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al Qaeda and Global Governance: When Ideology Clashes With Political Expediency

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In recent years, statements by al Qaeda leaders have included references to topics often associated with global-governance proponents’ critique of the state. This article examines the organization’s attitude toward symbols of global governance, giving particular attention to its view of the United Nations as the foundation for global governance, and to the manner in which al Qaeda approaches the central questions of environmental threats and human rights. The organization is seeking to insert itself into the discourse of global governance and use it in an instrumental manner; it focuses on anti-Western narrative and seeks to expose the existing order as designed by Western powers, particularly the United States, for self-serving reasons. However, the article argues, notwithstanding al Qaeda’s reputation for sophistication in manipulating public opinion, the organization’s references to global governance underscore the limitations its rigid ideology imposes on its messaging efforts. Even though adopting the global governance discourse is in line with the group’s effort to improve its image, al Qaeda’s extremist ideology limits its ability to take full advantage of the benefits this discourse offers.

Keywords al Qaeda, English school, environment, framing, global governance, human rights, ideology, international order, religion, United Nations

Introduction

Over the years, al Qaeda’s propaganda machine regularly received high marks from scholars and practitioners. Pundits portrayed the organization as media-savvy and called sophisticated its continuous efforts to manipulate and sow discord among its state enemies. In reality, al Qaeda’s messaging proved much less successful than its image suggests: At the end of the day, no matter how savvy al Qaeda’s marketers, it is selling a very unappealing product. Flexibility in its strategic messaging may have had a potential to mitigate this problem, but al Qaeda had limited appetite for instrumentalism. Its adherence to a radical ideological worldview makes masking its true nature for the purpose of scoring political points extremely difficult.

This article presents global governance as an example of a subject to which al Qaeda attempted to link itself but was unable to take full advantage of due to...
the constraints al Qaeda’s ideology imposed on its messaging strategy. Why global governance? Global governance is a subject of growing interest in the West, and given al Qaeda’s deteriorating image, it is hardly surprising that the organization would seek to insert itself into this discussion and exploit it to its advantage. Thus, discussing this subject has a dual purpose: it is illustrative, illuminating how ideology constrains information campaigns, and it also sheds light on an element of al Qaeda’s discourse that has so far been under-explored.

Utilizing three symbols of global governance—environmental threats, human rights, and the UN system—this article shows that al Qaeda uses this discourse primarily as a rhetorical device, designed to expose what it sees as the hypocrisy of the United States and its allies as well as the self-serving order they promote. The evidence al Qaeda offers often exposes legitimate grievances. But while this critique is compatible with some proposed by supporters of global governance, it does not reflect support for governance that is anchored in liberal principles, much less a genuine interest in offering constructive and just solutions to worldwide problems outside a primarily Muslim-led world order.

The argument does not seek to judge the content of al Qaeda’s ideology, and the wisdom of adhering to it given the associated costs. Instead, I maintain that adopting the discourse of global governance is compatible with other al Qaeda efforts to appeal to a Western audience, particularly the people and governments of Europe, and with al Qaeda’s broader efforts to confront the view that it is a nihilistic fanatic group that cares little about the sanctity of human life. Thus, al Qaeda’s use of the discourse demonstrates the trade-off between ideological rigidness and tactical opportunism. Belying al Qaeda’s reputed ability to shift public opinion, its worldview’s incompatibility with the notion of global governance (one that is not dominated by an Islamic empire and ruled by Islamic law) exposes the limitations on the organization’s ability to manipulate the global-governance discourse in the West to its advantage. Indeed, the conflict exposes the group’s appeal to Western audiences on the subject as unconvincing and disingenuous. Thus, this article provides evidence for how the ideology which had given al Qaeda unique appeal in certain quarters also imposes serious limitations on its ability to reach larger audiences, and limits the ability of the group to construct an image that could assist it in promoting its goals.

Global Governance

When we talk about global governance, we refer to an evolving structure of formal and informal systems of rule-making and political coordination, transcending states and societies. These systems involve public authorities—namely, states, IGOs, and, increasingly, private agencies and civil-society actors, which together seek to define and realize common purposes or resolve collective problems. Note that global governance does not refer only to formal institutions and organizations, and it is not limited to the UN system; diverse forms of governance coexist without clearly discernable hierarchy. This implies that global governance does not presuppose a central public authority for all humanity. Theoretically, it may take the form of world government, but normally it is characterized by diverse sources of rule-making, political authority, and power. Utilizing the global governance discourse would be beneficial for al Qaeda in at least two ways. First, given the appeal of global governance to a Western audience, particularly European governments and peoples, the use of this discourse is
compatible with al Qaeda’s desire to neutralize European opposition to the group and break the alliance between the U.S. and the European countries. Bin Laden dedicated a number of statements specifically to the Europeans, and even in internal communications noted the importance of appealing and explaining al Qaeda’s just causes to the European people. Second, the global governance discourse could also assist al Qaeda in fending off the image of a fanatic nihilistic movement. The threat of this image is very frustrating to al Qaeda’s leadership and has led it to release many statements and pamphlets in which it has rejected the accusations that it is a Takfiri organization and has explained its views on killing, particularly on the killing of Muslims. Unable to present a comprehensive program for governance, particularly prior to the establishment of an Islamic order, al Qaeda still wants to be seen as guided by reason, following a logical plan, and advancing legitimate claims. The global governance discourse offered al Qaeda a way to present a semblance of a program with an appeal beyond the umma and a more benign face.

However, the diverse ways in which global governance can be understood makes articulation of al Qaeda’s position difficult. To mitigate this problem, I propose that we use elements that students of globalization almost universally recognize as reflecting mechanisms or subjects of interest for global governance, and apply them to the statements made by al Qaeda leaders. In the discussion below I use the United Nations, the environmental-protection regime, and human rights as proximate factors which, despite some overlap, largely represent different dimensions of global governance.

The most basic view of global governance focuses on governance through international institutions. Such governance reflects an instrumental-functional approach to global governance. This perspective views global governance as a response to problems and opportunities faced by states, as a way to surmount their narrow interests and resolve collective-action problems. Globalization renders the management of state affairs highly complex. It generates new and greater negative externalities that the traditional practices of the international society can no longer address, as well as new opportunities for collective action. The expansion of the global economy in particular requires management on a global scale.

Through global governance, governments sacrifice some of their legal freedom of action to gain influence over the consequential actions of other actors and to promote causes they cannot advance on their own. Beyond that, questions of survival, such as those associated with the danger of large-scale violence and protecting the environment, give particularly strong impetus to instrumentally driven global governance.

While there is considerable potential for more evolved international institutions-based global governance, at this stage the modest management of global affairs through state-dominated international institutions still offers the most conservative (and common) manifestation of global governance, one in which states are the fundamental building blocks of the international order. States seek to respond to globalization by strengthening and institutionalizing international cooperation. The enterprise of managing growing interstate and transnational connections is undertaken through state-based international organizations. International organizations coordinate and regulate a more interdependent world and thus help states and others to further their interests. They also assist in spreading the fundamental values of the international community. For some observers, international organizations go even further, contributing to the construction of global governance. In the following section, I focus on al Qaeda’s attitude toward the United Nations, the most
comprehensive and inclusive international organization. Such inquiry will reveal al Qaeda’s position on the United Nations specifically and, more broadly, on international organizations.

The second and third elements this article explores are subjects that stand at the center of the agenda for global governance. Similarly to the United Nations, environmental protection represents the functional logic for global governance (though some actors may construe it in normative terms). The environmental agenda is broad. David Held identifies three types of problems: shared problems involving the global commons (such as the atmosphere, climate system, and the oceans and seas), which include the challenges posed by global warming and ozone depletion; interlinked challenges of demographic expansion and resource consumption; and trans-boundary pollution. But primarily the components relating to ecosystems degradation, particularly the question of global warming, serve as cause and rallying cry for advocates of global governance—and receive attention in al Qaeda statements. This issue presents a collective problem that reaches every area of the globe and arguably cannot be confronted effectively as long as states’ narrow interests limit their willingness to take costly measures. Global governance, then, whether understood broadly or in a more narrow sense, is promoted as an essential response to large-scale environmental problems.

Conversely, the question of human rights can be categorized as an example for a normative logic for global governance. The normative justification makes efficiency, the core assumption of the functionalist view, only a contested variable whose form depends on the preferences and hegemonic ideas of powerful actors. Efficiency is only one of a number of possible values that global governance could promote. The normative perspective presents an alternative ontology to that of the Westphalian order, putting the individual human or the human race at the center. The existence of the international society of states is not a goal in itself; rather, states’ rights are derived from their role as the representatives of the rights and interests of the individuals who constitute humanity. In many ways, this is an ontology of liberal cosmopolitanism: The primacy of human beings binds states into some minimum degree of civil relationship with their citizens. The state-based order is therefore conditional on the aspiration to improve the human condition and preserve human rights. Global governance can be promoted as an alternative to the state route to achieving these goals. Alternatively, it could be seen as a means to guarantee that states abide by their obligations, appropriate their rights if they abuse their privileges, and punish violators.

Human rights constitute a central element in an order that goes beyond states to emphasize the inviolable rights of individuals, irrespective of states’ interests. Individual human beings, rather than states or other types of political association, are the ultimate unit of moral concern. The demands of social justice cannot be limited by relatively arbitrary national, ethnic, or territorial boundaries, but must transcend them. In fact, states are required to respect basic human rights. Gross violations may lead to appropriation of a state’s rights and external intervention sanctioned by global authority, in exception to the principles of sovereignty and non-intervention.

The environment and human rights also represent two distinct ways to think about global or world. The first meaning would see them as the collection of all individuals, the aggregation of a shared identity on the smallest scale. Global governance in this view would be governance that focuses on all members of humankind. The
alternative interpretation turns to the largest scale, referring to humanity as a whole. Rather than the interests of separate individuals, it focuses on their interests in unison, and on patterns of collective shared identity that group all human beings together as a community. The first perspective goes hand in hand with an emphasis on human rights. The second emphasizes interests of the global and can be identified (among other things) with environmental problems as a threat to humanity.

**al Qaeda and the UN**

al Qaeda’s critique of the United Nations surrounds two central themes: its association with the Westphalian system, viewed as an illegitimate order, and the “true nature” of the United Nations as a tool designed to solidify and reproduce Western domination. Together, these lines of attack indicate that al Qaeda sees faults beyond the organization’s alleged unjust practices. Its position toward the order embodied by the UN system is therefore extreme, reflecting dismissal of the organization’s ability, even if reformed, to promote a more peaceful and just order, let alone serve as a foundation for a new global-governance era.

At first look, the rhetoric of al Qaeda’s critique of international organizations in general, and the United Nations in particular, seems familiar to students of international politics. It views the dynamic within such organizations as a reflection of power relations: International organizations are sites not for collective governance but, rather, for power abuse by the major states that design and navigate such organizations in a self-serving manner. The criticism derived from this perspective is hardly unusual; if the proclaimed ideas behind the United Nations only mask the interests of the powerful, many of the specific practices of the organization would naturally reflect abuse of structural power inequalities and pervasive double standards in the pursuit of the organization’s objectives.

Yet there is a twist in al Qaeda’s critique that renders it unique. In the organization’s narrative, not all of the weak are equal victims, and power abuses are more selective. Moreover, the abusers are not motivated solely by a desire to promote their material interests. Their actions are as much about identity and a struggle to prevent the rise of one particular alternative order, one that is based on Islam. al Qaeda depicts Muslims as the main victims and denounces the United Nations as “an instrument of crime” against them. The United Nations is treated as a corrupt institution and an instrument controlled and used by the powerful, especially the United States. al Qaeda charges the United Nations with cooperation with the aggressors (the strong powers) in the suppression of the weak (mainly Muslims), ignoring the aggressors’ deeds but hastening to convict the weak, who try only to defend themselves. The United Nations allegedly ignores the torture and killings of Muslims in Kashmir and Chechnya, while supporting the Western military campaign against innocent people in Afghanistan. Among the additional evidence provided to confirm al Qaeda’s thesis is the UN weapons embargo on the parties to the war in Bosnia, viewed as an attempt to prevent Muslims under attack from obtaining weapons for their defense, and the forced separation of East Timor—a part of the Islamic world—from Indonesia. In what al Qaeda sees as the greatest injustice, it blames the United Nations for its 1947 decision on the division of Palestine, in which the organization “surrendered the land of Islam to Jews.”

The depiction of the United Nations as representative of an international order that is alien to what can be acceptable for Muslims, as well as the rejection of some
UN prerogatives, represent a departure from the more common accusations directed at the practices guiding UN action and reflect a deeper, more fundamental hostility. This deep rejection does not allow for remedy within the framework of the state-based order, not even if Muslim states were its leading powers. al Qaeda describes the United Nations as “an organization of infidel [countries] that shapes the nature of the relations between the lords of the veto, headed by America, and the slaves of the General Assembly, and then speaks mendaciously and distortingly of justice, equality, and freedom.” According to bin Laden, the United Nations is an element in a broader scheme that is designed, together with other international institutions and laws, to maintain the supremacy of the white West over the “colored slaves.” The West is incapable of recognizing the rights of others, or respecting their beliefs, because it holds the racist view that it is superior to the rest of humanity. Thus, the United Nations is not an organization that has lost its way but could be reformed if states remained loyal to the principles upon which it was founded. Instead, it is another manifestation of a conspiracy to perpetuate a world order serving the evil wishes of the “infidels” and preserving the alleged submission of Muslims to the U.S.-led Crusaders’ alliance. In the words of al Zawahiri, “the U.N. is part of the Crusader kingdom, over which reigns the Caesar in Washington, who pays the salaries of Kofi Annan and his like.”

But the United Nations (alongside other international organizations, international law, and all international conventions) is flawed in a deeper sense because it is shaped by non-Muslim states and reflects Western norms that are antithetical to Islam. It is essentially a hegemonic organization of universal infidelity. Muslims are not allowed to join it or turn to it. It is designed to relegate Muslims and Islam to submissiveness and to drive them away from God and his religion.

The foundations of the United Nations fundamentally conflict with al Qaeda’s view of what kind of international authority is permissible under Islamic law, and what kind of actions Muslim states are allowed to take. The starting point is the illegitimacy of an organization that is founded on the primacy of states. al Qaeda’s worldview is divinely centered, viewing Allah, rather than people or states, as the sole source of authority. It does not accept the anchoring of political life in a secular institution such as the state, or the division of the global terrain into independent separate states bounded by rules and norms that are set through practice or man-made decisions. In al Qaeda’s view, the state-based order is not only illegitimate—it is the embodiment of an anti-Islamic conspiracy designed to break the Muslim world into numerous entities in order to weaken the unity of the Muslim community.

With such a worldview, it is unsurprising that al Qaeda views the United Nations as representing an unacceptable order and rejects many of its central roles and prerogatives. If the legitimacy of a political community depends on its religious foundation, the United Nations and its members cannot legitimately possess the right to grant and consequently confer authority to other state actors—whether through external recognition or by admittance to the United Nations and other organizations.

Other elements that are incompatible with al Qaeda’s worldview are the role the United Nations and its organs play in the creation of international law, as well as its importance in articulating international norms that guide states’ foreign and even domestic policies. The United Nations’ symbolic role as the place where states realize the desire for international collective action, and the appeal for international legitimacy, are also rejected. Bin Laden argues that the desire for international legitimacy
contradicts, especially with respect to the Arab leaders, the legitimacy and superiority of the Qurʾan and Islamic law. Moreover, as the creation of men, the United Nations (and other international organizations) represents a contravention of the principle of Tawhid, which affirms God’s supremacy and strictly prohibits sharing authority with any other entity or institution: no other is allowed to assume this right. In bin Laden’s view, since the norms on which the United Nations rests are Western and antithetical to Islam, those who seek its support deny the legitimacy of the Qurʾan and thus betray Islam. These aspects of al Qaeda’s worldview also imply that its position toward the United Nations will not change as a result of greater limitations on states’ power and expanded participation of NGOs. As long as states are the building blocks of the United Nations, no amount of shift from an international organization to becoming a focal point for global governance would change al Qaeda’s position.

Finally, and most importantly, al Qaeda’s worldview is inconsistent with the United Nations’ goals of limiting violence and promoting coexistence (or even cooperation) through dialogue and tolerance among diverse state actors. Its perspective promises a relentless campaign for domination and unabashedly accepts intimidation and violence in the name of God until victory is achieved.

Therefore, although elements in al Qaeda’s critique may resonate with some advocates of global governance, its religious undertones, as well as the absolute rejection of the state-based order and its contribution to the progress of humanity, make the organization’s position distinct and illuminate its rejection of the United Nations’ foundations. It sometimes underscores criticism of UN practices instrumentally, but overall it is loyal to its ideological rejectionist view. al Qaeda sees the universal organization as the embodiment of the international order’s subversion of God’s authority, and an instrument for the U.S.-led Western Crusade against Islam. This is not a case of UN failure to promote its declared objectives, which could be fixed by strengthening its global governance functions—the United Nations must go. Thus, the possibilities of instrumentally using the UN aspect of the global governance discourse is limited by al Qaeda’s commitment to its radical ideology.

The Environment

Global warming was hardly on al Qaeda’s agenda when bin Laden began formulating his critique of the United States and the regimes of the Middle East. Even as states and world public opinion showed increased awareness of the importance of environmental changes, al Qaeda was slow to interject itself into this debate despite the debate’s apparent compatibility with the group’s effort to rattle the international order. Although bin Laden started referring to environmental problems in 2002, it was not until five years later that he moved beyond merely mentioning the U.S. position on the Kyoto treaty to dedicating statements to environmental problems. Even then, references to environmental protection were scarce and appear to reflect an instrumental approach rather than genuine interest.

Bin Laden began making more elaborate references to global warming in a video speech commemorating the sixth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. In this statement, titled “the solution,” global warming is still no more than a secondary issue, used to support bin Laden’s claim that corporate interests have hijacked U.S. foreign policy. At the center of the statement is the question of the continuity of U.S. foreign policy despite the Democratic Party’s gains in the 2006 midterm elections. In this message,
addressed to the American people, bin Laden seeks to utilize the unpopularity of corporations to encourage Americans to rebel against their economic and political systems. His bottom line: Americans’ hope for change through political action is futile; businesses are the real power holders, standing behind the politicians and ensuring that no matter which political party reaches official power positions, U.S. policies will continue to serve the interests of the powerful businesses.27

This is an indictment of a democratic system that fails to protect the people from the greed of major corporations. But according to bin Laden’s analysis, the deeper problem has to do with the global capitalist system, which seeks to “turn the entire world into a fiefdom of the major corporations” and produces pain and misery for most people. Instead of reflecting democracy, the real face of man-made laws is of one class—the rich—laying down self-interested laws at the expense of all other classes. As a result, while the rich get richer, the poor become even more impoverished. In this framework, global warming is only one manifestation of the misery caused by the capitalist system and the major corporations, the consequence of emissions from major corporations’ factories that put “the life of all mankind in danger.”28

It was only in January 2010 that al Qaeda released a statement dedicated specifically to global warming. Entitled “The Way to Save the Earth,” the statement was addressed to the entire world, and while it again links global warming to unfettered capitalism, it puts the environment at the center of the statement. Bin Laden first identifies those responsible for global warming. While he assigns liability to all the industrialized countries, bin Laden puts the onus on the United States and the major corporations, which he sees as one and the same because the corporations purportedly control the direction of U.S. policy.29

Bin Laden then offers several solutions to the problem of global warming, including modesty and conservatism, avoiding luxury and extravagance in all ways of life and particularly in food, drink, clothes, housing, and energy. But his main prescription is weakening the United States. For that, he calls for boycotts of American products, which would lead to the closure of American factories and, in turn, to reduced gas emissions. Another measure he advocates is abstaining from dealing in the dollar, as a way to “free humankind from subservience” to the United States and its corporations. Additionally, bin Laden recommends holding CEOs and corporate owners accountable for their deeds. Their punishment, he determines, would lead them to cease their harm to humanity.30

Returning to a universal message, bin Laden closes his statement with a call for “all people on the earth” not to leave the mujahideen alone to carry the burden of resisting the United States. Not unreasonably, given that the statement targets a broader audience than the umma, al Qaeda thus tries to narrate a common cause shared by humanity, Muslims and non-Muslims alike: liberation from U.S. oppression. Bin Laden urges his audience to recognize and take advantage of this rare opportunity of great American weakness to be liberated from dependence on the United States, which hurts the world as a whole.31

The environmental theme returned to al Qaeda’s statements in October 2010 with two messages from bin Laden to the Muslim people, released on successive days in the aftermath of the massive floods in Pakistan. Given the scope of the disaster, al Qaeda’s hostility to Pakistani authorities, and the centrality of Pakistan to its future, it was virtually impossible for the organization not to address these floods. Moreover, at a time in which its popularity was diminishing due to the rising numbers
of Muslim victims in operations conducted by al Qaeda and its affiliates, the floods offered the organization a rare opportunity to demonstrate a different and more compassionate face. In these messages, bin Laden calls the umma to assist their suffering brethren in Pakistan and to prepare for future environmental disasters. In addition, the events allowed bin Laden to demonstrate his personal experience in water projects.32

Bin Laden uses the floods as evidence that divisions within the umma, and the “rise of hateful, narrow nationalistic spirit at the expense of the all-encompassing spirit of the umma,” inhibit the response to the umma’s problems. Holding the regimes that rule Muslim countries responsible for this inadequate response, he uses the events in Pakistan to criticize the Pakistani government, and the governments of Muslim states more broadly, for corruption and incompetence that result in Muslim suffering.33 But he takes the critique one step further, attributing Muslim leaders’ lack of responsiveness to indifference.34

What, then, needs to be done? Bin Laden argues that the floods in Pakistan are just one event in increasingly frequent climate-related crises; he thus divides his message between a call for assistance to the Pakistani people and an appeal for more comprehensive measures that will allow Muslims to go beyond reactive measures once a disaster has occurred. The solution, according to bin Laden, is to form a Muslim relief agency. Among the proposed agency’s roles: to conduct studies on disasters in the Islamic world to determine which resulted from climate change and which from human action (for example, unsafe dams and bridges, and building on valley banks); to plan for cases of famine, including a concrete response when famine is expected to hit a certain area; to develop projects in disaster-stricken and poor areas, such as drains and canals; to provide food security; and to educate Muslims about the danger of overuse of non-renewable groundwater in agriculture as well as constructing projects for more efficient use of water.35

The famine in Somalia put al Qaeda in a unique situation—for the first time, one of its associates reigned over a territory inflicted by an environmental disaster. The famine challenged both al Shabab and al Qaeda central to go beyond rhetoric. al Qaeda pleaded with the umma to aid their suffering brethren.36 The bin Laden documents also raise the possibility that bin Laden planned to address the suffering of the Somali people by encouraging rich donors from the Gulf to fund assistance programs.37 Whether bin Laden indeed planned to do so, and how successful this effort was, is hard to determine due to the paucity of sources and the possibility that this claim was made to allow a polite decline of al Shabab’s request for a formal merger. Nevertheless, in the spirit of its charm offensive, intensified since the beginning of the “Arab Spring,” al Qaeda went further and publicized that its representatives gave al Shabab an aid shipment to distribute among those in need.38 al Qaeda’s perspective differs from that of global-governance advocates in two important ways. The organization’s negation of a governmental role in facing environmental threats is quite radical. Governments should be excluded, at least until the emergence of true Islamic regimes that work for the benefit of their people. Since governmental neglect is at fault in the failure to deal with the disasters, the solution is to be found only in non-governmental organizations, particularly charities and large companies that specialize and can perform effectively in this field.

The second difference is that, for al Qaeda, the protection of the environment in general and responding to the floods in particular are a Muslim concern rather than a global problem. Therefore, the framework for addressing environmental problems
is restricted to the *umma*. The NGOs that lead the effort must be Muslim, and they
must be aided by groups of passionate volunteers from all around the Muslim world
"who care for the lives of Muslims."39 In this understanding, there is no role for
non-Muslims, whether international organizations, states, NGOs, or individual
environmental activists. Environmental problems are inherently global, but the sol-
ution has no global element. Note that al Qaeda's view does not exclude care for
non-Muslims. In its view, once Islamic social justice is granted authority to govern
the world, it would benefit all, Muslims as well as non-Muslims. But until that time,
al Qaeda's statements on environmental problems avoid calls for universal, collective
action, let alone strengthening of existing international treaties and creation of new
international instruments to address pressing environmental threats. It appears that
the age of global solutions will arrive only with global governance, in the form of
Islamic governance carried out by a worldwide caliphate.

**Human Rights**

References to human rights are more prevalent in al Qaeda statements than are
references to the environment. Nevertheless, human rights references are still rela-
tively small in number and are rarely the focus of a given speech. Like the subjects
discussed above, al Qaeda’s references to human rights are usually instrumental, as
another field in which the United States and its fellow “Crusaders” act hypocriti-
cally. al Qaeda does not pretend to adhere to human-rights norms itself; in its view,
the Western paradigm of human rights is empty and unnatural, standing in conflict
with God’s decrees. Instead, it promotes an Islamic understanding (or at least, al
Qaeda’s Islamic understanding) of what human rights really means.

On its face, defense of the *umma* and of Muslims in particular is the underlying
cause for al Qaeda’s operations. As such, it could be presented as a campaign for the
ignored human rights of Muslims. However, despite the prominence of the theme of
defense in al Qaeda’s statements, the question is rarely formulated in the context of
universal human rights, probably because al Qaeda gives no ground on what it sees
as the inherent inequality of legitimate rights between Muslims and non-Muslims.
Rather, al Qaeda’s engagement with the discourse of universal human rights usually
focuses on imparting a negative view of the United States. Specifically, al Qaeda
argues that the U.S. record of following human-rights norms, and its compliance
with international human-rights treaties, prove that the discourse it champions is dis-
ingenuous. Hypocratically, the United States violates human-rights principles when-
ever they conflict with its interests, or when they dictate protecting Muslims.40 Since
the United States has declared a war on Islam, it will never seek to protect the human
rights of Muslims, as what is beneficial for Muslims is inherently in opposition to the
American definition of its self-interest. al Qaeda offers a litany of evidence to back its
allegations. As in its reference to the malaise of the United Nations, its critique of the
United States is based on widely held grievances about injustices against Muslims.
However, its explanation for the motives behind U.S. actions (and inactions) relies
on a selective use of evidence, and while one should not dismiss the possibility that
it reflects the sincere beliefs of al Qaeda’s leaders, its main purpose is to enhance the
organization’s mobilization efforts. It highlights U.S. support for corrupt, repressive,
and authoritarian rulers with little regard to the rights of the people, as proof that
the American-declared effort to bring freedom to the Islamic world and promote
human rights is cynical.41 While outwardly the United States insists that Arab
regimes such as Egypt and Jordan respect human rights, it sent these countries jihadi prisoners to torture. The United States would not have supported autocratic dictators in the region if it genuinely sought to liberate Muslims from their oppressors, or support people’s right to choose their leaders and hold them accountable. The United States will never permit any Islamic group to assume rule in the heart of the Islamic world, regardless of people’s wishes, unless it collaborates with Washington.

Combining material and ideological interests, the United States wants to occupy Muslim countries, spread corruption and promiscuity, encourage Christian missionary work, and promote a new and distorted kind of Islam. It wants to separate Muslims from their religion. Consequently, it ignores Muslims’ quest for Shari’ah rule, trying instead to force upon them aspects of democracy like secular constitutions, majority rule, and legislative councils that are incompatible with Islam and subvert God’s authority. The denial of Muslims’ right to exert free judgment reflects deep hostility toward Islam and fear for the future of American hegemony—as in U.S. eyes, Islamic freedom would reflect “fanaticism and backwardness, ignorance and rebelliousness against the American authority and the Crusader Jewish oppressor, who rule the sons of man.” Rather than a battle for liberty, this is a campaign against Islam, and Muslims must fight back. According to al Qaeda, the United States is not alone in this attitude. Its allies in Europe act hypocritically and malevolently too.

In a similar vein, al Qaeda claims that hatred of Muslims and the desire to subjugate them has led the United States and its allies to stand idle when Muslims were victimized. Even worse, the West has actively participated in the killing of millions of Muslims throughout the world. In al Qaeda’s view, Western complicity, and even outright responsibility, for the killing of Muslims in Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan, Bosnia, and elsewhere undermine the credibility of the region’s commitment to human rights.

The Darfur massacres come up in several statements. Even as al Zawahiri clarifies that he supports accountability for crimes committed in Darfur (not surprising given al Qaeda’s unsettled account with Khartoum over the expulsion of its cadre in 1996), he argues that the International Criminal Court’s arrest warrant for Sudanese President Omar al Bashir was not issued for crimes in Darfur but is actually a part of a scheme to divide Sudan and erase its Islamic and Arab identity. al Qaeda statements reveal more than anger about the particular application of human rights laws when Muslim lives are at stake: The organization rejects the legitimacy of the international action on Darfur, seeing it as interference in the affairs of Muslims. Additionally, it claims that the Security Council lacks the moral right to intervene in Muslim affairs: Its permanent members are stained by the victimization of Muslims throughout the world; the leaders of these countries, as well as their allies among the rulers of Arab regimes, are not themselves subjected to international justice. Al Zawahiri wonders how the United States can refer the case of Darfur to the International Court of Justice when the United States itself refuses to join the court and subject itself to its authority. Thus, in an ironic twist, al Qaeda presents a system designed to enhance the cause of justice worldwide as evidence that “injustice is governing the world.”

The events of the Arab Spring forced al Qaeda to discuss the West’s response to the revolutions. Unsurprisingly, the organization promoted a narrative that reaffirms its earlier statements. al Qaeda seeks to portray the position of the
United States and its Western allies as cynical and disingenuous. The United States, al Qaeda asserts, does not care about the freedom and rights of Muslims: It turned against the Tunisian, Egyptian, and Libyan dictators only when it became apparent they would not be able to remain in power,\(^{50}\) while it avoids pressuring other tyrant allies, such as the Saudi regime, to depart.\(^{51}\) U.S. interests, then, dictate shifts in the American position, which is formulated to guarantee the country’s continued influence.\(^{52}\) al Qaeda also warned the revolting people of the Middle East of Western schemes to steal their revolutions and the fruits of their resistance.\(^{53}\) Al Zawahiri warned the Libyan people that NATO is not a “charity foundation”—rather, it seeks to establish a new regime submissive to Western interests.\(^{54}\) Interestingly, al Qaeda’s statements ignore the inconvenient possibility that the rebelling youth were seeking democracy and liberal human rights; instead, the organization repeatedly determines that the people fought for the establishment of Islamic law and cautions that the West plots to thwart this goal.\(^{55}\) A letter written by bin Laden a few days before his death suggests that he genuinely believed in the critical roles both jihad and the desire for Islamic rule played in bringing about this “most important point in our modern history.”\(^{56}\)

While for al Qaeda the hypocrisy surrounding Western positions on human rights is self-evident, the organization sees its attacks as a way to more clearly reveal its enemies’ true nature by provoking a response that contradicts the image the West is trying to present, exposing the “hypocritical face of the Western civilization.”\(^{57}\) Interestingly, there is another way in which al Qaeda links its actions to human rights: Attacks are justified as a natural response to the American people’s failure to hold leaders accountable for their crimes. Therefore, U.S. violations of human rights, unhindered by the American public, legitimize attacks against American targets in defense of the Muslim victims of human-rights violations.\(^{58}\)

But one cannot infer from this that al Qaeda is committed to human rights. Even prominent Salafi scholars criticize its expansive notion of culpability in governments’ crimes, which serves its attempts to legitimize the massacre of civilians, including Muslims.\(^{59}\) And while the organization complains about the way the United States treats detainees, it would be hard to argue that al Qaeda treats its prisoners better. It clearly has no qualms about executing hostages, even if some of its leaders would prefer the killing to be less graphic and public to reduce public-relations damage.\(^{60}\)

This does not imply that al Qaeda’s leaders were not concerned by the killing of innocent Muslims; indeed, their concern went beyond the adverse consequences of damage to its public relations to encompass the questionable religious legitimacy of such actions. Senior al Qaeda members expressed their reservations,\(^{61}\) and even dissatisfaction that bin Laden failed to explicitly renounce and dissociate al Qaeda from those groups who used al Qaeda’s name in illegal killings.\(^{62}\) As noted earlier, al Qaeda also released statements in an effort to demarcate the boundaries of legitimate violence. But these concerns coexist with a rejection of the Western conception of human rights at its core.

Contrary to the Islamic position, the organization argues, the Western notion of freedom and human rights prescribes no limits for behavior. Indeed, al Zawahiri denounces the American conception of freedom for its failure to set limits for moral behavior. Thus, it permits every behavior, including perverse sexual behavior, the spread of AIDS, and obscenity. It also includes destroying others for material gains, usury, and the unhindered operation of private security companies. Among other permissible “immoral” actions he identifies with the American conception of
freedom are gambling, alcohol, the destruction of the family unit, and the use of women as if they were merchandise. Also on the list are the murdering of people by atomic weapons, use of depleted uranium and cluster bombs, carpet bombings, the destruction of villages, conducting torture and abusing detainees, selling torture machines, and providing support for oppressive regimes. In addition, what is labeled as freedom of religion is in reality the freedom to insult Islam and the prophet.63

From al Qaeda’s perspective, only the Shari’ah provides appropriate boundaries for freedom (and, thus, for human rights). Not only must any conception of human rights correspond to Islamic principles—it must stem from the Islamic scriptures. There is no room for competing notions of human rights. Furthermore, no one has the right to remove himself from God’s laws. Believers, especially, are bound by the Islamic view of human rights. At the same time, negotiating human rights with nonbelievers is unacceptable: That would amount to seeking a compromise on clear and absolute divine rules. The quest for a middle ground with non-Muslims is merely a trick employed by secularists. Interestingly, al Qaeda maintains that even positions Muslims can accept must be founded on Islamic bases solely.64 Therefore, shared ends must also be resisted if they legitimize an un-Islamic system of rules.

Another reason for the denial of liberal notions of human rights is manifested in al Qaeda’s rejection of the principle of human equality. People are not equal as long as they hold different religious affiliations. While al Qaeda raises the equality of all Muslims as one of Islam’s many advantages, proclaiming that the religion prohibits discrimination based on race, gender, ethnicity, or national affiliation, it contends that people are still separated by religion. Non-Muslims are not equal to Muslims: “the Muslim, even if he is a slave, is a million times more superior than an infidel lord.”65 These differences are not simply a matter of personal qualities—they are reflected in legal rights, though practical discrimination could be moderated if non-Muslims live as a protected minority in an Islamic state and accept Islam’s superiority. Non-Muslims living outside the realm under Muslim control cannot enjoy these mitigating conditions.

Though they are not the only religious actors to hold such positions, al Qaeda speakers also take issue with two rights that are inexorably linked to democracy. Freedom of religion is rejected because it suggests equality between religions, and because it allows people to choose their religion and convert at will. However, al Qaeda’s position is that Islam is superior to all other religions and leaving Allah’s religion is apostasy, prohibited and punishable by death.66

The organization’s understanding of Islam also puts limitations on freedom of expression. Not all expression is accepted as the fulfillment of human rights. Thus, al Zarqawi asserts that expression is prohibited if it means “hurting and reviling the Divine Being.”67 The divergence between the expansive Western support for free expression and al Qaeda’s stance came to light with the publication of the infamous Danish cartoons of Muhammad in 2005 and 2006. al Qaeda rejects the right of both Muslims and non-Muslims to portray—let alone insult—the Prophet, and of newspapers to publish these depictions. Rather than free expression, it views the cartoons as blasphemous, deserving the execution of those responsible. It does not settle for punishing those directly involved in this crime—its leadership holds the Danish government and its people responsible as well. The bombing of the Danish embassy in Islamabad, for which al Qaeda took responsibility, indicates that these were not idle words.68 To debunk Western states’ argument that they cannot prevent the publication of such cartoons due to the cherished freedom of expression, al Qaeda
maintains that these same countries ignore the right to free expression when it concerns Holocaust revisionism.\textsuperscript{69} Bin Laden threatens that if the West refuses to limit freedom of expression, it should accept the ramifications: no limits on al Qaeda’s retaliation.\textsuperscript{70}

Even more alarming to supporters of universal human rights, al Qaeda’s view on the Islamic way to promote these rights implies fighting injustice by freeing human beings from their slavery to other humans. The objective is to create the conditions under which all humans will be able to adopt God’s message.\textsuperscript{71} This perspective legitimizes broad violence. The \textit{mujahideen} are not only entitled but, in fact, required to carry out offensive jihad to expand the territories under Islam’s rule, allowing people to free themselves from their shackles and make the natural choice to join Islam and worship Allah.\textsuperscript{72} That al Qaeda’s perspective reflects the position of only a small segment of the Muslim population matters little, because Muslims are obligated to fight for the “correct” values; questions of doctrine are superior to human stances. God’s rule, not any manmade ideas, represents the truth. Therefore, it must prevail because “what is false is false—even if a billion individuals agree to it; and the truth is truth—even if only one who has submitted [i.e., a Muslim] holds on to it.”\textsuperscript{73}

\section*{Limitations of an Uncompromising Ideology}

Surveys of al Qaeda’s attitude toward the United Nations, the environmental-protection regime, and human rights reveal some affinity for global-governance discourse. al Qaeda utilizes the discourse of global governance in an instrumental manner, as a way to interject itself into the discussions of global order and legitimize a role for itself. However, even though adopting the global governance discourse is compatible with al Qaeda’s charm offensive, the organization’s rigid ideology severely restricts its ability to utilize this discourse.

al Qaeda is hardly alone in its belief that the states that lead the international society, especially the United States, behave hypocritically, claiming adherence to principles they support only to the extent that they serve material interests and perpetuate the status quo. But the convergence between the discourse of global governance and al Qaeda’s statements is largely limited to the critique of the current order. When it comes to the shape global order should take, al Qaeda is, more often than not, sincere. It does not pretend to support liberal ideals and ways to institutionalize them, because it simply does not view the world in this way. al Qaeda’s envisioned order is global in scope but uniquely Islamic. And in the organization’s view, it offers solutions to the human condition, not just to the organization of humans’ lives, that are not offered by any system of global governance that emphasizes human rights, transparency, and democratic accountability. Indeed, contrary to most advocates of global governance, al Qaeda adheres to a non-secular ontology, and to a particular and especially extreme understanding of Islam as an organizing principle for world politics.\textsuperscript{74} In this way, its envisioned order, based on the authority of God, inherently conflicts with the Westphalian system and with any conception of global governance that is built on the foundations of the state-based order, or anchored in liberal individual rights.

Consequently, while al Qaeda shares with human-rights advocates the fundamental view that states and decision-makers should not be free to act as they wish, those calling for a greater role for civil society tend to judge the legitimacy of governments by their dedication to the promotion of human rights; by contrast, al Qaeda’s
judgment of the legitimacy of state actions is measured by their adherence to the Islamic scripture (normally in the way al Qaeda interprets Islamic imperatives). Authority is conditional in both lines of reasoning, but for different reasons, and measured against different standards.

Others may share al Qaeda’s denunciation of UN practices, and even its negation of the state-based order. But whereas proponents of the Westphalian synthesis may dispute whether the state is the foundation of order, or whether popular sovereignty is the source of authority and states serve as the voice of diverse collective wills (a point that could serve as a link between the state-based order and global governance), neither perspective views the divine as the ultimate source of authority. And while one can see a liberal position according to which a new order could be constructed—one more congruent with the values of humanity, while retaining a modicum of the Westphalian system—for al Qaeda there is no solution short of the total dismantling of the existing order and its substitution by a religious one.

Nevertheless, given the potential value of the global governance discourse to improving al Qaeda’s appeal to a Western audience and to portraying it as a “normal” organization with just causes and a viable program, it is actually surprising that there have been relatively few references to issues identified with such subjects—particularly given al Qaeda’s common portrayal as masters of media manipulation and the organization’s documented efforts to insert itself into debates related to global governance. al Qaeda leaders relinquished the opportunity to strengthen their critique of the existing international order and to enhance their position in the battle for world public opinion. This omission can be attributed to al Qaeda’s ideological rigidity: While there is tactical flexibility in al Qaeda’s messaging, particularly in its communication with Western audiences, it remains a purist, inflexible organization unwilling to alter its strategic messaging. Its ideology restricts what it can say and, as a result, limits the effectiveness of its propaganda.

With regard to the United Nations, al Qaeda can point to power abuses, but supporting reform of the UN system would imply accepting its legitimacy. Thus, even though calls for greater equality and justice at the United Nations could benefit al Qaeda, it cannot adopt this rhetoric. The environment is a growing source of concern throughout the world, but the implications of threats to the environment—the need for a universal environmental-protection regime—conflict with the end-states that al Qaeda’s worldview permits. Therefore, the organization can highlight the threat and try to emphasize the negative role of the United States; but prior to the arrival of the much-anticipated Islamic Empire, the only solution al Qaeda can offer must be restricted to collaboration among the people of Dar al-Islam. Finally, because its ideology rejects the liberal foundations of human rights, al Qaeda can use the human-rights discourse only to a limited extent. It can wield the subject to expose the insincerity of the United States and its allies, but it cannot join the multiple human-rights groups advocating ideals that al Qaeda wholeheartedly rejects and that could sway Muslims in a direction it finds detrimental to the establishment of Islam as a system of rule.

It is important to note that al Qaeda has greater flexibility when it addresses Western audiences, which allows it to use vocabulary associated with global governance. Such language is also more likely to appeal to this crowd than to its Muslim constituency. But Muslims are al Qaeda’s main audience. The organization does not expect to achieve its objectives through arousing resistance from the Western public against their governments (though it does hope that public opinion will put
greater pressure on Western governments). Its heart and focus lie in the Muslim world, and its Muslim audience has traditionally showed less receptiveness to the discourse of global governance than to accusations of foreign occupation of Muslim lands and Western support for oppressive regimes.

Moreover, the importance of the Muslim masses to al Qaeda’s program, and its ideological inclinations, explain why the organization’s appeal to this audience emphasizes a portrayal of the international order as one that is serving Western interests and hostile to Islam and Muslims. These malevolent “Crusading” powers pretend to be principled while using such values as human rights and international peace and security to advance their own interests and perpetuate their dominance—all through abuse and oppression of Muslims. al Qaeda may be interested in global governance, but only in the framework of an Islamic order. Far from buying into a functional logic in which governance is required to cope with the developments accompanying globalization and facilitate the further expansion of globalization, or the normative agenda that emphasizes the rights of human beings regardless of their religion, al Qaeda is promoting an Islamic alternative that even the bulk of its co-religionists reject. Thus, as its out-of-touch reaction to the Arab Spring demonstrates, al Qaeda’s rigid ideological stance undercuts its ability to take full advantage of opportunities offered by global issues and emerging norms gaining traction throughout the world.

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Notes
1. When the name al Qaeda is used in this article it refers primarily to its central command located in the border areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan.
2. This article relies on a collection of nearly three hundred statements made by leaders of al Qaeda Central since 1994. Translations of these statements were collected and indexed in the al Qaeda Statements Index as part of the Global Terrorism Research Project at Haverford College, gtrp.haverford.edu.
5. For example, Azzam al Amriki, “The Mujahidin Do Not Kill Muslims,” OSC, December 12, 2009; Skaykh Atiya Abd al Rahman, “Glorifying the Sanctity of Muslim


17. Ibid. For additional examples of alleged double standards, see “Ayman al Zawahiri Interview Four Years After 9/11,” *OSC*, September 11, 2005.


20. “Al Zawahiri Interview” (see note 17 above).

21. bin Laden, “Declaration of War” (see note 15 above); bin Laden, “This War is Fundamentally Religious” (see note 14 above); al Zawahiri, “Open Interview—Part One,” *OSC*, April 3, 2008.


23. bin Laden, “Declaration of War” (see note 15 above).

24. Ibid.


26. al Qaeda Statements Index.


28. Ibid.


30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.


33. bin Laden, “Pauses with the Method” (see note 32 above).

34. bin Laden, “Help Your Pakistani Brothers” (see note 32 above).

35. bin Laden, “Pauses with the Method” (see note 32 above).


37. The bin Laden Documents (see note 4 above), SOCOM-2012-0000004-HT, and SOCOM-2012-0000005-HT.


39. bin Laden, “Help Your Pakistani Brothers” (see note 32 above).

42. “al Zawahiri Interview” (see note 17 above).
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. “Al Amriki Calls” (see note 41 above).
46. bin Laden, “The Solution” (see note 27 above); “al Zawahiri Interview Four Years After 9/11” (see note 17 above).
49. al Zawahiri (see note 48 above).
51. al Zawahiri, “Dawn of the Imminent Victory” (see note 36 above); al Libi, “To Our People in Libya” (see note 50 above).
55. al Zawahiri, “Message of Hope, Episode 3” (see note 50 above).
56. The bin Laden Documents (see note 4 above), SOCOM-2012-0000004-HT, and SOCOM-2012-0000010-HT.
57. “Ayman al Zawahiri Interview Four Years After 9/11” (see note 17 above).
58. bin Laden, “The Solution” (see note 27 above).
61. For example, Nelly Lahoud, Beware of Imitators: Al-Qa’ida Through the Lens of its Confidential Secretary (West-Point: Combating Terrorism Center, June 2012).
62. The bin Laden Documents (see note 4 above), SOCOM-2012-0000004-HT, and SOCOM-2012-0000004-HT.
67. Ibid.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibrahim, The al Qaeda Reader (see note 65 above), 45–46.
72. al Libi, Moderation of Islam (see note 25 above).
73. Ibrahim, “Moderate Islam Is a Prostration to the West” (see note 65 above), 50–62.