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An operational code of terrorism: the political psychology of Ayman al-Zawahiri

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The study of terrorism requires not only the study of specific acts of terrorism but also the study of the context in which such acts are made. Researchers must consequently be familiar with the general psychological principles of terrorism (of its causes and effects) as well as the psychological background of individual terrorists, especially terrorist leaders such as Ayman al-Zawahiri. This study creates a broad, context-rich profile of Ayman al-Zawahiri’s political psychology using the analytical framework known as operational code. Content analysis of al-Zawahiri’s written and spoken statements allows the researcher to analyze the important belief systems that motivate al-Zawahiri’s actions. These belief systems are crucial in understanding al-Zawahiri’s political and terrorist actions, as al-Zawahiri experiences very few institutional barriers altering the otherwise robust relationship between belief and action. This study finds not only that al-Zawahiri perceives the political world through a purely religious view, but also that his implementation of political action depends only on the will, capabilities, and nature of the jihadist movement itself. As a result, al-Zawahiri shows little to no cognitive complexity and interacts with the political world solely based on his judgment of the capabilities of the jihadist movement.

Keywords: Ayman al-Zawahiri; operational code; terrorism; political psychology

Introduction

To fully understand how and when terrorists act, researchers need to not only include but also look beyond tactical details of terrorist attacks. Instead, the analyst must understand the social milieu in which the terrorists are operating, the terrorists’ individual and collective motivations, and the methods by which the terrorist group as a whole decides to engage in action. Only with these contextual details can current and future terrorist attacks be fully understood.

Essentially, then, fully contextualizing (and, thus, understanding) terrorism requires an in-depth understanding of terrorist psychology. Each action an individual takes is found in a psychological context, and by understanding the context in which terrorists find themselves, one can better understand the function, effect, and purpose of terrorist actions. This paper is an attempt to move toward a better understanding of that context.

However, analyzing the psychology of terrorist behavior is a complicated proposal: one typically cannot invite a known terrorist into a soul-searching counseling session. Instead, as with many other cases in political psychology, terrorist psychology must be judged from afar. Terrorist’s actions, words, and attitudes must be analyzed using

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formal analytical methods to determine the psychology that underlies them. Although
this is imperfect, given terrorists’ secrecy it is the only viable option available to
analysts to study the psychology of terrorism.

Once data from terrorists’ actions, words, and attitudes are collected, there are a
number of tools that the analyst can use to come to a conclusion. One of the lesser
known tools in the field of terrorism research is operational code analysis. Used in pol-
itical psychology, the operational code framework seeks to explain “the overall belief
systems of leaders about the world (i.e., how it works, what it is like, what kinds of
actions are most likely to be successful, etc.)” (Cottam, Dietz-Uhler, Mastors, &
Preston, 2010, p. 32). These belief systems not only serve to process information
about the world, but also serve as motivating forces that impel to action.

This framework has been used extensively to explain the political psychology of
leaders such as Vladimir Putin (Dyson, 2001), Fidel Castro and Kim Il Sung (Malici &
Malici, 2005), and George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev (Winter, Hermann, Weintraub,
& Walker, 1991). However, until recently operational code has not been used frequently to
analyze political actors who do not participate in a nation–state’s leadership structure.

One recent example of an operational code study of terrorism is Walker’s (2011)
analysis of the operational codes of terrorist groups and leaders. In this article, Walker
parses several important conclusions from terrorist communications through a detailed
statistical analysis of the words terrorists use; indeed, most current operational code
research is done this way, yielding important insights into the field of political psychology.

However, these conclusions and insights, no matter how parsimonious, are limited
in scope and breadth. For example, Walker (2011) had no statistically significant find-
ings about al-Zawahiri’s operational code; instead, only some differences between his
and Osama bin Laden’s operational code were statistically significant. Fully under-
standing a terrorist’s ideas and belief systems requires more than regressions;
instead, the analyst needs a general, broad outline of the said terrorist’s political psycho-
logical topography.

Consequently, the purpose of this paper will be to qualitatively study terrorist psy-
chology through the prism of operational code by analyzing the writings of Ayman al-
Zawahiri. This qualitative analysis goes about creating a context-rich portrait, giving
the analyst a broad vision of al-Zawahiri’s belief systems using the 10 questions of
the operational code as a framework.

Belief systems and political behavior

First of all, to fully understand the nature of political action (which in the case of al-
Zawahiri takes the form of terrorist activity), one must first understand the belief
systems to which the actor subscribes because these belief systems, and the cognitive
processes they inform, lead to political action. It is in their context that all political
behavior is located. Young and Schafer write:

The more fundamental point here is that power and interest-concepts that reside at the
heart of the study of international politics – are cognitive in nature. Neither power nor
interest is objective; rather, each emerges from the beliefs individuals hold about these
concepts. Mao appears to have believed that power flowed from the barrel of a gun;
Ghandi believed otherwise. Each of these men instigated consequential political trans-
formations. Cognitions – the beliefs and reasoning processes of individuals – matter
because they underlie all political behavior and form the foundation for how both
power and interests are understood. (1998, p. 64)
For political actors that make up part of a nation-state’s leadership structure, the otherwise robust relationship between belief and action is somewhat mitigated by external factors—often, a leader will find that institutional and normative restraints will limit personal influence. These restraints can be weakened in certain conditions, creating situations even in democracies where power and influence contract around a leader, thus increasing the rate at which personal belief affects the political action taken by a nation or group (Hermann, Preston, Korany, & Shaw, 2001).

For politically active non-state leaders such as terrorists, however, these restraints can be weakened. Typically bereft of the bureaucratic structures, the institutional inertia, and the complex power-sharing arrangements that many national leaders must face, terrorists must instead deal with small-group dynamics and wooing individual actors to their favored courses of actions. While these dynamics can also become complex, they do not present as much restraint to the relationship between belief and action as do the institutional barriers of a nation-state.

Thus, understanding a terrorist’s belief systems is an especially fruitful analysis, for it gives insight into a more robust relationship than otherwise exists in international politics. Furthermore, the institutional barriers which dampen a nation-state leader’s personal influence also make that personal influence harder to measure. A politician’s words and actions do not necessarily reflect only his own attitudes—the influences of institutions, other actors, and even of speech writers can be reflected in the words and perceived actions of a political leader.

This is not so for terrorists: without the institutional barriers and power-sharing coalitions that many nations are built on, terrorists are left to themselves. This means that their words and actions are more clearly representative of their own belief systems unmodified by external factors.

That being said, there are still some factors which make ascertaining a terrorist’s true belief system difficult. It can be said that much of a leader’s statements are meant to be motivational rather than descriptive of his actual beliefs. Al-Zawahiri, according to this critique, could easily be espousing a belief system in which he does not actually believe but that he thinks will motivate others to engage in the actions he wants them to.

However, al-Zawahiri’s position as an ideologue and doctrinaire makes it less likely that this is the case. Many of the beliefs that can be inferred from al-Zawahiri’s recent speeches and writings appear to be consistent with, or are an evolution from, those he developed earlier in his life. Furthermore, engaging in action that is substantially contrary to the beliefs he espouses for others may lead to a loss of credibility and authority on his part. As the leader of a network of networks, al-Zawahiri depends very much on his reputation as a scholar. Consequently, while some disconnect must be expected between the beliefs his speeches and writings imply and those that al-Zawahiri actually holds, such a gap would be small and would not distance al-Zawahiri very far from the terrorist community that he is attempting to motivate.

Formulation and reformulation of operational code

Studying the beliefs of terrorists, then, is highly useful, as it can efficiently reveal important components of terrorist psychology. Several tools exist for measuring cognition (and the belief systems which informs it) at a distance, one of which is an analytical framework known as operational code. Originally created by Nathan Leites in his classic study of Bolshevistic political psychology, operational code identified similar
psychological elements among members of the Politburo that Leites argued were a “series of decision making rules ... that constituted the world view upon which these rules were based” (Walker, 1990, p. 404).

As used by Leites, operational code studied more than simply the cognitive. George wrote that it also studied the affective, in that the individual who properly internalizes the cognitive elements of the Bolshevik world view “acquires a new and different character structure – that of the reliable, ‘hard core’ Bolshevik” (1969, p. 194).

In the article quoted above, George notes that while Leites’ operational code had promise to alter the way leaders were studied, the complexity and admittedly speculative psychoanalytic hypotheses which Leites paired with the cognitive aspects of operational code made this otherwise valuable tool less effective than it otherwise could have been. Furthermore, George notes that while Leites clearly states that the answers to questions surrounding political action are essential; Leites never articulates what these questions and answers were.

George then reformulated the operational code, while removing the psychoanalytic elements Leites had paired with it, and structured it into a series of 10 questions. Once answered, these questions then give researchers a clear picture of the cognitive processes which drive political perceptions and expectations.

These questions are divided into two sections. First, the philosophic beliefs ask “what the nature of the political universe is” (Cottam et al., 2010, p. 31), and are incorporated into the following questions, formulated by George (1969, pp. 201–204):

(1) What is the “essential” nature of political life? Is the political universe essentially one of harmony or conflict? What is the fundamental character of one’s political opponents?
(2) What are the prospects for the eventual realization of one’s fundamental political values and aspirations? Can one be optimistic, or must one be pessimistic on this score; and in what respects the one and/or the other?
(3) Is the political future predictable? If so, in what sense and to what extent?
(4) How much “control” or “mastery” can one have over historical development? What is one’s role in “moving” and “shaping” history in the desired direction?
(5) What is the role of “chance” in human affairs and in historical development?

Second, the instrumental beliefs relate to “what are believed to be the best strategies and tactics for achieving goals” (Cottam et al., 2010, pp. 31–32). The five instrumental questions ask:

(1) What is the best approach for selecting goals or objectives for political action?
(2) How are the goals of action pursued most effectively?
(3) How are the risks of political action calculated, controlled, and accepted?
(4) What is the best “timing” of action to advance one’s interest?
(5) What is the utility and role of different means of advancing one’s interests?

**Further developments in operational code**

In the years following George’s reformulation, a few theoretical changes were introduced, but George’s 10 questions have dominated operational code analyses. These theoretical changes, although minor, relate to the case of the present study. First, Loch Johnson hypothesized the existence of operational code continua – that each
of the questions of the operational code can place a leader on a continuum of answers (Johnson, 1977). For example, a political leader may view the political world as predictable, as unpredictable, or somewhere in between.

Additionally, Johnson suggested that a leader’s operational code could change, sometimes quite rapidly as “the political actor modifies his beliefs in response to the changing mix of psychological and situational pressures upon him” (Johnson, 1977, p. 89). A leader’s code could also appear to change as different dimensions of the leader’s code become more or less salient, depending on the issue at hand. Finally, Walker, Schafer, and Young (1998) hypothesized that a leader’s operational code could also be topical, changing depending on the situation at hand.

Thus, operational code emerged as a method allowing researchers to study a leader’s “belief system”, the series of cognitive processes which not only act as information processing tools, but also give important clues about a leader’s inner motivations. While a leader’s operational code can be both mutable and topical, it clearly measures deeply held values and beliefs that may provide clues to far more than belief systems.

The current research goal is to create a broad, context-rich profile of Ayman al-Zawahiri, allowing analysts to contextualize al-Zawahiri’s past and further actions. This goal calls for a qualitative approach that will examine each of the questions generally without specializing in any particular point of the operational code.

To do this, a number of al-Zawahiri’s written and spoken statements, authored between the mid-1990s and 2008, will be analyzed. Included are serious doctrinal works such as *Loyalty and Separation* and *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*. Additionally, video statements ranging from 2002 to 2008 are analyzed. Together, these statements, books, and doctrinal expositions reflect the underlying assumptions that undergird al-Zawahiri’s political psychology. By analyzing this large body of data, the questions of the operational code can be accurately answered.

**Philosophical beliefs**

The first set of beliefs in the operational code analysis is philosophical beliefs. These beliefs form the basis of the political leader’s perceptions about the political world as a whole: is it harmonious or conflicting? Is it likely that one’s political goals will be realized? Can one predict the political future at all? How much control can a person have over historical developments? What is the role of chance in these developments? When answered, these questions will allow the researcher to determine how the subject views the political world, and will be more able to understand his actions.

*What is the “essential” nature of political life? Is the political universe essentially one of harmony or conflict? What is the fundamental character of one’s political opponents?*

Of the elements of al-Zawahiri’s political psychology, perhaps the most important to understand is his perception that all political behavior is inherently religious. Western concepts such as the American “separation of church and state” and the French “laiicité” are, for al-Zawahiri, merely the rejection of an important part of Islam in favor of another religion. In a letter condemning parliamentary representation, he explains:
Democracy is a new religion. In Islam, legislation comes from God; in a democracy, this capacity is given to the people. Therefore, this is a new religion based on making the people into gods and given them God’s rights and attributes. (Keppel & Milelli, 2008, p. 184)

In *Bitter Harvest*, an excoriating critique of the Muslim Brotherhood’s acceptance of democratic governance, he explained further: “Either legislation comes from God alone . . . or one gives the right to legislate to others, like the people and their delegates, referring to them in case of conflict. This is tantamount to worshipping gods, peers, and associates alongside God” (Keppel & Milelli, 2008, p. 171). This point, according to al-Zawahiri, is not a “secondary matter on which legal disagreement is acceptable”, but is a religious tenant which must be accepted by all Muslims. Al-Zawahiri professes: “we cannot reconcile loyalty with God’s unbelieving enemies . . . and their impious doctrines, like consultation, positive law, and democracy. None of this can be reconciled with faith” (Keppel & Milelli, 2008, p. 172).

Since political life is inherently religious in al-Zawahiri’s thinking, any political conflict is religious in nature. Consequently, political systems and ideas which diverge from al-Zawahiri’s interpretation of Islam deserve the strictest condemnation and should be zealously fought using political means.

In al-Zawahiri’s mind, then, the political world is one of inherent conflict divided between the believers and the unbelievers. The unbelievers detest the believers and do not allow them to form the government which they wish, seeing rule by Islam and by Allah as a threat to their own unjust institutions. To accomplish this, the unbelievers have formed an alliance consisting of Western nations, Christians, and Jews that is designed to violently maintain the status quo.

That status quo is an unjust one in which the unbelievers are plundering the resources of the Muslim world, propping up apostate regimes in the Muslim world designed for their own benefit, and otherwise preventing truly Muslim governance.

Properly understanding that status quo and the enemies of Islam in Islamic terms is vital in al-Zawahiri’s opinion. In *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*, he writes:

> In the training camps and on the battlefronts against the Russians, the Muslim youths developed a broad awareness and a fuller realization of the conspiracy that is being weaved. They developed an understanding based on shari’ah of the enemies of Islam, the renegades, and their collaborators. (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 23)

Furthermore, engaging in this conflict in an un-Islamic manner is, for al-Zawahiri, not only wrong but also ultimately ineffective. When referring to the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria, al-Zawahiri writes:

> It rushed to the ballot boxes in a bid to reach the presidential palaces and the ministries, only to find at the gates tanks loaded with French ammunition, with their barrels pointing at the chests of those who forgot the rules of confrontation between justice and falsehood. The guns of the Francophile officers brought them down to the land of reality from the skies of illusions. (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, pp. 205–206)

In this conflict, there are two main types of enemies which al-Zawahiri faces: the near enemy and the far enemy. The near enemy consists of the apostate regimes who claim to be Muslim but who embrace the doctrine of the infidel for their own selfish benefit. In *Loyalty and Separation*, al-Zawahiri writes of these apostates:
They did not hesitate to borrow the ideas of corrupt secularists, although they claim to guard and defend revealed law. In their minds, there is no harm in being a civil servant, a soldier, a security agent, a journalist, a judge, and a partisan of secularism, preaching recognition of Israel and submission to its superior force, while also claiming to be a pious Muslim who fears God, fasts, prays, goes on pilgrimage, and donates legal alms. (Keppel & Milelli, 2008, p. 207)

These apostate Muslims form a potent threat: in 2002, al-Zawahiri wrote

The threat they pose to the nation has become so great that it is the gravest menace to our creed: they use force to prevent the community from obeying its religion . . . this group is so present that not a single Muslim country escapes the harm that it does. (Keppel & Milelli, 2008, p. 225)

Additionally, al-Zawahiri directly encourages other Islamist groups to participate in a struggle against these apostates. He calls the Muslim Brotherhood to repentance that “will be achieved by denouncing the apostasy of the tyrants who rule in spite of revealed law, and the positive laws that the crusading colonizers spread in our countries and that the apostate Muslims maintain” (Keppel & Milelli, 2008, p. 178).

Al-Zawahiri warns that such apostates weaken the Muslim nation, or ummah, by sapping it of the ability to react to the provocations of the far enemy. That far enemy is the puppeteer, the controlling hand who is directly and indirectly responsible for the puppet regimes that forbid the rule by Islam. Currently, the greatest far enemy is the USA, which, after the fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), attempted to extend its influence far into Muslim lands.

Before this, however, al-Zawahiri believes that the Western world had been imposing its will on the Islamic nation for centuries. Since the invasion of Egypt by Napoleon Bonaparte, Western powers had been intent on colonizing, pillaging, conquering, and otherwise meddling in Muslim lands. One of the largest and most important of these crimes was the creation of the state of Israel – when Christians and Jews literally conquered and pushed back Muslims using both naked force and illegitimate international bodies such as the United Nations.

Al-Zawahiri’s operational code states that one cannot reason with the West. It can only be attacked, for discussion or debate with the far enemy is impossible: “… the west is not only an infidel but also a hypocrite and a liar” (Keppel & Milelli, 2008, p. 205). Violence is the only possible medium of communication: “Cause the greatest damage and inflict the maximum casualties on the opponent, no matter how much time and effort these operations take, because this is the language understood by the West” (Keppel & Milelli, 2008, pp. 200–201).

The question of which enemy is more dangerous in al-Zawahiri’s mind is a complicated one. At different times, it seemed like al-Zawahiri changed his opinion as to which enemy deserved to be attacked. Although he first believed strongly in attacking the near enemy (specifically, the Egyptian regime), upon aligning with Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden he wrote that it was more important to attack the far enemy. Some have said that this switch was merely pragmatic, and it was one of the results of al-Zawahiri’s calculated move to merge Islamic Jihad with Al-Qaeda (Mastors & Nortwitz, 2008). The question of when to attack what enemy is answered in the ensuing instrumental questions.

However, like all political actors, al-Zawahiri does not interact with only political opponents; his perceptions of and interactions with his allies are also telling. In the
beginning of *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*, al-Zawahiri includes a brief description of himself, saying that he is connected with those who are engaged in jihad: “Who am I, the man who wrote this book? I am a man with a connection with the mujahideen and have forged a bond with them” (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 19). This “bond” with the mujahideen is perhaps more than simple grandstanding. Instead, this may be a clue to how he defines the mujahideen: those who have a bond with him and who agree with him.

Already known for silencing Islamists who disagreed with him (Al-Zayyat, 2002), al-Zawahiri clearly does not react well with differing opinion. He “does not like to be questioned about his methods, nor does he welcome being criticized, especially by other Muslims” (Mastors & Nortwitz, 2008, p. 334).

It is important, then, to recognize that al-Zawahiri’s allies are not simply those who agree with his goals, but those who do or can be led to believe in his methods as well. Despite the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood seeks much of the same Islamist goals that al-Zawahiri does, he wrote an excoriating critique of them in *Bitter Harvest* because they did not agree with his more violent means of achieving those Islamic goals. He even criticizes individual Islamists who disagree with him, spending a lengthy amount of time in his book *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner* questioning the motives of Montasser Al-Zayyat, who publicly supported an initiative among Islamists to cease violent means (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, pp. 152–154).

Of his fellow Islamists, he writes in *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*:

> We need to admit that successful attempts have been made to infiltrate our ranks, that these attempts have attracted some of our prominent names, and our enemies have added them to the crowds that serve their purposes, including the writers of falsehoods, those who exploit principles for personal gain, and those who sell their fatwas as commodities. (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 20)

Here, he is criticizing not those that give information to opposing security or intelligence services but those who in his mind “sell” their religious declarations, write falsehoods, and otherwise diverge from the methods that he has determined to be Islamic duties.

When al-Zawahiri speaks of jihad, he is not speaking of political action that is merely permitted; he views jihad as a duty that must be completed (in the prescribed way) by each Muslim regardless of the situation in which he finds himself. Not only does al-Zawahiri write that “this battle . . . is a battle facing every Muslim, young or old. It is a battle that is broad enough to affect every one of us at home, work, in his children, or dignity” (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, pp. 223–224) but that jihadists must hold “every Muslim responsible for defending Islam, its sanctities, nation, and homeland” (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 213). So important is it to al-Zawahiri that individuals engage in jihad that he claims that Muslims risk eternal punishment if they do not wage it. In *Bitter Harvest*, al-Zawahiri writes “God will send punishment in this world and the next to those who refuse to fight” (Keppel & Milelli, 2008, p. 180).

Furthermore, al-Zawahiri criticizes other Islamists for not emphasizing this individual duty. When writing of Sheikh Bin Baz and his fatwa authorizing parliamentary representation, al-Zawahiri says, “By making it licit to follow the democratic path, the sheikh opened the door for Muslims to forsake this jihad, which is an individual duty; he is even combatting it” (Keppel & Milelli, 2008, p. 192). Additionally, in *Bitter Harvest*, he calls the Muslim Brotherhood to “believe in the duty of jihad
against these tyrants… They must consider jihad an individual duty that is incumbent upon every Muslim governed by these tyrants” (Keppel & Milelli, 2008, p. 179).

Thus, the political conflict before al-Zawahiri is hostile, religious, and intractable. His enemies are imperialistic, barbaric, and hypocritical infidels who will always seek to conquer and govern Muslims. Al-Zawahiri’s allies are precisely those who agree not only with his goals but also with his methods. Finally, al-Zawahiri’s operational code dictates that this struggle between Muslims and infidels is required by the Islamic religion, and in order for any to be considered Muslim, he must engage in jihad. In al-Zawahiri’s words, “It is a battle of ideologies, a struggle for survival, and a war with no truce” (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 111).

What are the prospects for the eventual realization of one’s fundamental political values and aspirations? Can one be optimistic, or must one be pessimistic on this score; and in what respects the one and/or the other?

In al-Zawahiri’s operational code, the long-term eventual prospects for the creation of an Islamic Caliphate and for rule by sharia law are certain. This is because the political goal of creating a Caliphate and submitting to rule by sharia is a religious requirement, and since God has stated that it will happen, it will happen. In a statement, al-Zawahiri writes, “If there is belief in God, and if God’s word is the most supreme, then the land will be liberated, injustice will end, and the sanctities will be protected” (IntelCenter, 2008, p. 93).

Additionally, al-Zawahiri points to many examples in history of when Muslims have fought and pushed out Crusaders and infidels. For example, in Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner, he reminded his audience that “The Crusaders in Palestine and Syria left after two centuries of continued jihad” (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 117). He also recounted the battles of Saladin and others who captured Jerusalem, and then saw “the cycle of history turn against the Crusaders” (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 215).

His feeling of historical and theological inevitability, however, is tempered by the fact that in the near to mid-range future, there is little question that there will not be an Islamic Caliphate. Al-Zawahiri writes: “The establishment of a Muslim state in the heart of the Islamic world is not an easy goal or an objective that is close at hand” (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 215). As al-Zawahiri notes, even Muslims in the age of Saladin had trouble driving out the Crusaders: “The Islamic nation at the time had jihad rulers and regular and disciplined armies. It was led by prominent scholars… Despite this, the Crusaders did not leave in 30 or 50 years” (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 117).

Al-Zawahiri perceives the current struggle as a much more difficult one, in that Muslims are ruled and broken up by traitorous regimes who will not allow sharia to be implemented and who submit to the Crusaders and Zionists for their own fractious interests. Hence, this war may last until Judgment Day, but it will ultimately be successful.

This point deserves further elaboration. Al-Zawahiri’s certainty of the goal (combined with the individual duty to engage in jihad) makes him a far more dangerous terrorist. He can be fatalistic about success in the near and mid-term, making him willing and able to demand huge sacrifices of himself and others. However, his extremely optimistic view of the jihad movement’s eventual prospects makes him equally capable of conserving his resources and waiting to attack until he has enough resources to attack more efficiently.
Is the political future predictable? In what sense and to what extent?
The political future is, in al-Zawahiri’s operational code, completely predictable for two reasons. First, the prospects for the Muslim nation are certain; eventually the Caliphate will be restored and Muslims will be ruled by sharia. Second, the Crusader/Zionist enemy will not change natures very easily and will continue to engage in such behavior as it has done in the past centuries.

As has been previously mentioned, al-Zawahiri sees certain, eventual success for the Muslim nation: “The mujahideen will continue to battle this campaign until they defeat it, God willing ... Even if this war lasts until the End of Days” (IntelCenter, 2010, p. 151). In al-Zawahiri’s mind, God has promised that Muslims will eventually be victorious, although in the immediate future they are currently betrayed by the various puppet regimes the West has implanted in the Muslim world, and are thus victimized by the West.

Furthermore, in al-Zawahiri’s mind, the Crusader/Zionist enemy will not change in the near future. Violence is the only language the West understands (Al-Zawahiri, 2006). Until they recognize the superiority of Islam, they will always logically seek their own interests. Because the infidel currently does not recognize the superiority of Islam, they will not respect the rights of Muslims to rule over themselves, and they will attempt to steal their resources, rule over them, and otherwise meddle in the Muslim world so as to encourage their own interests.

How much “control” or “mastery” can one have over historical development?
What is one’s role in “moving” and “shaping” history in the desired direction?
First and foremost, in al-Zawahiri’s operational code the most important historical and political developments that are to come are the will of an omnipotent God. In a statement made on 4 March 2006, al-Zawahiri wrote: “If there is belief in God, and if God’s word is the most supreme, then the land will be liberated, injustice will end, and the sanctities will be protected” (IntelCenter, 2008, p. 93). Success to Muslims is guaranteed regardless of how many Muslims truly fight jihad, for God is greater than them all. In Bitter Harvest, al-Zawahiri wrote: “God therefore has no need of us, the Brotherhood, or his other creatures. Praise him: he causes his religion to triumph through whomever he wills” (Keppel & Milelli, 2008, p. 180).

However, it is clear that al-Zawahiri admits that individuals can and do have a great deal of control over intermediate historical developments. First of all, Muslims can easily attack their enemies and effectively pursue their objectives, giving them some control over immediate and intermediate goals. In Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner, al-Zawahiri wrote:

Killing Americans with a single bullet, a stab, or a device made up of a popular mixture of explosives or hitting them with an iron bar is not impossible. Likewise, burning their property with Molotov Cocktails (sic) is not difficult. (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 212)

By doing so, small groups of jihadists can effectively frighten the Americans and the Jews, as well as expose the traitorous agenda of the rulers of the current regimes, thus accomplishing an immediate political goal and having some control over immediate historical development.

Conversely, al-Zawahiri notes that should Muslims fail to adequately strive in jihad in one or more ways the consequences can be dire. Should the Muslim nation neglect
jihad, it would suffer the consequences as al-Zawahiri writes in his theological treatise *Loyalty and Separation*: “To neglect this essential pillar is to open up a breach through which the enemies of Islam can pass to destroy the Muslim nation, deceive it, put it to sleep, and lead it into disaster and calamity” (Keppel & Milelli, 2008, p. 231).

Even with a proper religious understanding, one must prepare and fight jihad in a proper way, for even those fighting jihad are liable to failure. In *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*, al-Zawahiri wrote that loyalty to leadership should not extend so far as to leave the movement bound to a fallible man, warning that “Any leadership flaw could lead to a historic catastrophe, not only for the movement but also for the entire nation” (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 208). Furthermore, in an undated letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, he writes: “You know well that purity of faith and the correct way of living are not connected necessarily to success in the field unless you take into consideration the reasons and practices which events are guided by” (Al-Zawahiri, n.d.). Thus, conviction to jihad doesn’t necessarily make one’s operations successful – a lack of tactical preparation has caused some operations to fail (Al-Zawahiri, 2006).

Finally, al-Zawahiri clearly indicates that the infidels can and do change intermediate historical and political developments by taking advantage of Muslims. For example, the creation of the state of Israel was the result of a centuries-long effort to serve their own interests in the area and was accomplished through a variety of backstabbing, treaty-breaking, and other crimes that primarily relied on taking advantage of Muslim rulers who made deals with the infidel (Al-Zawahiri, 2006). Thus, according to al-Zawahiri’s operational code, the infidel can promote its own agenda and interests by relying on deceit and trickery and on the failings of Muslim leaders and the Muslim nation.

These points show al-Zawahiri’s sense that while God is ultimately the source of all history and politics, men can affect immediate or intermediate political developments. Muslims have the ability to successfully attack their targets and win battles, but Muslims can also fail because of inadequate commitment to jihad, improper understanding of it, or failure in tactical or practical concerns. It may seem counter-intuitive that Muslims’ ability to fail is proof of their control; however, because failures are caused by Muslims’ actions, success is also caused by Muslims’ actions. Thus, al-Zawahiri’s operational code states that all Muslims must do is properly devote themselves to monotheism and jihad and engage in jihad in the proper manner, both religiously and tactically, and they will be successful, eventually establishing the Caliphate and submitting to rule by sharia.

*What is the role of “chance” in human affairs and in historical development?*

As understood in Western terms, al-Zawahiri believes that there is no chance. Instead, all success and failure is the result of God’s inscrutable will. One succeeds in life because it is God’s will – Muslims, in particular, succeed in their political endeavors because they follow their religion. If a Muslim fails, it is not because of chance, but because either he has been betrayed by other Muslims or failed in some form, or because God inscrutably willed it. This failure comes because he has not lived his religion perfectly or he has not taken adequate precaution against the efforts of the infidel.

Unforeseen events, to al-Zawahiri, are also the will of God and cannot be perfectly understood. Several times al-Zawahiri mentions that unforeseen events, when fortuitous, are the will of God. For example, in *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*, he notes:
The Islamic Group responded to the killing of Alaa Muhi Al Din by ambushing Interior Minister Abdel Halim Musa, but God willed that People’s Assembly Speaker Rifaat al Mahjoub’s motorcade happened to pass by the ambush, and he was killed. (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 101)

Even when such unforeseen events seem to be against the jihadist wishes, it is the will of an Almighty God. In an interview released on 5 May 2007, al-Zawahiri said: “Ramzi Yousef tried to demolish the two Trade towers, and success was not decreed for him, but Kalid Shaykh came along after him and destroyed them” (IntelCenter, 2008, p. 260). Thus, success and failure depend not on the whims of chaotic chance but on the will of the Almighty.

**Instrumental beliefs**

The second set of questions in the operational code focus on the subject’s instrumental beliefs, or beliefs about what is the best way to interact with the political worlds. These questions relate to the relationship between the subject and the world, asking how a subject believes one should choose and pursue goals, how political risk is calculated, the best timing of political action, and the utility and roles of different political means.

While the previous philosophical questions refer to the leader’s perceptions of the political world and what political vision the leader has, the instrumental questions deal solely with how the leader chooses to go about implementing his political vision. Answering these questions allows the researcher to better contextualize the subject’s behavior; this is an especially useful analysis when discussing terrorism, as it gives important clues to a terrorist’s potential targets and methodologies.

**What is the best approach for selecting goals or objectives for political action?**

Perhaps one of the most important questions of the operational code, this question gets at the heart of how a political actor chooses the goals and objectives with which he attempts to implement his political vision. In the case of Ayman al-Zawahiri, this is a dynamic and complex question which requires some historical context.

In his early writings and life as a jihadist, al-Zawahiri was quite clear about his chosen target: the secular regime in Egypt. Even other Middle Eastern targets took a back seat as compared to this overriding goal of toppling the un-Islamic regime and implementing sharia. In 1995, al-Zawahiri wrote that “The Way to Jerusalem Passes Through Cairo” (Al-Zayyat, 2002, p. 62). Furthermore, in a 1996 statement, he “rejected any intention to stop fighting the Egyptian regime, saying that the main mistake of the Gama’a al-Islamiya was that it drew a distinction between the internal enemy and the outside enemy” (Al-Zayyat, 2002, p. 63). Citing the Koran, he said that the near enemy was a more important target. Reflecting this theological reasoning, in *Bitter Harvest*, al-Zawahiri had written:

> We consider that the fight against apostate regimes in Muslim countries must come before other fights, because they are apostates and the fight against apostates must take precedence over the fight against unbelievers; this is also true because they are closer to Muslims... Their nature as apostates and their proximity to Muslims make them more dangerous for Muslims. (Keppel & Milelli, 2008, p. 178)

Within several years, however, al-Zawahiri had radically changed his ideology. This change began in 1997, when his writings became more and more anti-American and
anti-Israeli (Al-Zayyat, 2002, p. 64). Joining with Osama bin Laden in 1998, al-Zawahiri helped form the International Islamic Front for Jihad on the Jews and Crusaders, an organization devoted to attacking the far enemy of the USA and Israel. This organization issued a fatwa claiming that jihad against the Americans was a compulsory duty for all Muslims who were capable of doing such.

Analysts have suggested that this change in al-Zawahiri’s goal-choosing behavior occurred for a variety of reasons. For example, the Islamist lawyer Montasser al-Zayyat writes that much of this can be explained by the general deterioration of al-Zawahiri’s Egyptian terrorist organization, Islamic Jihad. Not only did the group suffer from a lack of financial resources in the early 1990s, but also their attacks were not successful and the Egyptian regime made large numbers of arrests, sapping the group of its strength. Furthermore, al-Zawahiri’s interaction with bin Laden led to favoring bin Laden’s philosophy of attacking the far enemy. By this analysis, turning to a different ideology was simply an outgrowth of seeking support from bin Laden (Al-Zayyat, 2002, pp. 64–70).

This shift in al-Zawahiri’s choice of targets is an important facet in understanding his operational code. It is clear, of course, that the conclusions he was reaching in 1996 differed greatly from those he was reaching in 1998. What caused this? Several possibilities arise as to why his political behavior changed so much. First, it may be that the information processing structures that he was using changed. A leader’s operational code can indeed change in response to changing psychological conditions (Johnson, 1977). Second, it may be that al-Zawahiri’s information processing schemata remained the same, but the input (or the information at his disposal) changed significantly.

While a rigorous examination of this specific point is beyond the scope of this study, initial analysis suggests that it may be the latter. Throughout even his earliest writings, much of al-Zawahiri’s goal-seeking behavior seems to be capabilities-based. That is, his judgment of which target to attack is directly based on his perceptions of his abilities and resources. People are loathe to acknowledge a threat before which one is unprepared and helpless, and al-Zawahiri may have unconsciously played down the threat of those enemies he could not confront, or conversely, emphasized the threat of those enemies he could confront.

This possibility suggests that al-Zawahiri’s ideological shift to the far enemy in 1997 occurred not because his information processing schemata changed, but because the input to such schemata did. In Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner, al-Zawahiri wrote:

“The struggle for the establishment of the Muslim state cannot be considered a regional struggle, certainly not after it had been ascertained that the Crusader alliance led by the United States will not allow any Muslim force to reach power in Arab countries. Confining the battle to the domestic enemy (within the Arab states), will not be feasible in this stage of the battle. (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 201)

This quote shows that al-Zawahiri ascertained a relative disparity between the strength of the mujahideen in Egypt and the regime’s forces, interpreting that disparity as a result of the support of the far enemy for the regime. Thus, al-Zawahiri may have judged that the near enemy was more of a threat in 1996 because he had resources at his disposal to attack the Egyptian regime. The deterioration of Islamic Jihad’s prospects in the mid-1990s, coupled with his interaction with Osama bin Laden, may then have led him to later conclude that the far enemy was more threatening. The simple fact was that action
against the Egyptian regime was becoming less and less likely while the safe havens in Afghanistan were allowing bin Laden to train fighters and to plan jihad against the far enemy with impunity.

Furthermore, much of al-Zawahiri’s strategic thinking and goal-seeking behavior also appears to be based on efforts to increase the capabilities of himself, his group, and the jihadist movement as a whole. In *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner* al-Zawahiri writes:

Victory for the Islamic movements against the world alliance cannot be attained unless these movements possess an Islamic base in the heart of the Arab region. Mobilizing and arming the nation will be up in the air, without any tangible results, until a fundamentalist state is established in the region. (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 201)

In a statement on 17 April 2008, al-Zawahiri expresses confidence that this process of fundamentalist state creation was well on its way: “Shortly Iraq will become the fortress of Islam which will become a springboard from which expedititions and troops will leave to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque, God willing” (IntelCenter, 2008, p. 443). Note that the creation of a fundamentalist state is not only an end unto itself but the means whereby the jihadist movement will complete their mission of creating a Caliphate.

Hence, al-Zawahiri is prioritizing his strategic goals based on how achieving those goals will affect his (or his movement’s) resources and capabilities. Furthermore, his tactical considerations are also couched in terms of capabilities; when deciding on what tactical targets to bomb, his group’s capabilities were the primary factors used in the decision (Al-Zawahiri, 2006). Moreover, when al-Zawahiri was approached with an idea about creating a guerilla war against the Egyptian regime, he did not agree, saying that the terrain of the land in question was not good for such operations (Al-Zawahiri, 2006). His objection, then, came only from considerations of capabilities: al-Zawahiri did not believe that his colleague was capable of sustaining a successful guerilla campaign in the area mentioned, so he recommended against it.

Finally, al-Zawahiri explained, also in *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*, what caused the failures of several attacks by the mujahideen in Egypt. About the 1974 Technical Military College incident, he wrote, “The coup attempt failed because it did not take into consideration the objective conditions and the need to prepare well for it” (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 55). By “objective conditions”, he spoke of training, preparation, and other factors affecting the mujahideen’s capabilities. About efforts to conduct an uprising after the assassination of Anwar al-Sadat, he wrote,

The armed rebellion in Asyut was doomed to fail. It was an ‘emotional’ uprising that was poorly planned. The rebellion . . . was based on an unrealistic plan to seize Asyut and then advance northward toward Cairo, disregarding any figures about the enemy’s strength and material. (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 60)

Hence, both tactically and strategically, al-Zawahiri clearly used capabilities analysis to determine which targets, goals, and objectives he would use to implement his political vision. Further research is needed to determine how this, and his large ideological shift in the late 1990s, affects his information processing schemata.

**How are the goals of action pursued most effectively?**

After selecting goals and objectives through which to implement his political vision, al-Zawahiri pursues those goals through methods he believes to be religiously acceptable.
Namely, he believes that violent jihad is both a compulsory duty for every Muslim, and it is the only effective way of successfully changing the political world. In an interview on 3 August 2009, al-Zawahiri states:

First, no real reform can take place in Egypt as along (sic) as it is distant from the Islamic approach. And this is a legal religious truth as well as political. Second, the regime in Egypt and in most Arab-Islamic countries cannot be changed except by force. The regime in Egypt will not submit to any peaceful attempt for change, and Hosni Mubarak and his son will not cede power except by force. Third, the attempt to change the regime internally and through its laws and constitution will only lead to more corruption and oppression and dependence . . . The United States will welcome a regime change only if it is reassured that the new regime will follow its orders and will be more dependent on it than the pervious (sic) one. (IntelCenter, 2010, p. 187)

In Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner, al-Zawahiri also refers to Afghan jihad against the Russians, claiming that the success of that jihad was due to the purity of the Islamic approach. Other battles across the Muslim world did not fight so purely: “many of the liberation battles in our Muslim world had used composite slogans, that mixed nationalism with Islam and, indeed, sometimes caused Islam to intermingle with leftist, communist slogans” (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 36). By using both Islamic and secular justification, al-Zawahiri claims that those fighting the battle became confused as to the true meaning and scope of the conflict and thus lose sight of who the near enemy was. Palestine is an excellent example of this:

The Palestine issue is the best example of these intermingled slogans and beliefs under the influence of the idea of allying oneself with the devil for the sake of liberating Palestine. They allied themselves with the devil, but lost Palestine. (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 36)

Thus, in al-Zawahiri’s operational code, applied Islam is the most effective political tool against the oppressors, and the most potent weapon against the Crusader/Zionist enemy would be a truly Islamic nation, one led by sharia alone. Furthermore, the most effective fighters would be those who were purely Islamic and who carefully plan their campaigns around their resources.

How are the risks of political action calculated, controlled, and accepted?

Compared to other political activity, the risks of terrorist activity are relatively great. Not only do individual terrorist operations create the possibility of injury or death for the actor, but investigations by intelligence and security services can lead to imprisonment or death even when a terrorist group is not operationally active.

In al-Zawahiri’s political psychology, such risks should be carefully studied. Tactical risks, the risks that individual operations create, and operational risks, the risks inherent in membership of a terrorist organization, are both considered in depth by al-Zawahiri’s operational code. When leveled against a group’s members or operations, these risks should be carefully planned against.

However, the most dangerous risks that al-Zawahiri sees are those that beset the intangible assets of the jihadist movement. For example, when discussing the assassination of Anwar al Sadat and the resistance against the Egyptian regime in Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner, al-Zawahiri writes that the most serious risk facing the movement at the time was the despair that some in the movement were facing, and that continued resistance met this risk by increasing the self-confidence of those
wondering whether or not such resistance was possible. Al-Zawahiri asserts, “there was no choice but to continue the resistance. Any analyst could realize the extent of the disasters that could have taken place had Anwar al Mujahideen not been killed and had the resistance against the Egyptian Government stopped” (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 110).

This quotation highlights an important part of al-Zawahiri’s operational code: the most damaging risks that must be planned for are those found within the movement itself. Indeed, for while infidels cannot, in and of themselves, bring ruin to jihad or to the Muslim nation, the Muslims can. Leadership failings can doom the movement, traitorous regimes can forget Islam, and tactical failings of the jihadist can prevent them from succeeding.

To limit these risks, al-Zawahiri’s operational code dictates that all operations must be planned in terms of the movement and of jihadist’s tangible and intangible capabilities. This form of analysis is much like the capabilities analysis that dominates other parts of al-Zawahiri’s operational code, in that the risks that al-Zawahiri are most concerned with affect the capabilities (whether tangible or intangible) of the movement and groups with which he is affiliated.

More specifically, the most daunting risks that the movement faces are those that are spawned by the human failings of the members of the group. While tactical and operational risks are important and should be understood well, the greatest and longest-term risks are those that arise from the jihadist’s own imperfections and foibles.

What is the best “timing” of action to advance one’s interest?

For al-Zawahiri, the best timing depends entirely on an organization’s goals and capabilities. On the one hand, battles should be well thought out, not too hasty, and should be on jihadist terms. On the other hand, there is no point in allowing resources to lie idle. Therefore, once a group has the capabilities to engage in an attack, it should do so.

As with other elements of al-Zawahiri’s operational code, analysis of timing is a form of capabilities analysis. It is the jihadists’ capabilities, and nothing else, that determines when operations should occur. Al-Zawahiri asserts, “The jihad movement must patiently build its structure until it is well established. It must pool enough resources and supporters and devise enough plans to fight the battle at the time and arena it chooses” (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 216). Al-Zawahiri even explains that pulling out from an area is preferable to allowing the enemy to destroy the movement so that the movement can preserve its strength and fight another day (Al-Zawahiri, 2006).

These operations, however, cannot wait indefinitely. Jihadists cannot simply wait for the opportune moment, as such waiting in not fruitful. In an interview on 5 May 2007, al-Zawahiri states that

if we relax and stay behind, we will lose both the Deen and the Dunya, we will lose both lives and wealth, and will lose both dignity and sacred things. In fact, we will lose everything if we are stingy with anything. (IntelCenter, 2008, p. 255).

Consequently, al-Zawahiri’s operational code states that the best timing of action is as soon as a jihadist organization is capable of engaging in such action. Opponent action does not affect timing except insofar as it makes jihadist operations more or less possible to effect.
What is the utility and role of different means of advancing one’s interests?

In the statement of 4 March 2006, al-Zawahiri outlines four interrelated fronts, which he suggests are ways of confronting the Crusader enemy. He writes:

The first front is that of inflicting losses on the Crusader West, especially its economic structure, through dealing strikes which will make it bleed for years… The second front is that of expelling the Crusader-Zionist enemy from the lands of Islam, particularly from Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine. The troops that invaded the lands of Islam… should leave our lands defeated after the collapse of their economies… As for the third front, it is the front of work on changing corrupt regimes which have sold our dignity and pride to the Crusader West and surrendered to Israel… As for the fourth front, it is the front of popular missionary activity. (IntelCenter, 2008, pp. 88–89)

This quotation accurately and succinctly outlines the most important means of advancing an Islamist agenda. Each of these fronts will be reviewed. The first front is the infliction of direct losses on the Crusader West. This front includes all attacks on the USA and Israeli homeland. As al-Zawahiri states, the point of these attacks is to damage the Crusaders’ economy. By doing so, the Crusaders will become unable to bankroll their Arab puppets, interfere in the Middle East, or otherwise occupy Muslim lands.

Evidently, mere blood and gore are not enough to change the world; instead, attacks on the USA and Israeli homeland are devoted to damaging their capability to oppress Muslims. In Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner, al-Zawahiri writes:

If the successful operations against Islam’s enemies and the severe damage inflicted on them do not serve the ultimate goal of establishing the Muslim nation in the heart of the Islamic world, they will be nothing more than disturbing acts, regardless of their magnitude, that could be absorbed and endured. (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 215)

Hence, blood for the sake of blood is not encouraged by al-Zawahiri, and attacks on the Crusader/Zionist enemies exist to limit their economic ability to finance and support the oppression of Muslims. To be certain, al-Zawahiri does not discourage bloodshed, even of civilians. While such attacks on the USA and Israeli homeland may indeed kill and maim civilians or attack secondary or tertiary economic targets, they must be designed to create the maximum economic impact, even if it is as little as increasing the cost of security to the homeland.

The second front is insurgent warfare against Western and Israeli military targets in the Middle East, particularly Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine. These countries are those where Western (particularly American) troops are directly working to attack Muslims and occupy Muslim land. These attacks differ from the first front in that they focus on the enemy’s military capabilities. In Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner, al-Zawahiri writes of the benefits of attacking Crusader troops wherever they are in the Middle East:

By this, we win three times: First, by dealing the blow to the great master, which is hiding from our strikes behind its agent. Second, by winning over the nation when we choose a target that it favors, one that it sympathizes with those who hit it. Third, by exposing the regime before the Muslim people when the regime attacks us to defend its US and Jewish masters, thus showing its ugly face, the face of the hired policeman who is faithfully serving the occupiers and the enemies of the Muslim nation. (Al-Zawahiri, 2006, p. 218)

Thus, attacks against American and Israeli military forces not only cause actual damage to those forces, but they also rally the Muslim nation (ummah) to the jihadist call.
Additionally, once the local regime responds against the jihadists, Muslims learn where the regime’s loyalty lies: with the Crusader enemy which they seek to support.

The third front is the “near enemy” discussed in the first philosophical question. While al-Zawahiri’s opinion on the utility and role of attacking un-Islamic regimes in the Middle East has shifted over the years, there is little doubt that, given the opportunity, al-Zawahiri would gladly attack and/or destroy any of the regimes he has labeled as “infidel”. By toppling one or more of these regimes, and by establishing an Islamic state in their place, al-Zawahiri is attempting to establish a growing swell of Islamic force that will eventually accomplish all the goals of his political vision.

The fourth and final front is that of “popular missionary activity”. While at first glance, this may seem similar to the da’wa performed by other Islamist organizations attempting to Islamize Arabic countries from the ground up, for al-Zawahiri, these non-violent means only serve as a support to violent means. They are not ends unto themselves, as this support should “motivate the nation to support its mujahideen sons financially and morally” (IntelCenter, 2008, p. 89).

Al-Zawahiri even attempts to dictate that Muslims should turn all of their charitable giving required by Islam over to jihad groups like his. For most Muslims, these alms are used for the poor. One author wrote, “For the zakah is to be used first and foremost for the needy, in order to alleviate the problem of poverty, if not to extirpate it completely” (Turner, 2006, p. 120). However, al-Zawahiri states, “We should not imagine directing the Muslims’ alms and donations and wealth to other fields” (IntelCenter, 2008, p. 89). This is a rather radical statement, as it shows that al-Zawahiri sees entire pillars of Islam as serving the need of jihad.

For al-Zawahiri, then, these donations, along with all other popular missionary activity, Islamic education, activism, and charity work, all serve only to support the jihad in one way or another. While he does not often discuss non-violent means of conducting jihad (as his operational code states that violent means are the only effective ones), his inclusion of this front in his 2006 statement indicates that he recognizes the value of such action, provided that it properly supports and services the violent means he finds effective.

**Concluding views and implications**

From the preceding questions examining al-Zawahiri’s operational code, the main assumptions driving al-Zawahiri’s philosophical and instrumental beliefs become apparent. First, the most important element of his political psychology is his understanding of political activity as a religious battlefield, a hostile world in which the infidels oppress Muslims and take upon themselves the sovereignty that belongs to God. Second, when implementing his political vision, al-Zawahiri’s instrumental analyses appear to rely almost solely on the capabilities, weaknesses, and nature of the jihadist movement itself, while determining only the most basic outline of infidel capabilities and motivations necessary for tactical operations.

Philosophically, al-Zawahiri’s world view clearly denotes that the political world is at once both religious and hostile. These elements cannot be separated, as al-Zawahiri’s religious characterization of his allies and enemies makes the political world a black-and-white struggle in which good and evil are clearly delineated. Not only does this clear delineation grant al-Zawahiri, in his own mind, unquestionable authority to engage in whatever political (and violent) activity as he sees fit, but also it drives him to do so, requiring him to struggle for God and monotheism as he sees it. To
forsake violence for any worldly concern would be akin to forsaking his religion. Thus, his struggle against the forces of democracy and the West are very much a struggle for his own soul.

Additionally, al-Zawahiri’s political psychology clearly views the implementation of political action as dependent solely on the will, capabilities, and nature of the jihadist movement. Without action on the part of Muslims, the political world will not change; perhaps the actors would, but ultimately the infidel West will always attempt to oppress Muslims and usurp sharia. Only action by Muslims can change this and allow Muslims the dignity of living their own religion in a political system created by Allah.

Furthermore, in al-Zawahiri’s operational code, the planning of political action, especially violent operations, depends only on the tangible and intangible capabilities of the jihadist movement. The infidels cannot be allowed to dictate timing, means, or any other element of jihadist activity. Additionally, the greatest risks to the jihadist movement do not come from the well-understood nature of the infidels but from the human frailties and failings of the jihadists themselves.

These points each bring with them several implications which may affect al-Zawahiri’s capability as a terrorist leader and which may assist policy makers and analysts to determine and act upon al-Zawahiri’s weaknesses. First, al-Zawahiri’s religious conception of the political world will not allow him to make allies among those with whom he disagrees on any subject of importance.

As al-Zawahiri separates the world into black-and-white conceptions of good and evil, those who hold different points of view on democratic government and the most effective way of Islamizing society are, at best, deceived by the infidel, and at worst, traitors to Islam. For example, while both he and the Muslim Brotherhood both seek a more Islamic society in Egypt, the Brotherhood’s acceptance of the democratic process as a means of attaining power and of changing society drives al-Zawahiri to criticize, if not fight against, their goals.

This inability to ally with those who disagree on means and methods may help explain some of his behavior with those who should be his allies. Known as one who was wont to make trouble among other groups, al-Zawahiri always sought to be next to those in power. He was widely praised in Islamist circles for his writing about jihad and his religious works; however, very often, al-Zawahiri did not work well with other Islamists (Al-Zayyat, 2002).

Now without the charisma of Osama bin Laden, al-Zawahiri finds himself at the head of Al-Qaeda, a network of networks, as more of a figurehead than ever bin Laden was. Furthermore, he risks being a “prisoner in an ivory tower from which [his] voice[s] [is] heard more and more faintly” (Lacroix, 2008, p. 170), aggravating an already difficult security situation with an insistence that the jihadist movement defers to his own enlightened leadership. These weaknesses aside, al-Zawahiri remains a cunning adversary of Western counter-terrorism forces, not only because of his intelligence but also because of his sheer devotion to his cause.

The second implication that can be drawn from al-Zawahiri’s political psychology relates to his instrumental beliefs and the centrality of jihadist capabilities in determining political action. As the infidel is well understood in terms of sharia and of Islam, spending precious resources in order to learn more about the West than is needed for tactical operations is a waste. This implies several things. First, al-Zawahiri most likely filters the information he receives and/or considers by listening to or seeking information from jihadist sources exclusively. Even if his security situation were such that he could view Western media or other sources, it is likely that he would
not. Instead, it appears that he would rely on his allies to tell him what these sources are saying and if they are doing anything important.

Additionally, by viewing the West with such an inflexible image, al-Zawahiri only ascertains the most basic outline of infidel capabilities and motivations necessary for tactical operations. It does not appear that his strategic planning evinces any amount of cognitive complexity. As a result, al-Zawahiri is unable to foresee the West’s intangible capabilities or possible responses. His inability to foresee the US response to the attacks of 11 September 2001 or the success of “Awakening Councils” in Iraq, and his as yet immaterialized premonition that Iraq would soon be an Islamist state are all, to differing extents, related to this point.

To al-Zawahiri, the West is only a two-dimensional enemy that is perhaps dangerous but not at all complex. Thus, al-Zawahiri fails to fully understand the conflict in which he is thrusting himself, looking only at his jihadist movement for validation even as he plans attacks which, ostensibly, are aimed to hurt the West he does not understand.

In conclusion, Ayman al-Zawahiri’s political psychology not only informs his religious view of the political world, but also drives him to continually fight for his hope of an Islamic Caliphate. Despite the difficulty he has in attracting followers and in conducting operations with allies who may disagree with him, and despite his inability to engage in all but the most basic of strategic planning, al-Zawahiri remains a dangerous enemy of the USA. His lack of inhibition and the drive to attack the USA combine to make him a danger, if not strategically, then at least tactically, as his operations will necessarily harm Americans.

However, al-Zawahiri’s most dangerous role may not necessarily be as an operational planner. Ever the introvert, al-Zawahiri most likely understands that he does not have the charisma or leadership of Osama bin Laden. This, combined with the forced shift of Al-Qaeda into a network of networks, makes al-Zawahiri’s role more as a cheerleader and figurehead.

As a result, al-Zawahiri’s most dangerous attacks on the USA will not come as he attempts to interpose himself into armed operations, which he has never had much experience in anyway, but will instead come as he attempts to rally and centralize the efforts of the faithful. Only when the Al-Qaeda network can muster all of its resources, concentrating its forces and resources, can it be a threat to the USA, and this is exactly what al-Zawahiri has been trying to accomplish in the past several years. By encouraging his jihadist allies to participate in specific campaigns, telling the Muslim faithful to support the jihad, and otherwise fighting for his inflexibly hostile world view, al-Zawahiri is doing nothing more or less than encouraging the spread of his own operational code to other jihadists and Muslims. Thus, al-Zawahiri’s operational code and political psychology is not only a key to understanding his own actions, but also can be crucial to understanding a portion of jihadist thinking throughout the world.

Limitations
Understanding that thinking, however, will require more research than the present study provides. As with any study, there are several limitations which need to be understood in order to properly contextualize the information provided.

First, belief systems represent only a portion of cognition in general. There are many cognitive variables unmeasured by this study standing between belief and action.
Consequently, a measure of al-Zawahiri’s belief systems may not give an exact blueprint of al-Zawahiri actions, thus limiting the utility of such an analysis.

This being said, some utility can be expected from studying al-Zawahiri’s belief systems, especially due to al-Zawahiri’s role as an ideological leader. As previously noted, al-Zawahiri depends on a reputation of ideological purity. It can be expected, then, that there will be a potent relationship between the beliefs he espouses and the action he takes.

Second, the present study attempts to research al-Zawahiri’s belief systems in a qualitative manner, trading statistical analyses for a less parsimonious but more in-depth ideography. The effect of this research design is that its conclusions are less nomothetic than those derived from a quantitative approach. Rather than seek to prove generalizable laws and principles of human psychology, the present study has instead sought to apply current theory and to directly inform counter-terrorist and political strategy, thus creating an analysis that presents a less clear but more expansive view of the subject.

Finally, the present study relies primarily on four sources for material: two broad collections of statements by IntelCenter (2008, 2010), a collection of al-Zawahiri’s writings translated by Mansfield (Al-Zawahiri, 2006) and a collection of Al-Qaeda source material by Keppel and Milelli (2008). This small diversity of translations and sources was sufficient for the present study due to the fact that the qualitative research design did not study individual word choice as other operational code analysis techniques do. Other studies using more parsimonious methods will require a larger diversity of translations.

Despite these limitations, however, it is clear from al-Zawahiri’s belief systems that his religious beliefs create an inflexibly hostile world view and make him unable to ally with any who disagree substantially with his preferred means and methods. Further research is needed to determine what other cognitive variables outside belief systems affect al-Zawahiri’s actions, why al-Zawahiri chose to change enemies in 1998, and to research how al-Zawahiri’s interactions with the group dynamics of terrorist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda affect his own operational code.

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