

CHAPTER TWELVE

AL-QAEDA'S "CULTURAL JIHAD:" VIOLENT CENSORSHIP BY AL-QAEDA AND ASSOCIATED MOVEMENTS, 2001-2011

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Introduction

One of the major debates surrounding 9/11 and the subsequent "Global War on Terrorism" is Al-Qaeda's motivation for launching terrorist attacks against American and European targets. According to many western politicians and scholars, global salafist-jihadist terrorism is part of a deeply ideological struggle motivated by a profound hatred of western secularism and liberal modernity.¹ Other specialists, such as former CIA analyst Michael Scheuer, argue that Al-Qaeda's war against the west is primarily political in nature, undertaken in direct response to western military, political and economic actions in the Muslim world, such as the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the stationing of American forces in Saudi Arabia from 1990-2003 and American backing for Israel. According to Scheuer, "It was a profound and unnecessary mistake...to believe that the Islamist militants' animosities for the accoutrements of our society were the main motivating and unifying factors behind their hatred and willingness to wage war against the United States."²

Osama bin Laden, in his statements directed at western audiences, clearly sought to reinforce the second view. He regularly argued that attacks such as 9/11 were acts of reciprocity and retaliation. As Bin Laden put it in a November 2002 "Letter to the American people:" "Whoever has destroyed our villages and towns, then we have the right to destroy their villages and towns. Whoever has stolen our wealth, then we have the right to destroy their economy. And whoever has killed our civilians, then we have the right to kill theirs."³ In the words of scholar Raymond Ibrahim,

“Reciprocal treatment has been Al-Qaeda's sole justification for all the terrorist acts it has perpetrated against the West.”⁴

Bin Laden's most direct attempt to refute the notion that Al-Qaeda attacked America because it hated liberal democracy came in October 2004, when he released a video directed to the American people. The former leader of Al-Qaeda directly attacked “Bush's claim that we hate freedom. If so, let him explain to us why we have not attacked Sweden, for instance.”⁵

Eventually, though, salafist-jihadists would attack Sweden, in December 2010, when a would-be suicide bomber with links to Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) blew himself up in the middle of Stockholm. The primary motivation for the attack was that three years earlier, a Swedish cartoonist drew an insulting caricature of the Prophet Muhammad. In fact, this attack provides just one example of how bin Laden's October 2004 claim has been refuted by both Al-Qaeda's statements and its actions since 9/11. This record shows a proven willingness to attack western countries precisely because of their freedom; specifically, because the right of free expression has enabled the publication of creative works deemed defamatory towards Islam and the Prophet Muhammad.

This became quite clear in the aftermath of the Danish Muhammad cartoons published in September 2005. In an April 2006 statement reacting to the cartoons, bin Laden called for the death of not only the cartoonists, but of any writers or intellectuals critical of Islam or the Prophet Muhammad. In his words: “The condition and ruling of the Zindeeqs⁶ and atheists who defame the religion and slander and insult our honorable Messenger, peace be upon him, has been clarified by the Imam Ibn al-Qayyim, who made it clear that the crime of the Zindeeq is the grossest of crimes and that the evil of his remaining amongst the Muslims is among the greatest of evils, and that he is to be killed and his repentance is not to be accepted.”⁷

Even in the midst of its war against both western and Muslim adversaries, Al-Qaeda and its followers have devoted substantial efforts to striking those who “defame the religion and slander and insult our honorable Messenger.” Since 2001, there have been at least 11 AQAM (Al-Qaeda and Associated Movements) terror attacks or plots directed at European targets in relation for acts of creative expression such as the Danish Muhammad cartoons or Swedish cartoonist Lars Vilks' insulting drawing of Muhammad. In addition, numerous creative intellectuals and Muslim reformers have received death threats from AQAM.

While AQAM is certainly motivated by what it sees as western aggression against Islam, its response to the Scandinavian Muhammad

cartoons shows that its definition of "crusader aggression" transcends military and political interventions. Salafist-jihadists see their struggle with the United States and its allies as an all-encompassing one in which western ideas and culture pose every bit the threat that western armies and security services do. As such, silencing those "apostate" Muslims who embrace aspects of western modernity and all those who "defame the religion" and its Prophet, is as important as winning military and political victories. This "cultural jihad" (understood in this sense as a physical, violent act carried out by extremist Muslims, not "struggling," as most Muslims view it, to lead a pious faith-centered life) is seen by Al-Qaeda and its supporters as an essential duty deeply rooted in both Islamist ideology and certain interpretations of Islamic law. It shows that AQAM is indeed motivated by what it sees as a religious-ideological imperative that transcends short-term political objectives.

What is AQAM?

Al-Qaeda, its associates and supporters belong to a broader ideological current called Islamism. Islamism is a political ideology rooted in a belief that Muslim states must be governed by Islamic Sharia law, as drawn from a strict interpretation of the Qur'an and the Hadith, the recorded sayings and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. Islamism dates back to the late 19th century, and is a mix of puritanical, revivalist strains within Islam and elements of western ideologies. Islamism exists in both Sunni and Shia forms, and is currently embraced by a variety of movements and organizations in the Islamic world, some more radical and/or violent than others. Salafism is a strict, Sunni variant of Islamism, strongly influenced by the puritanical Saudi form of Islam known as Wahhabism. Al-Qaeda and its allies represent a subset of salafism known as salafist-jihadism. Many Salafist-jihadists are committed to using violence to bring about a purified, extremist vision of the Islamic state. Salafist-jihadism first emerged as a radical offshoot of the Islamist movement in the 1960s.⁸ Prominent pre-9/11 salafist-jihadist movements include Egyptian Islamic Jihad (part of which eventually merged with Al-Qaeda), the Egyptian Islamic Group, and Algeria's Armed Islamic Group (GIA).

"Al-Qaeda Central," the organization once based in Pakistan and led by Osama bin Laden (and now Ayman al-Zawahiri), is the most prominent salafist-jihadist group in the world today, but it is far from the only one. Many of the others are tied to Al-Qaeda through organizational links or ideological affinity. Therefore, rather than thinking of Al-Qaeda as a single, unified whole, it is more accurate to think of it as a movement or

alliance containing a number of like-minded organizations and individuals. The term that best reflects this reality is Al-Qaeda and Associated Movements (AQAM). AQAM contains three main tiers: Al-Qaeda Central in Pakistan; regional allies and affiliates, such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq; and unaffiliated individuals and groups that support Al-Qaeda's cause and embrace the salafist-jihadist worldview.⁹ All three tiers of AQAM have been part of the "cultural jihad".

The Ideological Origins of "Cultural Jihad"

Salafist-jihadist ideology, like most forms of Islamism or Islamic revivalism, takes as its starting point the idea that the Islamic world is in a serious state of decline. In the words of scholar John Calvert, the ideology of AQAM represents "an extreme manifestation of a particular syndrome of Muslim reaction to the Western-dominated political and cultural order that has been over fifty years in the making."¹⁰ As Emmanuel Sivan put it, Islamism is "primarily a cultural phenomenon," engaged in "a sort of holding operation against modernity."¹¹ The main reason for this decline, according to Islamists, is that Muslims have forsaken pure Islam, in particular the Islamic legal code of Sharia, and instead chosen to follow man-made laws which usurp the rightful authority of Allah and encourage Muslims to stray from the true path of Islam. The Egyptian thinker Sayyid Qutb (1906-66), widely considered the founding father of salafist-jihadism, considered the Islamic world to be so corrupted that he condemned it as having reverted to a state of *jahiliyyah*, the pre-Islamic pagan barbarism that prevailed in Arabia before the coming of Muhammad. In Qutb's view, it would take the dedicated efforts of a small vanguard of pious Muslims to save the situation by overthrowing the jahiliyyah apostate regimes currently ruling Muslim lands and restore the rightful rule of Allah on Earth as laid out in the Qur'an and Hadith.¹²

In his writings, Qutb stressed the essential role of western intellectual and cultural forces in corrupting Muslim societies. In many cases, he argued, this corrupting influence was by design. As a result, the future Islamic state would need to suppress all but the most purely practical forms of western thought. He summarized this point in his seminal work *Milestones*:

The Western ways of thought and all the sciences started on the foundation of these poisonous influences with an enmity toward all religion, and in particular with greater hostility toward Islam. *This enmity toward Islam is especially pronounced and many times is the result of a well-thought-out*

scheme, the object of which is first to shake the foundations of Islamic beliefs and then gradually to demolish the structure of Muslim society.

If, in spite of knowing this, we rely on Western ways of thought, even in teaching the Islamic sciences, it will be an unforgiveable blindness on our part. Indeed, it becomes incumbent on us, while learning purely scientific or technological subjects for which we have no other sources except Western sources, to remain on guard and keep these sciences away from philosophical speculations, as these philosophical speculations are generally against religion and in particular against Islam. *A slight influence from them can pollute the clear spring of Islam.*¹³ (emphasis added)

Nearly all the major salafist-jihadist thinkers have echoed Qutb's concerns about the poisonous, corrupting nature of western ideas and influences. As the Saudi scholar Muhammad Saeed al-Qahtani puts it, Muslims who have embraced western modernity, are guilty of "corrupting Muslim society by means of education, media and instilling western thoughts and ways of life into the minds of Muslims."¹⁴ In his writings, al-Qahtani traces the beginnings of the corruption of Islam to the influence of Greek philosophy during the Abbasid period.¹⁵ This belief in the corrupting influence of western intellectual and cultural currents can be seen in the writings of those affiliated with Al-Qaeda.

In his 2005 tome *The Call to Global Islamic Resistance*, Al-Qaeda affiliated strategist Mustafa Setmariam Nasar, better known as Abu Musab al-Suri, stated that westerners have "conspired over the past two centuries to drive Muslims away from their faith, which they realize is the reason for Arab power and glory."¹⁶ In his view, the "modern, Crusader-Jewish, American-led campaign against the Arab and Islamic world has clearly announced its goals: total elimination of the civilizational, religious, political, economic, social, and cultural existence of Muslims."¹⁷ Al-Suri's description of the current state of Muslim societies is very much in keeping with the profound sense of cultural pessimism described by scholars such as Sivan.¹⁸

This belief in a western conspiracy to culturally and intellectually corrupt Islam can also be found in the writings of bin Laden's deputy and eventual successor, the Egyptian jihadist Ayman al-Zawahiri. In his view, Jews and crusaders "embark upon intellectual and religious attacks in parallel to their crusading military attacks, in order to mend the bleak reality represented by the ruling regimes in our [Muslim] countries with all their corruption and corrupting effects and their servility toward the worldwide Crusading Jewish oppressive powers."¹⁹

Osama bin Laden himself included this "cultural invasion" as just one facet of a broader "Zionist/Crusader war" against Islam:

And then what does the continuation of the cunning, malevolent media and cultural invasion mean, when controlled TV channels and radio stations are set up, in addition to the Voice of America, BBC and the rest, to continue the ideological invasion of our Ummah and make war on its beliefs and change its values and spread obscenity and depravity. Indeed, they have gone so far as to interfere in the curricula – especially the religious curricula – and change them. It is a Zionist/Crusader war.²⁰

If secular western culture is a poison that has corrupted Muslim societies, then those writers and intellectuals who have embraced western modernity are carriers of this corruption and should be eliminated. Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian jihadist preacher who served as Osama bin Laden's mentor wrote a treatise on morality in jihad. In it, he argued that Afghan communist women should be killed, regardless of whether they were armed or not, simply because they were the bearers of dangerous, un-Islamic ideas.²¹ Muslim reformers and freethinkers are regularly accused of apostasy (*rida*), an offense that, according to some interpretations of Islamic law, is punishable by death.²² A Saudi salafist scholar named Sa'id Al-Ghamdi even published a book in 2003 labeling over 200 Arab intellectuals and authors as heretics.²³ Osama bin Laden, in his April 2006 statement calling for the killing of heretics, mentioned several reformist intellectuals by name as deserving such a fate and even cited al Ghamdi as an authority.²⁴ Comments or creative works that insult or defame the Prophet Muhammad are considered an especially egregious form of apostasy, and a capital offense whether committed by Muslims or non-Muslims.²⁵ In the words of Muhammad Saeed al-Qahtani, "Slandering our faith and insulting our Prophet is aggression against us and an act of war. It is a violation that invalidates the truce between us and our enemies, and is no different from any other assault against us."²⁶

Salafist-jihadists have proved more than willing to enforce such judgments of apostasy against secular writers and intellectuals. In Egypt in the 1960s, a secret jihadist group tied to Sayyid Qutb allegedly planned to murder a number of leading artists and television personalities.²⁷ In 1992, the Egyptian Islamic Group murdered secular author Farag Foda.²⁸ Two years later, a follower of the group's main ideologue, Omar Abdel Rahman, stabbed and wounded Nobel Prize winning novelist Nagib Mahfouz. Algeria's radical Islamist GIA murdered dozens of journalists and other intellectuals during that country's horrific civil war of the 1990s.²⁹

It is important to note that these attitudes are not confined to Salafist-jihadists. Many non-political salafists, traditionalist Muslims and Muslim governments also vigorously condemn freethinking and reformist Muslims,

and support censoring cultural and intellectual products considered blasphemous or otherwise harmful to Islam, sometimes through violence if necessary.³⁰ As Petter Nesser has noted, "The full spectrum of militant organizations, most extremists and even many mainstream Muslims support the religious verdict of the death penalty for cartoonists who insult the Prophet Muhammad."³¹

Al-Qaeda's "Cultural Jihad:" First Phase: 2001-2005

An examination of the record of Al-Qaeda, its affiliates and supporters since 9/11 shows that their willingness to retaliate against "apostates", "heretics" and those deemed guilty of defaming the Prophet Muhammad is far from merely rhetorical. For example, AQAM has continued the salafist-jihadist practice of targeting "apostate" Muslim intellectuals for death. In July 2005, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) threatened to kill Dr. Sayyid Al Qimni, a reformist Egyptian scholar. The threat was withdrawn after al Qimni (temporarily) retracted his views. A website related to AQI posted a lengthy list of Arab journalists it considered to be critical of its efforts, with a call that they should all be killed. In the words of the posting: "We ask the mujahideen to make preparations to assassinate these agents and enemies of the Faith, since they are the mouthpieces of the Crusader and Jewish occupation."³²

What makes Al-Qaeda's "cultural jihad" unique from previous salafist-jihadist efforts to punish apostasy and blasphemy is that it targets not only Muslims, but westerners guilty of "defaming" Islam and the Prophet Muhammad as well. From 2001-2011, there were at least 11 instances of AQAM violent censorship targeting Europeans: actual or planned terrorist attacks intended as retaliation for acts of expression considered hostile or defamatory towards Islam. Two of these acts occurred between 2001-05, both in the Netherlands.³³

The first such instance of AQAM violent censorship targeting Europe was the November 2004 murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh. A radicalized Dutch Muslim named Muhammad Bouyeri, who belonged to a jihadist cell called the Hofstad Network, committed the murder.³⁴ Van Gogh had made a short film called *Submission* that condemned the treatment of women in Islam, in cooperation with a Dutch-Somali parliamentarian named Ayaan Hirsi Ali. This film outraged Bouyeri and after killing van Gogh, left a letter pinned a letter to his body addressed to Hirsi Ali:

There shall be no mercy for the unjust, only the sword raised at them. No discussion, no demonstrations, no parades, no petitions; merely DEATH shall separate the Truth from the LIE.³⁵

At his trial the following year, Bouyeri bluntly explained his motive for the murder: "I was motivated by the law that commands me to cut off the head of anyone who insults Allah and his prophet."³⁶ For all their anger over actions such as the Iraq invasion, Bouyeri and the Hofstad Network were very much committed to waging "cultural jihad". For example, Bouyeri signed his letter to Hirsi Ali "Saifu Deen al Muwahhied," a pen name he had used since that August to issue death threats. According to Dutch scholar Albert Benschop, this was the name used by a medieval North African Islamic revivalist sect that sought to root out all elements of corruption and decadence from Muslim Spain, such as alcohol and dancing girls. Jason Walters, another Hofstad Network member, saw Islam as under both physical and ideological assault from "the army of disbelief and corruption, commanded by America and Israel."³⁷

The van Gogh killing is believed to have merely been the first part of a broader plan by the Hofstad Network to murder outspoken Dutch critics of Islam such as Hirsi Ali and parliamentarian Geert Wilders, along with Amsterdam mayor Job Cohen and secular Dutch-Muslim politician Ahmed Aboutaleb.³⁸ A few days after the murder, other members of the network issued a communique in which they stated:

We have, in accordance with the authentic Islamic manner slaughtered a lamb. From now on this will be the punishment that will be imposed, on anyone in this country who abuses and challenges Allah and his envoy. Oh, you Ayaan Hirsi, if Allah so desires it will be your turn tomorrow. Allah is the greatest of all and Islam will conquer.³⁹

A second plot was detected in July 2005, when a radicalized teenage convert to Islam was arrested for possible links to the Hofstad Network. He had posted a number of online death threats against Hirsi Ali and Wilders and was found in possession of a homemade bomb.⁴⁰

Despite this arrest, Hirsi Ali and a number of other prominent Dutch politicians and critics of Islam continued to live under threat. A year after the van Gogh murder, the *Washington Post's* Craig Whitlock noted that "A soaring number of Dutch academics, lawmakers and other public figures who have been forced to accept 24-hour protection or go into hiding after receiving death threats from Islamic extremists."⁴¹ By 2006, Hirsi Ali would have to leave the Netherlands and move to the United States. The Hofstad Network succeeded in creating a climate of fear

among critics of Islam in the Netherlands, and jihadists continue to cite the murder of Theo van Gogh as an example to be emulated.⁴²

“Cultural jihad” Intensifies:” The Muhammad Cartoons, 2006-2011

The key development in the unfolding of Al-Qaeda's “cultural jihad” occurred in September 2005, when the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten* published 12 cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. The move was in response to a perceived reluctance among European intellectuals to discuss or depict Muhammad, caused in part by the van Gogh murder.⁴³

One byproduct of the controversy these cartoons generated was an enormous intensification of AQAM's campaign of violent censorship against European “blasphemers.” Of the 11 incidents of anti-European AQAM violent censorship, nine occurred between 2006-2011. Seven of these nine incidents were acts of retaliation for the Danish Muhammad cartoons. All but one occurred (or were intended to occur) in Europe.

While there were a number of reactions to the cartoons on various jihadist websites, the most noteworthy Al-Qaeda response came in April 2006, with the release of a lengthy audio recording from bin Laden.⁴⁴ In his statement, bin Laden called upon Muslims to “Punish those responsible for the heinous crime committed by some journalists among the Crusaders or the apostate Zindeeqs (unbelievers) in insulting the chief of the forefathers and the successors, our Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him.” Bin Laden then demanded that those responsible for the cartoons be handed over to Al-Qaeda, “to be judged according to the Law of Allah.”⁴⁵

In his remarks, bin Laden included the publication of the Muhammad cartoons among a long list of western transgressions against Muslims, including, but not limited to, Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Chechnya and Somalia, all of them part of “a Zionist/Crusader war.” He then made it clear that such cultural attacks were very much part of this broader struggle, if anything even more threatening than military invasions:

I say: our duty is to make every effort to aid Allah's Messenger, peace be upon him, and his religion and Ummah, with everything in our power and on all levels. *And despite the large number of Zionist and Crusader attacks on our Ummah – among them military, economic and moral and cultural attacks – by far the most important and serious of them are their attacks on our Prophet, religion and methodology of our Shari'ah.*⁴⁶ (emphasis added)

The first attempted terrorist attack committed in retaliation for the *Jyllands Posten* cartoons occurred on July 31, 2006, when two suitcase bombs were

discovered on German passenger trains; one of the two Lebanese men arrested for committing this attack testified that the attempted bombing was motivated by the cartoons.⁴⁷ By September 2007, Danish authorities had discovered three bomb plots within the previous two years. As Nicholas Kulish wrote in the *New York Times*, "Tiny Denmark is on the front line in the battle against Islamic terrorism in Europe."⁴⁸ Rita Katz of the SITE Institute told the Associated Press that this sudden jihadist focus on Denmark was "because of the cartoons."⁴⁹

AQAM's desire to punish Denmark for the *Jyllands Posten* cartoons intensified in February 2008. After Danish authorities arrested three radicalized Muslims suspected of plotting to kill Kurt Westergaard, the cartoonist who drew the most controversial of the 12 Muhammad caricatures, 17 Danish newspapers republished the cartoons as an act of defiance.⁵⁰ In March 2008, bin Laden responded with an audio statement addressed to "the intelligent ones in the European Union" concerning "the insulting drawings and your negligence . . . to take the necessary measures to prevent their being repeated."⁵¹ After condemning alleged western military targeting of Muslim women and children, bin Laden returned to the issue of the cartoons:

Although our tragedy in your killing of our women and children is a very great one, it paled when you went overboard in your unbelief . . . and went to the extent of publishing these insulting drawings. This is the greater and more serious tragedy, and reckoning for it will be more severe.⁵²

In his remarks, Bin Laden reiterated the religious prohibition against defaming Muhammad or other prophets, stating that, "Whoever detracts from or mocks anyone of them is an apostate unbeliever."⁵³ He dismissed "the sacredness you accord freedom of expression and the sacredness of your laws and how you won't change them" by stating that "The laws of men which clash with the legislations of Allah the Most High are null and void, aren't sacred and don't matter to us."⁵⁴

Bin Laden closed with a warning: "If there is no check on the freedom of your words, then let your hearts be open to the freedom of our actions."⁵⁵

Al-Qaeda made good on bin Laden's promise of retaliation on June 2, 2008, when it staged a suicide car bomb attack on the Danish Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan. Eight people were killed in the blast. In a communiqué released the next day, an Al-Qaeda leader named Mustafa Abu al-Yazid stated that the attack was "in retaliation for what the infidels from the so-called state of Denmark have published: the insulting cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed". The statement even quoted bin Laden's threat

from March, and went on to note that the attack "should serve as a warning to the infidel countries regarding their crimes against our Prophet Mohammed."⁵⁶

Al-Qaeda's final comment on the Danish Embassy attack came in September 2008, when it released a video featuring the Saudi suicide bomber who carried out the operation. The video revealed how Al-Qaeda viewed the Muhammad cartoons as part of the west's "ideological invasion":

(Narrator) The Zionist-Crusader war, another installment of the conflict between the truth and the falsehood stretching across time until Allah inherits the earth and everyone on it. The battle of the Zio-Crusader enemy against out [*sic*] Ummah isn't waged solely at the military and economic level, *but is waged first and foremost and in addition to and after that at the level of doctrine. . . .*

It is a war which targets all strongholds of Islam and *invades minds and ideas in the same way it invades lands, and dares to destroy beliefs and meddle with sacred things in the same way it dares to spill blood.*

"(Narrator) *It is within this framework that the drawings insulting the Messenger (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) came: drawings which were first published by the Danish press before the insult spread to most European countries in the name of freedom of expression and respect for law.*"⁵⁷ (emphasis added)

The Danish Embassy attack is unique in that it is the only anti-European act of violent censorship to take place outside of Europe. It also stands out in that Al-Qaeda Central, not a regional affiliate or individuals supportive of the broader salafist-jihadist movement, perpetrated it. Only two of the 11 planned or actual terrorist attacks intended as retaliation for acts of creative expression can be traced to the Al-Qaeda organization proper.

The other such incident was revealed in October 2009, when a US citizen named David Headley was arrested for participation in a terrorist plot targeting the Copenhagen offices of *Jyllands Posten*. Headley, a Pakistani-American with ties to the Pakistani jihadist group Lashkar-e-Taiba, had done reconnaissance work for the planners of the November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India. He made his feelings about the Danish Muhammad cartoons known in a 2008 online forum posting: "I feel disposed towards violence for the offending parties, be they cartoonists from Denmark or Sherry Jones . . . or Irshad Manji."⁵⁸

Headley made at least two trips to Copenhagen to do reconnaissance on *Jyllands Posten's* offices, as well as several trips to Pakistan and England to help coordinate attack preparations. Headley's efforts were at

the behest of Ilyas Kashmiri, one of Al-Qaeda's top operational commanders. A veteran Pakistani jihadist, Kashmiri had affiliated with Al-Qaeda Central in 2005 and reportedly sworn allegiance to Osama bin Laden.⁵⁹ In his dealings with Headley, Kashmiri made it very clear that he considered the *Jyllands Posten* attack a priority. The final plan that Kashmiri settled on was for a Mumbai-style seizure of the newspaper's offices, with the assassination of Westergaard and cultural editor Flemming Rose as a possible backup plan.⁶⁰

The final four acts of violent censorship in response to the Danish Muhammad cartoons occurred in 2010. On January 1, a Somali immigrant named Muhammad Muhideen Gelle, brandishing an axe and a knife, forced his way into Kurt Westergaard's home and chased the cartoonist and his granddaughter into a panic room before being captured by police. Gelle reportedly had ties to the Somali Al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Shabaab (The Youth).⁶¹ Three Muslim immigrants living in Norway were arrested in July. The men were in possession of peroxide-based explosives and reportedly planning an attack against *Jyllands Posten*. Two of the men were eventually convicted of planning to bomb the newspaper and kill Westergaard.⁶² In September, a Chechen living in Belgium injured himself while preparing a letter bomb to be mailed to *Jyllands Posten's* offices.⁶³ Finally, at the end of December, four radicalized Muslims living in Sweden were arrested on charges that they sought to storm the *Jyllands Posten* offices and stage a Mumbai-like massacre.⁶⁴

The Lars Vilks Cartoon

In August 2007, Sweden joined Denmark as a target of Al-Qaeda's "cultural jihad". In that month, a Swedish cartoonist named Lars Vilks published a caricature in a newspaper called *Nerikes Allehanda* showing the Prophet Muhammad as a dog. In September, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the leader of Al-Qaeda's Islamic State of Iraq, denounced the Vilks cartoon. Addressing Sweden, he warned that, "You will learn how to officially apologize for your crime against our Prophet Mohammed." In addition to threatening to attack Swedish corporations if an apology was not issued, Al-Baghdadi also promised a \$100,000 reward for "anyone who kills that infidel criminal" Lars Vilks. The reward was boosted to \$150,000 if Vilks was actually beheaded. A sum of \$50,000 was offered for killing the editor of *Nerikes Allehanda*.⁶⁵

There have been two confirmed acts of violent censorship by AQAM in response to the Vilks cartoon. In October 2009, an American convert to Islam named Colleen LaRose, who posted on jihadist forums as "Jihad

Jane", was arrested and charged with planning to murder Vilks. She pled guilty in January 2011.⁶⁶

The second incident occurred on December 11, 2010 when an Iraqi immigrant to Sweden named Taimour Abdulwahab al-Abdaly blew himself up while attempting to stage a suicide bombing in Stockholm. Before the attack, al-Abdaly left a recorded message with a Swedish news agency, in which he explained his motives for the attack: "You have Lars Vilks — the pig Lars Vilks — to blame, and yourselves for these actions." Al-Abdaly demanded that Sweden "stop your drawings of our prophet Muhammad [Arabic], withdraw your soldiers from Afghanistan and no more oppression against Islam or Muslims will be tolerated in any way or any means."⁶⁷

As noted above, al-Abdaly also cited the presence of Swedish forces in Afghanistan as a justification for his attack. However, Sweden has been a member of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan since 2002. It was part of ISAF when Osama bin Laden was citing Sweden as an example of a country that Al-Qaeda did not attack.⁶⁸ In the meantime, countries like Poland and Romania, which have made much larger contributions to the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, have yet to be targeted by AQAM.⁶⁹ It seems clear based on both rhetoric and actions that the Muhammad cartoons primarily motivated AQAM's targeting of Denmark and Sweden.

The scope of Al-Qaeda's "cultural jihad" is even more apparent in the context of the overall number of European jihadist terror plots. Norwegian terrorism researcher Petter Nesser has documented 79 "planned, prepared, and executed terrorist attacks" by jihadists in Western Europe from September 11, 2001 through the end of 2010. His list does not include the Colleen "Jihad Jane" LaRose plot against Lars Vilks. Adding this item brings the total list of incidents to 80. Ten of these 80 (12.5%) are credibly confirmed as acts of violent censorship. From 9/11 through 2005, there were only two such acts out of 42 overall incidents (4.8%); from 2006-2010, in the wake of the Scandinavian Muhammad cartoons, eight of 38 incidents (21.1%) were acts of violent censorship. The bulk of incidents occurred between 2008-2010, when seven out of 24 (29.2%) "planned, prepared, and executed terrorist attacks" in western Europe were intended as acts of violent censorship. In short, one out of every five planned or actual terrorist attacks in western Europe since the Danish Muhammad cartoons was in retaliation for either those caricatures or the Vilks drawing.⁷⁰

South Park and Abu Talha al-Amrikee

There have been no acts of violent censorship directed at the United States or American targets since 9/11. However, America has not been immune from “cultural jihad”. The most well known instance involves the irreverent animated program *South Park*. The show’s 200th episode, which aired on April 14, 2010, satirized the reluctance of many western media outlets to show images of the Prophet Muhammad by depicting him in a bear suit. The next day, a New York-based salafist-jihadist website called Revolution Muslim featured a post from an “Abu Talha al-Amrikee.” He warned that the creators of *South Park*, Matt Parker and Trey Stone, “will probably wind up like Theo van Gogh for airing this show. This is not a threat, but a warning of the reality of what will likely happen to them.”⁷¹

As a consequence of this warning, the second part of the episode, which aired on April 21, was heavily edited. All references to Muhammad were bleeped out and the character in the bear suit was covered with a graphic reading “CENSORED.” Six years later, the chilling effects of the Theo van Gogh murder resonated even on the other side of the Atlantic.

Abu Talha al-Amrikee was delighted by the publicity. On April 20, via Twitter, he noted that, “The kuffar are starting to really pick up on the *South Park* story in sha’a Allah this can be the USA’s version of the Rushdie affair in UK.”⁷² Al-Amrikee was in reality Zachary Chesser, a 20-year-old Muslim convert from Virginia. In addition to threatening Parker and Stone, Chesser made veiled or explicit online death threats against a number of other individuals. When a group of Facebook users responded to the *South Park* controversy by creating an “Everybody Draw Mohammad Day” campaign, Chesser posted the contact information for 11 group members on a jihadist web forum, with the comment that this was “just a place to start.”⁷³ In October 2010, Chesser pled guilty to a three count indictment that included issuing online threats. He was sentenced to 25 years in prison.

The *South Park* and “Everybody Draw Muhammad Day” controversy would attract the attention of Al-Qaeda’s Yemen-based affiliate, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), whose leadership included the English-speaking preacher Anwar al-Awlaki. In July 2010, the organization published the first issue of an online English-language magazine called *Inspire*. While an article titled “Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom” attracted most of the headlines, much of the issue was devoted to “cultural jihad.” The centerpiece was an essay by al-Awlaki entitled “May Our Souls be Sacrificed for You!” The article concerned “the defense of the Messenger of Allah.” Al-Awlaki denounced the west’s “outrageous

slander, blatant smearing of Muhammad, desecration of the Quran, and the insulting of over a billion Muslims worldwide" all of which were "done under the pretext of "freedom of speech"." In al-Awlaki's view, the only solution to these offenses, which are rooted in a "historic hatred for Islam and Muslims," is "the execution of those involved."⁷⁴ In his opinion, killing those who defame the Prophet is more important than facing "crusaders" on the battlefield:

This is a golden opportunity to have the honor of performing an act in the service of Islam greater than any form of jihad. *Defending the Messenger of Allah is a greater cause than fighting for Palestine, Afghanistan or Iraq; it is greater than fighting for the protection of Muslim life, honor or wealth.*⁷⁵ (emphasis added)

Al-Awlaki went on to condemn western countries for upholding "a system within which the defamation of Islam is not only protected but promoted." Because "the entire Western system is staunchly protecting and promoting the defamation of Muhammad . . . it is the entire Western system that is at war with Islam." Therefore, "Assassinations, bombings, and acts of arson are all legitimate forms of revenge against a system that relishes the sacrilege of Islam in the name of freedom."⁷⁶

The same issue of *Inspire* provided further support for this position, in an interview with the leader of AQAP, Abu Basir Nasir al-Wuhayshi. One of the questions posed was, "Why does Al-Qaeda insist on operations against the West and especially America?" Al-Wuhayshi answered as follows:

All praise is due to Allah. America is the one forcing us to target it. *These heinous crimes which the human soul rejects such as the cartoons of the Messenger and holding celebrations and awarding those who curse the Prophet require us to target the Americans. In fact they require us to wipe them out of the map completely. America is a cancer that needs to be removed along with the West that is supporting this criminal behavior and are banning the niqab of the chaste and pure Muslim women.*⁷⁷ (emphasis added)

Al-Awlaki and al-Wuhayshi could not have been any more explicit in their priorities: because western free expression permits defamation of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, all Muslims therefore have a religious duty to attack the west. At a time when the US still had over 100,000 troops deployed between Iraq and Afghanistan, two of the key leaders of Al-Qaeda's most important regional affiliate proclaimed that the western defense of free expression, which permitted apostasy and blasphemy, was

in itself sufficient cause to justify attacks on western targets and that “cultural jihad” was more important than combating American military forces in Muslim lands.

Conclusion

In May 2007, Al-Qaeda released a video featuring its American-born propagandist Adam Gadahn. Gadahn laid out six steps for America to follow in order to spare itself further attacks. In addition to completely withdrawing from all Muslim lands, ceasing all support for “apostate regimes,” and cutting all ties to Israel, Gadahn also demanded that America “Cease all interference in the religion, society, politics, and governance of the Muslim world” and that it “Put an end to all forms of interference in the education curricula and information media of the Islamic world, and impose a blanket ban on all broadcasts to our region, especially those designed to alter or destroy the faith, minds, morals, and values of our people.”⁷⁸

This statement is a firm indicator of the importance AQAM places on targeting what it sees as a moral and ideological threat posed by the west. Here Al-Qaeda made it abundantly clear that its violent campaign against the “crusaders” will continue until what Osama bin Laden called the “ideological invasion” of Muslim lands comes to an end.

The record of the last ten years, and especially since the publication of the Danish Muhammad cartoons, shows that Al-Qaeda, its allies, and its supporters regard the violent suppression of ideas and expression that they consider harmful to Islam as a sacred duty, a religious-ideological imperative. They reserve the right to enforce this prohibition anywhere, against anyone, and they regard such expression as just as harmful, if not more so, than western military or political actions directed against Muslim states.

AQAM has engaged in at least 11 acts of violent censorship against western targets, planned or actual terrorist attacks designed as retribution for creative expression deemed hostile or defamatory towards Islam. In addition, salafist-jihadists have made numerous death threats against apostate or blasphemous intellectuals, both western and Muslim. This campaign has indeed had an impact on free expression in western societies, as evidenced by the South Park incident, among others. It is quite likely that further acts of “defamatory” expression will be used by AQAM to justify terrorism even if western intervention in the Islamic world should cease.

Al-Qaeda and its supporters have also regularly denounced the west's "cultural invasion" designed to undermine Islam. Deeply rooted in a profound sense of cultural pessimism, the salafist-jihadist movement regards Muslim societies as hopelessly corrupted by the spread of western ideas and cultural products. Convinced that this is the result of a deliberate "crusader" conspiracy to destroy Islam, they demand that this campaign be halted as a condition of suspending hostilities against the west. In addition, new AQAM affiliates, such as Boko Haram in Nigeria and Ansar Dine in Mali, are clearly committed to waging "cultural jihad" against apostasy and western corruption on a local and regional level. All of these factors mean that the phenomenon of violent censorship by AQAM will almost certainly remain with us for the foreseeable future.

Notes

¹ For a good example of this view, see Mary Habeck, *Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

² Michael Scheuer, *Marching Toward Hell: America and Islam after Iraq* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 1.

³ Osama Bin Laden, "Full text: bin Laden's 'letter to America,'" *The Observer*, November 24, 2002, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/nov/24/theobserver>.

⁴ Raymond Ibrahim, "An Analysis of Al-Qaeda's Worldview: Reciprocal Treatment or Religious Obligation?" *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 12, no. 4 (December 2008): <http://www.raymondibrahim.com/7344/an-analysis-of-al-qaidas-worldview>.

⁵ Osama bin Laden, "Your Fate is in Your Hands Alone," in *The Al Qaeda Reader*, ed. and trans. Raymond Ibrahim (New York: Broadway Books, 2008), 214.

⁶ According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, a zindeeq (or zindiq) "is a heretic who subscribes to sectarianism and threatens the unity of the community by dissension". "Zandaqah," In *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito. Oxford Islamic Studies Online, accessed May 7, 2012,

<http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2562>. Jihadists and other Islamists commonly apply the term to secular and reformist Muslims. See Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism: Understanding Jihadi Movements* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2009), 38-39.

⁷ Osama bin Laden, "Oh People of Islam," (trans. Nine Eleven Finding Answers (NEFA) Foundation, 2006), no longer on site, now available via Internet Archive, accessed April 24, 2012, <http://web.archive.org/web/20061209001353/http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/binladenxscript.html>.

⁸ Bruce Livesey, "The Salafist Movement," *Al Qaeda's New Front*, PBS, January 25, 2005, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/front/special/sala.html>; *Militant Ideology Atlas: Executive Report*, ed. William McCants, (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, United States Military Academy: November 2006):

<http://oai.dtic.mil/oai/oai?verb=getRecord&metadataPrefix=html&identifier=ADA458483>. See also Jarret M. Brachman, "Doctrine and Schools," chap. 2 in *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2009). The terms "jihadist" and "salafist-jihadist" will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

⁹ Rick "Ozzie" Nelson and Thomas M. Sanderson, "A Threat Transformed: Al Qaeda and Associated Movements in 2011," Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 8, 2011, <http://csis.org/publication/threat-transformed>. The term "Al-Qaeda", along with AQAM, will be used to refer to the broader movement, not just the organization.

¹⁰ John Calvert, "The Islamist Syndrome of Cultural Confrontation," *Orbis* 46, no. 2 (2002): 333-349.

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0030438702001126>.

¹¹ Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics*, enl. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 3.

¹² Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (New Delhi: Millat Book Centre, n.d.).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁴ Shaykh Muhammad Saeed al-Qahtani, *Al-Wala' wa'l-Bara': According to the 'Aqeedah of the Salaf*, vol. 1. (n.p.: Kashf ul Shubuhah Publications, n.d.), preface, <http://www.alfurqan.com.au/component/content/article/49-comments-on/113-al-wala-wal-bara>. For more on al-Qahtani's work, including an alternate translation of this passage, see Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism*, 27-29.

¹⁵ Al-Qahtani, *Al-Wala' wa'l-Bara.*, vol. 2, chap. 1. See also Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism*, 80-84.

¹⁶ *A Terrorist's Call to Global Jihad: Deciphering Abu Musab Al-Suri's Islamic Jihad Manifesto*, ed. Jim Lacey (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008): 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

¹⁹ Quoted in Khosrokhavar, *Inside Jihadism*, 26.

²⁰ Bin Laden, "Oh People of Islam."

²¹ Abdullah Azzam, "Morals and Jurisprudence of Jihad (Excerpts)," in *Al Qaeda in its Own Words*, ed. Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Milelli, trans. Pascale Ghazaleh (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), 130-31.

²² Aluma Dankowitz, "Accusing Muslim Intellectuals of Apostasy," Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) Inquiry and Analysis No. 208, February 18, 2005, <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/0/1321.htm>.

²³ MEMRI Special Dispatch No.1070, "Saudi Doctorate Encourages the Murder of Arab Intellectuals," January 12, 2006,

<http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/0/1579.htm>.

²⁴ Bin Laden, "Oh People of Islam". See also MEMRI Special Dispatch No.1153, "Arab Reformists Under Threat by Islamists: Bin Laden Urges Killing of 'Freethinkers'," May 3, 2006,

<http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/0/1677.htm>.

²⁵ Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 149-52.

²⁶ Al-Qahtani, *Al-Wala' wa'l-Bara'*, vol. 3, 58.

²⁷ Sivan, *Radical Islam*, 61.

²⁸ Ana Belen Soage, "Faraj Fawda, or the Cost of Freedom of Expression," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 11, no. 2 (2007):

<http://meria.idc.ac.il/journal/2007/issue2/jv11no2a3.html>.

²⁹ Koenraad Elst, "Postscript: The Rushdie Affair's Legacy", in Daniel Pipes, *The Rushdie Affair: The Novel, The Ayatollah, and the West*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 263-64.

³⁰ See Trevor Mostyn, *Censorship in Islamic Societies* (London: Saqi Books, 2002); Paul Marshall and Nina Shea, *Silenced: How Apostasy and Blasphemy Codes are Choking Freedom Worldwide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and Elst, "Postscript."

³¹ Petter Nesser, "Individual Jihadist Operations in Europe: Patterns and Challenges," *CTC Sentinel* 5, no. 1 (2012):

<http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/individual-jihadist-operations-in-europe-patterns-and-challenges>.

³² Stephen Ulph, "Al-Qaeda extends threats to journalists and intellectuals outside Iraq," *Terrorism Focus* 2, no. 14 (2005): accessed May 1, 2012,

<http://www.jamestown.org/>.

³³ Figures are based on analysis of statistics provided by Petter Nesser in "Chronology of Jihadism in Western Europe 1994–2007: Planned, Prepared, and Executed Terrorist Attacks." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 31, no. 10 (2008): 924-946,

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³⁴ For more on Bouyeri and his background, see Petter Nesser, "The Slaying of the Dutch Filmmaker – Religiously Motivated Violence or Islamist Terrorism in the Name of Global Jihad?" (FFI-rapport 2005/00376, Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2005), <http://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/05-00376.pdf>.

³⁵ "Open Letter to Hirshi Ali", in Nesser, "The Slaying of the Dutch Filmmaker," 32.

³⁶ Ian Traynor, "Unrepentant killer of Dutch film-maker jailed for life," *The Guardian*, July 26, 2005,

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³⁷ Albert Benschop, "Chronicle of a Political Murder Foretold: Jihad in the Netherlands," (SocioSite, 2004), in sec. "Jason W.: slaughter them all and dreams of female slaves," http://www.sociosite.org/jihad_nl_en.php.

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³⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, in sec. "Michael R. (17) — Lust for bosomy virgins."

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⁵⁰ Committee to Protect Journalists, "Three arrested in plot to assassinate Prophet cartoonist," February 14, 2008, <http://cpj.org/2008/02/three-arrested-in-plot-to-assassinate-prophet-cart.php>.

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⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ "Al-Qaida's Abu al-Yazid Claims Denmark Embassy Bombing in Pakistan: June 3, 2008," (trans. NEFA Foundation, 2008),

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⁵⁷ Al-Sahab Media, "Al-Sahab Video Presents 'The Word Is the Word of the Swords I' Video," (trans. World News Connection, National Technical Information Service, 2008), 2, <http://hdl.handle.net/10066/4615>.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Seth G. Jones, *Hunting in the Shadows: The Pursuit of Al Qa'ida Since 9/11* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 382. Sherry Jones is the author of a controversial novel about the Prophet's wife Aisha. Irshad Manji is an outspoken liberal Canadian Muslim who is a regular target of Islamist death threats.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 384.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 387-90.

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⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

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<http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/0/2222.htm>.