific political goals.
This rupture has grown increasingly apparent in the past five years. Sheikh Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, Hezbollah’s spiritual leader, publicly denounced the September 11th attacks and condemned Al Qaeda's use of suicide bombers, even though the tactic was employed in the 1983 attacks on the U.S. Embassy in Beirut and the barracks of American and French troops in Lebanon, both of which are believed to have been carried out by Hezbollah. After September 11th, leaders of the Egyptian Islamist organization, Gama'a Islamiya, which has worked closely with Al Qaeda in the past, publicly condemned Al Qaeda's tactics and its goals of worldwide jihad. Even some of Zawahiri’s former colleagues in the Egyptian terror group he formed, Al Jihad, argue that Al Qaeda has undermined the cause of Islam by instigating anti-Muslim sentiment in the U.S. and the West.

It is notable how seldom these ideologues refer to the words of bin Laden or Zawahiri, the nominal leaders of the movement, perhaps because the declarations of Al Qaeda’s leadership are directed more at Americans and Europeans than at the jihadis. "Beware the scripted enemy, who plays to a global audience," David Kilcullen, the counterterrorism strategist at the State Department, wrote in a paper now being used by the U.S. military in Iraq as a handbook for dealing with the insurgency. Al Qaeda, he wrote, propagates a "single narrative" aimed at influencing the West; but each faction within the jihadi movement has its own version of this narrative, often sharply different from the message being put forward by bin Laden and Zawahiri.

Although American and European intelligence communities are aware of the jihadi texts, the work of these ideologues often reads like a playbook that U.S. policymakers have been slavishly, if inadvertently, following. "The data don't get to the top, because the decision-makers are not looking for that kind of information," a policy analyst who works closely with the American intelligence community told me. "They think they know better."

As the writings of Abu Musab al-Suri, Abu Bakr Naji, Fouad Hussein, and others make clear, the tradition of Salafi jihad existed before bin Laden and Al Qaeda and will likely survive them; yet, from the beginning of the war on terror, the strategy of the Administration has been to decapitate Al Qaeda’s leadership. Bruce Hoffman, who is the author of "Inside Terrorism" and a professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, told me, "One of the problems with the kill-or-capture metric is that it has often been to the exclusion of having a deeper, richer understanding of the movement, its origins, and our adversaries' mindset. The nuances are absolutely critical. Our adversaries are wedded to the ideology that informs and fuels their struggle, and, by not paying attention, we risk not knowing our enemy."