

The Jihad Against the Jihadis

How moderate Muslim leaders waged war on extremists—and won.



Yahya Arhab / EPA-Corbis

Alleged members of an Al Qaeda cell in Yemen are detained in a courtroom cage in Sanaa in December

By Fareed Zakaria | NEWSWEEK

Published Feb 12, 2010

From the magazine issue dated Feb 22, 2010

September 11, 2001, was gruesome enough on its own terms, but for many of us, the real fear was of what might follow. Not only had Al Qaeda shown it was capable of sophisticated and ruthless attacks, but a far greater concern was that the group had or could establish a powerful hold on the hearts and minds of Muslims. And if Muslims sympathized with Al Qaeda's cause, we were in for a herculean struggle. There are more than 1.5 billion Muslims living in more than 150 countries across the world. If jihadist ideology became attractive to a significant part of this population, the West faced a clash of civilizations without end, one marked by blood and tears.

These fears were well founded. The 9/11 attacks opened the curtain on a world of radical and violent Islam that had been festering in the Arab lands and had been exported across the globe, from London to Jakarta. Polls all over the Muslim world revealed deep anger against America and the West and a surprising degree of support for Osama bin Laden. Governments in most of these countries were ambivalent about this

phenomenon, assuming that the Islamists' wrath would focus on the United States and not themselves. Large, important countries like Saudi Arabia and Indonesia seemed vulnerable.

More than eight eventful years have passed, but in some ways it still feels like 2001. Republicans have clearly decided that fanning the public's fears of rampant jihadism continues to be a winning strategy. Commentators furnish examples of backwardness and brutality from various parts of the Muslim world—and there are many—to highlight the grave threat we face.

But, in fact, the entire terrain of the war on terror has evolved dramatically. Put simply, the moderates are fighting back and the tide is turning. We no longer fear the possibility of a major country succumbing to jihadist ideology. In most Muslim nations, mainstream rulers have stabilized their regimes and their societies, and extremists have been isolated. This has not led to the flowering of Jeffersonian democracy or liberalism. But modern, somewhat secular forces are clearly in control and widely supported across the Muslim world. Polls, elections, and in-depth studies all confirm this trend.

The focus of our concern now is not a broad political movement but a handful of fanatics scattered across the globe. Yet Washington's vast nation-building machinery continues to spend tens of billions of dollars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and there are calls to do more in Yemen and Somalia. What we have to ask ourselves is whether any of that really will deter these small bands of extremists. Some of them come out of the established democracies of the West, hardly places where nation building will help. We have to understand the changes in the landscape of Islam if we are going to effectively fight the enemy on the ground, rather than the enemy in our minds.

Once, no country was more worrying than bin Laden's homeland. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, steward of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, had surpassed Egypt as the de facto leader of the Arab world because of the vast sums of money it doled out to Islamic causes—usually those consonant with its puritanical Wahhabi doctrines. Since 1979 the Saudi regime had openly appeased its homegrown Islamists, handing over key ministries and funds to reactionary mullahs. Visitors to Saudi Arabia after 9/11 were shocked by what they heard there. Educated Saudis—including senior members of the government—publicly endorsed wild conspiracy theories and denied that any Saudis had been involved in the 9/11 attacks. Even those who accepted reality argued that the fury of some Arabs was inevitable, given America's one-sided foreign policy on the Arab-Israeli issue.

America's initial reaction to 9/11 was to focus on Al Qaeda. The group was driven out of its base in Afghanistan and was pursued wherever it went. Its money was tracked and blocked, its fighters arrested and killed. Many other nations joined in, from France to Malaysia. After all, no government wanted to let terrorists run loose in its land.

But a broader conversation also began, one that asked, "Why is this happening, and what can we do about it?" The most influential statement on Islam to come out of the post-9/11 era was not a presidential speech or an intellectual's essay. It was, believe it or not, a United Nations report. In 2002 the U.N. Development Program published a detailed study of the Arab world. The paper made plain that in an era of globalization, openness, diversity, and tolerance, the Arabs were the world's great laggards. Using hard data, the report painted a picture of political, social, and intellectual stagnation in countries from the Maghreb to the Gulf. And it was written by a team of Arab scholars. This was not paternalism or imperialism. It was truth.

The report, and many essays and speeches by political figures and intellectuals in the West, launched a process of reflection in the Arab world. The debate did not take the form that many in the West wanted—no one said, "You're right, we are backward." But still, leaders in Arab countries were forced to advocate modernity and moderation openly rather than hoping that they could quietly reap its fruits by day while

palling around with the mullahs at night. The Bush administration launched a series of programs across the Muslim world to strengthen moderates, shore up civil society, and build forces of tolerance and pluralism. All this has had an effect. From Dubai to Amman to Cairo, in some form or another, authorities have begun opening up economic and political systems that had been tightly closed. The changes have sometimes been small, but the arrows are finally moving in the right direction.

Ultimately, the catalyst for change was something more lethal than a report. After 9/11, Al Qaeda was full of bluster: recall the videotapes of bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, boasting of their plans. Yet they confronted a far less permissive environment. Moving money, people, and materials had all become much more difficult. So they, and local groups inspired by them, began attacking where they could—striking local targets rather than global ones, including a nightclub and hotel in Indonesia, a wedding party in Jordan, cafés in Casablanca and Istanbul, and resorts in Egypt. They threatened the regimes that, either by accident or design, had allowed them to live and breathe.

Over the course of 2003 and 2004, Saudi Arabia was rocked by a series of such terrorist attacks, some directed against foreigners, but others at the heart of the Saudi regime—the Ministry of the Interior and compounds within the oil industry. The monarchy recognized that it had spawned dark forces that were now endangering its very existence. In 2005 a man of wisdom and moderation, King Abdullah, formally ascended to the throne and inaugurated a large-scale political and intellectual effort aimed at discrediting the ideology of jihadism. Mullahs were ordered to denounce suicide bombings, and violence more generally. Education was pried out of the hands of the clerics. Terrorists and terror suspects were "rehabilitated" through extensive programs of education, job training, and counseling. Central Command chief Gen. David Petraeus said to me, "The Saudi role in taking on Al Qaeda, both by force but also using political, social, religious, and educational tools, is one of the most important, least reported positive developments in the war on terror."

Perhaps the most successful country to combat jihadism has been the world's most populous Muslim nation, Indonesia. In 2002 that country seemed destined for a long and painful struggle with the forces of radical Islam. The nation was rocked by terror attacks, and a local Qaeda affiliate, Jemaah Islamiah, appeared to be gaining strength. But eight years later, JI has been marginalized and main-stream political parties have gained ground, all while a young democracy has flowered after the collapse of the Suharto dictatorship.

Magnus Ranstorp of Stockholm's Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies recently published a careful study examining Indonesia's success in beating back extremism. The main lesson, he writes, is to involve not just government but civil society as a whole, including media and cultural figures who can act as counterforces to terrorism. (That approach obviously has greater potential in regions and countries with open and vibrant political systems—Southeast Asia, Turkey, and India—than in the Arab world.)

Iraq occupies an odd place in this narrative. While the invasion of Iraq inflamed the Muslim world and the series of blunders during the initial occupation period created dangerous chaos at the heart of the Middle East, Iraq also became a stage on which Al Qaeda played a deadly hand, and lost. As Al Qaeda in Iraq gained militarily, it began losing politically. It turned from its broader global ideology to focus on a narrow sectarian agenda, killing Shias and fueling a Sunni-Shia civil war. In doing so, the group also employed a level of brutality and violence that shocked most Iraqis. Where the group gained control, even pious people were repulsed by its reactionary behavior. In Anbar province, the heart of the Sunni insurgency, Al Qaeda in Iraq would routinely cut off the fingers of smokers. Even those Sunnis who feared the new Iraq began to prefer Shia rule to such medievalism.

Since 9/11, Western commentators have been calling on moderate Muslim leaders to condemn jihadist ideology, issue *fatwas* against suicide bombing, and denounce Al Qaeda. Since about 2006, they've begun to do so in significant numbers. In 2007 one of bin Laden's most prominent Saudi mentors, the preacher and

scholar Salman al-Odah, wrote an open letter criticizing him for "fostering a culture of suicide bombings that has caused bloodshed and suffering, and brought ruin to entire Muslim communities and families." That same year Abdulaziz al ash-Sheikh, the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, issued a *fatwa* prohibiting Saudis from engaging in jihad abroad and accused both bin Laden and Arab regimes of "transforming our youth into walking bombs to accomplish their own political and military aims." One of Al Qaeda's own top theorists, Abdul-Aziz el-Sherif, renounced its extremism, including the killing of civilians and the choosing of targets based on religion and nationality. Sherif—a longtime associate of Zawahiri who crafted what became known as Al Qaeda's guide to jihad—has called on militants to desist from terrorism, and authored a rebuttal of his former cohorts.

Al-Azhar University in Cairo, the oldest and most prestigious school of Islamic learning, now routinely condemns jihadism. The Darul Uloom Deoband movement in India, home to the original radicalism that influenced Al Qaeda, has inveighed against suicide bombing since 2008. None of these groups or people have become pro-American or liberal, but they have become anti-jihadist.

This might seem like an esoteric debate. But consider: the most important moderates to denounce militants have been the families of radicals. In the case of both the five young American Muslims from Virginia arrested in Pakistan last year and Christmas bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, parents were the ones to report their worries about their own children to the U.S. government—an act so stunning that it requires far more examination, and praise, than it has gotten. This is where soft power becomes critical. Were the fathers of these boys convinced that the United States would torture, maim, and execute their children without any sense of justice, they would not have come forward. I doubt that any Chechen father has turned his child over to Vladimir Putin's regime.

The data on public opinion in the Muslim world are now overwhelming. London School of Economics professor Fawaz Gerges has analyzed polls from dozens of Muslim countries over the past few years. He notes that in a range of places—Jordan, Pakistan, Indonesia, Lebanon, and Bangladesh—there have been substantial declines in the number of people who say suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets can be justified to defend Islam. Wide majorities say such attacks are, at most, rarely acceptable.

The shift has been especially dramatic in Jordan, where only 12 percent of Jordanians view suicide attacks as "often or sometimes justified" (down from 57 percent in 2005). In Indonesia, 85 percent of respondents agree that terrorist attacks are "rarely/never justified" (in 2002, by contrast, only 70 percent opposed such attacks). In Pakistan, that figure is 90 percent, up from 43 percent in 2002. Gerges points out that, by comparison, only 46 percent of Americans say that "bombing and other attacks intentionally aimed at civilians" are "never justified," while 24 percent believe these attacks are "often or sometimes justified."

This shift does not reflect a turn away from religiosity or even from a backward conception of Islam. That ideological struggle persists and will take decades, not years, to resolve itself. But the battle against jihadism has fared much better, much sooner, than anyone could have imagined.

The exceptions to this picture readily spring to mind—Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen. But consider the conditions in those countries. In Afghanistan, jihadist ideology has wrapped itself around a genuine ethnic struggle in which Pashtuns feel that they are being dispossessed by rival groups. In Pakistan, the regime is still where Saudi Arabia was in 2003 and 2004: slowly coming to realize that the extremism it had fostered has now become a threat to its own survival. In Yemen, the state simply lacks the basic capacity to fight back. So the rule might simply be that in those places where a government lacks the desire, will, or capacity to fight jihadism, Al Qaeda can continue to thrive.

But the nature of the enemy is now quite different. It is not a movement capable of winning over the Arab street. Its political appeal does not make rulers tremble. The video messages of bin Laden and Zawahiri once unsettled moderate regimes. Now they are mostly dismissed as almost comical attempts to find popular causes to latch onto. (After the financial crash, bin Laden tried his hand at bashing greedy bankers.)

This is not an argument to relax our efforts to hunt down militants. Al Qaeda remains a group of relentless, ruthless killers who are trying to recruit other fanatics to carry out hideous attacks that would do terrible damage to civilized society. But the group's aura is gone, its political influence limited. Its few remaining fighters are spread thinly throughout the world and face hostile environments almost everywhere.

America is no longer engaged in a civilizational struggle throughout the Muslim world, but a military and intelligence campaign in a set of discrete places. Now, that latter struggle might well require politics, diplomacy, and development assistance—in the manner that good foreign policy always does (Petraeus calls this a "whole-of-government strategy"). We have allies; we need to support them. But the target is only a handful of extremist organizations that have found a small group of fanatics to carry out their plans. To put it another way, even if the United States pursues a broad and successful effort at nation building in Afghanistan and Yemen, does anyone really think that will deter the next Nigerian misfit—or fanatic from Detroit—from getting on a plane with chemicals in his underwear? Such people cannot be won over. They cannot be reasoned with; they can only be captured or killed.

The enemy is not vast; the swamp is being drained. Al Qaeda has already lost in the realm of ideology. What remains is the battle to defeat it in the nooks, crannies, and crevices of the real world.

© 2010

<http://www.newsweek.com/id/233607/page/1>