

Heritage Lectures

No. 855

Delivered August 12, 2004



Published by The Heritage Foundation

November 8, 2004

Jihadist Strategies in the War on Terrorism

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I am going to be talking about a group of people who are generally known as fundamentalists, extremists, or (as I have grown to call them) “jihadis.” The term jihad suggests what they believe their lives are about—holy war that is directed against people they believe are their enemies and the enemies of their way of life.

Yet there is more to what they are doing than simple warfare. In fact, I believe they are involved in a war that has a definite strategy behind it, not simply the sort of random attacks that people talk about all the time. However, if you watch the news it is really hard to see that. You look at the news and you see Muslims being killed, you see churches being attacked, you see Jews being killed. You see all sorts of people being targeted and attacked, and in some cases those attacks seem to be counterproductive. After all, it does not make sense to kill the Muslims that you are trying to win over to your side of the argument. It does not make sense to target churches or other places of worship when all this does is win sympathy for the victims of these attacks.

There are also things like the Madrid attack, which, while it seemed to attain their ends, was accompanied by a second plan for a second attack on April 2—an attack that, if it had been carried out, would have had nothing to do with the elections, or with Spanish participation in Iraq. In fact, it could not have been sold as anything except an apparently random attack—a counterproductive attack on the Spanish. It might have convinced the Spanish them-

Talking Points

- The military strategies that most Islamic terrorists follow are generally based on something they call the “Method of Mohammad.”
- These strategies attempt to mirror Mohammad’s life and recreate today what he did in order to make Islam successful 1,400 years ago.
- Every single one of these terrorist groups subscribes to this “method” in one form or another and uses it in order to pinpoint who and when they will attack.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/research/nationalsecurity/hl855.cfm

Produced by the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis
Institute for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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selves to get re-involved in Iraq, or at least (in some way) with the war on terrorism.

However, I am going to argue that, in fact, this is not true. These are *not* random attacks; they are not entirely counterproductive. They do have strategies that are rational, systematic, and followed rigorously. Unlike other groups—such as the Anarchists of the late 19th and early 20th century (which really did seem to carry out pretty random attacks), or the Communists (whose pragmatism allowed them to pretty much get away with anything as long as they could make some sort of argument that it was helping the cause)—these new terrorists believe that they have an ideology that is so important that it must be followed rigorously. There are many different groups and each one of them is carrying out its own rational systematic strategy.

To understand each attack, therefore, you have to get into the mindset of the group that carried out that attack and not try to make broad generalizations about jihadis, extremists, or fundamentalists. These are very different people and very different groups with very different arguments about how they should be carrying out their warfare. To understand their arguments and attacks you have to understand their ideology, and in some cases understand theological arguments that they are having with the rest of the Islamic world.

Levels of Strategy

I am going to differentiate in this talk between four different levels of strategy or tactics. First, there are *grand strategies*; then there are *military strategies*; *operations* (or operational art, as some people call it); and then there are *tactics*. I am only going to be talking about the first two levels here—that is, grand strategies and military strategies.

Grand strategy is basically the same for almost every jihadi group. This is, I think, the only place where you can say that there is something unifying these groups and holding them together. The objective is, almost across the board, the same. They want to restore the greatness of their vision of Islam by defeating every rival to its power. The means by which they are going to attempt this are also the same and fit into this grand strategic vision. They are hoping to create an Islamic state.

They all argue about what that means and how it is going to be created, but somewhere they want to create an Islamic state. They also want to defeat all of their rivals through military means—that is, through violence of some sort. Additionally, they hope to win over the rest of the Islamic world to their vision of what Islam is about and how to restore Islam to greatness.

Those three things are the same across the board. If you take a look at these extremist groups, they all agree, at least on those basic principles. The result of this grand strategic vision is that they must take on an immense number of enemies. They must take on, in fact, what they call “The West” (or as some of them say, “the Jewish crusaders”); “the agent rulers” (that is, the rulers in almost every single one of the Muslim states); “the apostates and the heretics,” (which means any Muslim that doesn’t agree with them as well as the Shi’a groups—because most of the groups I’ll be talking about are Sunni). They also have to take on what they call “oppressors,” but this is a term that they use in a very specific way and has little to do with the socialist or leftist use of this term. For instance, “oppressors” include all the Hindus in the world.

The military strategies, unlike this grand strategic vision, seem more random. However, the extremists do not attack all of these groups simultaneously. They have, in fact, prioritized which one of these groups has to be attacked first, second, and third; which is the most important; which is the most dangerous; how they are going to carry out these attacks. In other words, they have definite strategies, but differing definite strategies, even about how to carry out these military attacks. Behind the seeming randomness then, even of the military strategies, there are a few basic principles which will help you to understand, when you see on the news that this or that group has carried out an attack on X, Y, or Z, why they might have chosen them and why they might be choosing another group next.

Turning to the Past

Generally, these military strategies are based on something extremists call the “Method of Mohammad.” This term comes from a lot of interpretation

of the Qur'an and Hadith, but it also comes from something called the Sirah, which are not well known in the West, but are very widely known in the Islamic world. The Sirah are essentially sacralized biographies of Mohammad's life. They tell the story of Mohammad in chronological fashion and provide the kind of historical background and continuous narrative that is missing from both the Qur'an and the Hadith.

In the Sirah, Mohammad is portrayed as the perfect man. Because he is the perfect man, he will have the perfect method for applying Islam. In fact, some believe that his early successes were miraculous—so miraculous that they could only have been supported and helped by God. Therefore, the logic goes, if followers want to experience the same successes, they have to follow his footsteps exactly, precisely following the “Method of Mohammad.” In other words, the strategies that I am going to look at today were taken from an attempt to recreate, precisely, Mohammad's life and what he did in order to make Islam successful 1,400 years ago.

The First Stage. What is this method? It begins where Mohammad began, which was in the city of Mecca, a place that was hostile to his message and that persecuted the early Muslims. This was the place where he began what was called the *Da'wah*—the call to Islam, the call to repent, to turn to God, and to follow the commandments of God. There was no violence allowed at this stage. Mohammad created a very small group, a *jama'a* which met in secret for fear of persecution, but was slowly inculcated into Islam as a way of life. It became, in fact, a small vanguard with an “Amir”—a leader. In this case, that meant Mohammad.

As you can see, this easily translates into the modern world—the creation of a small vanguard that will lead the rest of the world to the light of Islam (or at least some people's vision of Islam). This vanguard will not, at first, practice violence, but will instead be inculcated into the true Islam, and what the true Islam entails for their lives. It consists of “true believers,” a small vanguard that always has a leader. There is a Hadith from the traditions of Mohammad that says, “Wherever there are three Muslims, there must be an Amir.” There must be a leader and they take this literally. Where-

ever there are three of these extremists together, they truly believe that one of them must be the Amir. Notice also, that in their vision, this is done in secrecy. Therefore, you are allowed to do this in secrecy, away from the prying eyes of the unbelieving world. That is the first stage.

The Second Stage. The second stage in Mohammad's life and in their method is the *Hijrah*, the migration away from Mecca (an unbelieving place) to Medina (a place that was more accepting and open to the message of Islam). Once there is a dedicated vanguard, in other words, you have to migrate away from the unbelieving society to someplace where there is already an Islamic society or you must create one yourself, because that is what Mohammad was forced to do (i.e., use a small vanguard to create the perfect Islamic society). Therefore the argument is, “We must do exactly the same thing. The vanguard of true believers must migrate away from the unbelieving society to someplace that is either more open to our ideas, where there is already an Islamic society, or we must create one of our own to become stronger.”

The *Hijrah* is taken so seriously that there are several groups that have named themselves after those people who immigrated—the *Muhajiroon*. They call themselves this in several different countries. Osama bin Laden talked about this stage and believed that when he was leaving Saudi Arabia to go first to Sudan, and then to Afghanistan, he was taking part in this stage of the “Method of Mohammad.” He believed he was migrating away from the unbelieving Saudi Arabia to the perfect Islamic state in Afghanistan. Other groups have been no less certain about this. Some have migrated within an Islamic country (for instance, within Egypt or within Algeria) to set up their own mini-Islamic state in those countries.

The Third Stage. The third stage is *Medina*, a stage that includes the creation of an Islamic state and the permission to use violence. Almost immediately after Mohammad arrived in Medina, he set up, with the help of his small vanguard of dedicated believers, an Islamic state that would implement the new creed of Islam fully. Today there are various places that might act as that Islamic state. And several extremist groups believe that you must create

an Islamic state before you can proceed to the next part of the Medinan state, which is *jihad*.

In this part of the third stage, the belief goes, Muslims are allowed to take part in violence for the sake of Islam. This is what happened in Mohammad's life. It was at Medina that he was first allowed to use violence against the unbelievers, those who had been oppressing him, those who had been persecuting him, and then gradually those people against whom he was allowed to carry out this warfare included most of the unbelievers in the Arab peninsula.

Many of the groups that we hear about on the news believe that they have created this Islamic state and that they are now allowed to carry out this jihad against people in the West and elsewhere. It is here that you find the biggest split among these groups and the strategies that they are willing to follow because once you have decided to carry out violence, the question becomes who exactly you should be carrying this violence out against.

Who Are the Targets?

There are basically three different strategies that have been adopted by these groups. If you look at all the groups out there and who they have decided to attack, the targets fit into one of these three groups.

The first group has decided that we need to attack the "near enemy" first, followed by the "far enemy." The second group has decided to attack the "greater unbelief" first, followed by the "lesser unbelief." The third group has decided to attack the "apostates" first, followed by the "unbelievers." All of these come from the "Method of Mohammad." All of them can be read into the Qur'an, the Hadith, and the Sirah.

The "Near Enemy." Who is the "near enemy" and who is the "far enemy"? This is where you have people disagreeing. When Mohammad was deciding who he was first going to confront with violence, he was surrounded by people who did not support him, and it was those people he was first forced to engage with violence—those people who lived directly around him. Later, he was allowed to carry out violence elsewhere in order to spread the message of Islam.

Who is today's "near enemy" according to these groups that use this particular strategy? It is anyone in the Islamic lands—those who have occupied Islamic lands, those who have taken away Islamic territory, and even the rulers of some of these countries who call themselves Muslims. It encompasses those enemies that are directly inside these countries. They must be taken on first and defeated, and then afterwards, we can spread the message of Islam—without violence if possible, but with violence if necessary—to the rest of the world.

The "Greater Unbelief." The second strategy attacks the "greater unbelief" first, followed by the "lesser unbelief." The "greater unbelief" becomes that major enemy that has worn many guises over the centuries and which was embodied first by the Romans, then by the Greeks, and finally by the United States. The U.S. is considered that "greater unbelief" that must be taken on and defeated, whether its citizens are in Islamic countries or elsewhere. Once they are defeated, it is believed, all the rest of the "unbelievers" will fall into line. Terrorists then believe they can take on the "lesser unbelief"—all the other enemies of their vision of Islam—after the U.S. is gone.

"Apostates." The third strategy attacks the "apostates" first, followed by other "unbelievers." The "apostates," as I mentioned, include the heretics within the Muslim world (e.g., the Shi'a). There are groups that are dedicated to the idea of a systematic, rational strategy to first defeat all the apostates, whether they are the rulers like Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf or whether they are groups of people who follow a vision of Islam that terrorists do not agree with (such as the Shi'a, the Ahmadi or others). The idea is to defeat them first and then go outside of these Islamic countries and take on the rest of the "unbelievers."

If you look at what is going on in the world today, every single one of these terrorist groups subscribes to one of these strategies and uses it in order to pinpoint who and when they will attack.

After the Jihad

After his triumphal stay in Medina, Mohammad was able to leave and return to Mecca and take the city without a fight. It became a part of the Islamic

state without a fight or a battle—the doors were open and he was welcomed in.

These people also believe the same thing. They believe that once they begin this jihad and once they set up this Islamic state and carry this fight to the “unbelievers,” that all of the places that have been the centers of unbelief in the Islamic world (especially Saudi Arabia) will open up and become part of their Islamic state. The belief insists that one by one, they will all join with the extremists as they show success in other countries.

These strategies define what is happening in the world today. If you look at the attacks that are going on, this is how you can tell precisely which group you are dealing with and which strategy they are following. Listen to what they are saying. I have been amazed by the things they are willing to say, the things they are willing to put on a Web site (in what are called *khutab*—the preaching on Friday afternoon). Throughout the Islamic world you have people who are willing to say exactly what they believe, even if they are in the most extremist vein. You do not have to translate, decode, or decrypt these things—they are perfectly willing to share their strategies with the rest of the world.

Recent Attacks Explained

I encourage you to take a look at these English jihadi sites and see for yourself. It now makes sense why Madrid was attacked on March 11. After all, the terrorists had been talking about that

attack long before anything had happened in Iraq (and long before Spain had decided to go to Iraq). The jihadis were talking about carrying out some sort of huge attack on Spain.

Why? Because Spain has been occupying “Islamic land” for the past 600–700 years. These terrorists believe that they are actually beginning with the “near enemy” by taking on Spain and occupying Andalusia. They believed that by carrying out these attacks they would win over the Muslims within Spain and North Africa, who would then join up with them to return Andalusia to the Islamic fold. From this standpoint, it also makes sense that they do not care about other Muslims being killed. To people with this mindset everyone who does not agree with them is an apostate or a heretic. Otherwise, they would have joined up with them. Therefore, it does not matter if other Muslims are killed because in the long run they believe the grand strategic vision and military strategies will eventually bring success.

Using this logic, it makes sense to attack the United States, because if you can destroy the United States (the “greater unbelief”), then terrorists who follow this particular strategy believe they will not only have eliminated their greatest enemy, but will then be able to return in triumph to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and elsewhere and win over the rest of the Islamic world without a fight.

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