

# Why Do Islamist Groups Deploy Violence?

Written by Charles Cooper

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Why Do Islamist Groups Deploy Violence?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/04/09/why-do-islamist-groups-deploy-violence/>

CHARLES COOPER, APR 9 2013

Violence under the banner of the lesser *jihād*[1] has long been employed by certain Muslim groups as a means to achieve a variety of goals: in the first centuries following the Revelation, offensive *jihād* was used as a means to increase the limits of the *dar al-Islām*. Its next manifestation emerged in the 12<sup>th</sup> century as defensive *jihād*, incumbent upon Muslims as a response to the threat the Crusaders presented to Islam. Ibn Taymiyya, reacting to the corrupting influence Mongols had upon Islam in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, revived the concept of *jihād* when he re-introduced *takfīr*[2] as a justification for violence. In the years that followed, jihadist violence experienced a significant decline until it re-emerged as a weapon of anti-colonialism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The violence considered in this paper is, however, none of the above. Instead, the actions of contemporary Islamist groups will be analysed and the reasons they call for or cast aside violence investigated.

After defining the term Islamism, this paper will proceed in three parts. First, it will be contended that an oppressive political environment with little or no pluralism produces the circumstances that can lead to a movement employing violent means, using the Algerian Groupe Islamique Armée (GIA) as a case study. Then, the objectives and tactics of the global jihadist group al-Qā'ida will be investigated. Militancy is instrumental to this organisation; it is argued that a peaceful trajectory is not, and will never be, a feasible option. Finally, an analysis of Lebanon's Shi'ī movement Hizbullah is conducted. Through an investigation of its electoral and social strategy, initiated in the early 1990s, it is suggested that an Islamist group is more likely to pursue a non-violent strategy if it is given an opportunity for political participation, because it is more able to ensure its survival as a political entity. The three groups dealt with in this paper all share a common ideology regardless of their disparities: to make Islam not only a spiritual guide, but also the basis of all political and social life. Therefore, an explanation of their varying strategies and objectives must be with reference to some other factor that is not common to all. As the three case studies show, domestic repression, the international system and foreign intervention have each been used by Islamist groups to justify their use of violence in order to achieve their own goals, thus demonstrating that there is no one reason why Islamist groups deploy or renounce violence. Seeking such a reason, I will conclude, can lead to an oversimplified, weak understanding of the Islamist group in question.

Before any discussion may proceed, it is imperative that the term Islamism is defined in broad terms. It has its roots at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when a number of intellectual Muslims sought to apply Islam to political and social spheres and reconcile it with modernity. In Francesco Cavatorta's words, Islamism refers to ideologies that draw on 'Islamic referents – terms, symbols and events taken from the Islamic tradition – in order to articulate a distinctly political agenda'.[3] Each of the groups examined in this paper, the Algerian GIA, the transnational al-Qā'ida and the Lebanese Hizbullah, is fundamentally different. Regardless of that, they have a similar ideological outlook: they all provide 'a comprehensive critique of the existing order, challenge it and strive to change it'[4] and may be described as "radical" because they strive for radical change to the status quo.

### I. Local Politics and Strategy: The Descent into Violence in Algeria

The case of Algeria's GIA shows that state repression in response to the popularisation of Islamism can encourage the radicalisation of Islamist groups, as well as their deployment of violence as they seek to achieve their objectives, in this case toppling the "apostate" Algerian regime and establishing of an Islamic state. Time and again, Islamist movements found fertile ground in countries where socio-economic discontent was rife as a result of unemployment

# Why Do Islamist Groups Deploy Violence?

Written by Charles Cooper

and inequality; however, they did not inevitably deploy violence. Nevertheless, in the 1980s and 1990s, the experiences of Egypt and Syria led many analysts to view 'the root causes of Islamic militancy as being economic malaise and marginalisation'.<sup>[5]</sup> To be sure, economic marginalisation acts as a stimulus to the popularisation of Islamism, for it presents a crisis 'such that the ingredients of the [Islamist] ideology offer a solution to the problems perceived by the population'.<sup>[6]</sup> However, though it may accelerate radicalisation of their ideology, economics has little bearing upon the political strategies of Islamist groups. So in order to understand why certain Islamist groups deploy violence, one must look to the steps that governments take in reaction to the popularisation of Islamism. The events of the Algerian civil war in the 1990s, as examined below, are a paradigmatic example of how repressive state policies can culminate in violence.

In 1988 Algeria was rocked by the October Riots, where youths took to the streets demanding political and economic reform. Remarkably, President Chadli Bendjedid listened to these demands and initiated a programme of political liberalization. As of 1989, autocratic rule was replaced by a multi-party system, and non-state Islamist movements were legalised. Algerian political scientist Mohand Salah Tahī argues that it was at this point, immediately after Algeria's politics were liberalized, that the Islamist current began to move towards militancy, with clerics turning mosques into political fora and inflaming 'youths with sermons of justice, revolt and blood'.<sup>[7]</sup> However, contrary to this view, most scholars contend that, up until the electoral "interruption" of 1991, the largest Islamist party, the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) was moderate and inclusive – even if it called for the establishment of an Islamic state governed by *shari'a* law.<sup>[8]</sup> Algerian Islamists were not to undergo radicalisation until the military, in an act of self-preservation, annulled the first round of national elections in 1991, which the FIS had won. Following this move, the FIS along with other Islamist organisations was banned and its members imprisoned *en masse* in concentration camps.

Thus, moderate Islamists, upon recognising the 'manifest failure of the FIS' "legalist" strategy<sup>[9]</sup> and facing brutal repression, were radicalised in their thousands and absorbed into militant conglomerations like the GIA, a jihadist-salafist movement bent on toppling the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) government that had been in power since 1962.<sup>[10]</sup> Tit-for-tat violence between the state and Islamist militias descended into civil war, as violence came to monopolise 'practically all political expression of the Islamist current'.<sup>[11]</sup> As well as enforcers of law and government officials, the violence expanded such that journalists, intellectuals, and teachers – indeed, 'anyone or anything that sustained the system'<sup>[12]</sup> – became targets. The violence peaked with the civilian massacres of 1997, which paradoxically signalled the point at which the conflict began to dissipate, with most Islamists laying down their arms in the years that followed.

In order to understand why the country descended into such levels of violence, one must determine what the ultimate political objectives of the militant Islamists, the GIA in particular, were (though it is important to remember that these objectives were forged in response to state violence). Like the Bouyali group in the 1980s,<sup>[13]</sup> the GIA sought to establish an Islamic state in Algeria, through the immediate deposal of the secular FLN government. The military's "interruption" of the 1991 elections proved to many that an electoral strategy was defunct and, coupled with the subsequent years of oppression, the peripheral Islamist ideologies that called Muslims to take up arms against the "*kufir*" (apostate) regime became more appealing. The urgency intrinsic to the objective of removing the regime was an important contributing factor in the Islamists' turn to violence, for violence alone would allow the most rapid change.

The earliest attacks were of Islamists trying 'to demonstrate the state's failure to protect its key leaders and strategic institutions',<sup>[14]</sup> seeking to show that the state was not an invincible entity and that it could be damaged by ordinary people ordained with a divine mission. Gordon McCormick and Frank Giardono suggest that, in this form, anti-state violence is an 'instrument for elevating the [insurgent] group to a position of strength',<sup>[15]</sup> as a sort of propaganda tool. However, as the war progressed, the GIA's strategy evolved; it began to seek complete state destabilization, so started targeting petrochemical facilities, the mainstay of the Algerian economy. A similar tactic was used by militant Islamists in Egypt (who were also subjected to brutal state repression) in November 1997, when tourists at the Deir el-Bahri archaeological site were attacked. 62 tourists were killed in the massacre, which was thought to be a response to the unconditional ceasefire between the Egyptian state and the jihadist group al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, agreed in July of that year. The attack damaged Egypt's tourism-based economy, but actually backfired in the same way that

# Why Do Islamist Groups Deploy Violence?

Written by Charles Cooper

the GIA's 1997 massacres did, though the latter were not perpetrated for the same reason: the Islamists' popularity was much damaged by the attacks' indiscriminate brutality. Regardless of that, the GIA's targeting of the economy was a means by which they sought to demonstrate vulnerability of the state and its inadequacies. This strategy was doubly effective because weakening the national economy was tantamount to weakening the state's hold on society.

As well as demonstrating the state's vulnerabilities, Islamist militias were attempting to provoke the state into using indiscriminate force, a tried and tested tactic of guerrilla warfare that seeks to unmask the true nature of the state. This unmasking, it was hoped, would help bolster the ranks of the Islamists, for indiscriminate state violence would disillusion many, and subsequently push them to take sides with the Islamists. However, the ubiquitous use of violence was beneficial to both sides, for it made maintaining one's neutrality difficult, and as the GIA's 'anti-system and Manichean worldview which refused to distinguish between active enemies and neutral observers'[16] continued to pervade, non-combatants enlisted with the military or supported the Islamists just to seek security. As Maghreb specialist Luis Martinez notes, the war polarised all, even families – 'when one brother was called up, it was not uncommon for another to be close to the Islamist factions'[17] in order to muster some form of mutual protection. In this way, violence was effectively used as a means of encouraging the polarisation of society and intimidating civilians into taking a political stance.

In the eyes of radical Algerian Islamist groups, the state had become the epitome of the impious apostate regime, increasingly viewed as a pawn of external forces; indeed, in the GIA's eyes, France's backing for the regime confirmed it as a 'colonial institution headed by native men'.[18] Historian Hugh Roberts suggests that these Islamist anti-system frames may not have been far wrong, arguing that France 'exercised a very great deal of power over Algeria's painful evolution since 1988',[19] and contributed to the failure of the most significant attempt to put an end to the Algerian civil war, the Sant' Egidio platform.[20] The rejection of foreign interference, then, can be added to the list of interwoven factors that drove the Algerian conflict to the levels of violence that it reached. It is demonstrated below that anti-imperialist values, central to the doctrines of al-Qā'ida and Hizbullah, are often used as a rallying point by radical Islamists.

Having briefly tracked the evolution of the civil war in Algeria, it becomes clear that the government's oppressive policies against the Islamists led to some groups' use of violence. Francois Burgat, in his study of political Islam, correctly suggests that 'from one terrorism comes another':[21] in the first years that followed the 1991 interruption, many once moderate Islamists were radicalised by the 'immeasurable brutality of the [state] repression'.[22] Violence monopolised political expression because all other paths were sealed off; the democratic experiment was viewed as an outright failure. Initially aimed at demonstrating vulnerabilities and provoking an indiscriminately violent reaction from the state, Algerian Islamists attacked its institutions, not unlike those militant Islamists radicalised under similar circumstances in Syria or Egypt. However, in Algeria, as the conflict escalated, violence became generalised and expansive. For the whole of society, taking a position of neutrality became impossible as the two terrorisms, Islamist and state, fed off each other, driving a peaceful solution further onto the horizon.

## II. Violence on the International Stage: The Case of al-Qā'ida

With an analysis of al-Qā'ida, one can begin to understand another framework within which an Islamist group may deploy violence. This group's doctrine, a branch of global *jihād*, is based around an ideology described succinctly by Quintan Wiktorowicz as a

'dichotomous struggle for God's sovereignty on earth [that] eliminates the middle ground and sets the stage for a millennial, eschatological battle between good and evil'.[23]

This Manichean worldview is not dissimilar from that of Algerian Islamist militias in the 1990s; indeed, theirs was adapted by al-Qā'ida to apply to the international community. The group is characterised by ideologically driven violence directed at the global system, a strategy which is considered more effective than a peaceful trajectory.

Members of al-Qā'ida, contrary to much popular thought, are not 'theological outliers';[24] they are part of the salafist community, though this does not mean that all salafist Muslims share the group's views on violence; rather, they

## Why Do Islamist Groups Deploy Violence?

Written by Charles Cooper

share a common theology that leads to divergent conclusions regarding it. It is not, as some contend, a coherent organisation; indeed, terrorism expert Audrey Cronin describes it as more 'a franchise organisation'[25] than anything else, with tactics that are aimed at thrusting it into international media, to give the impression that it is overwhelmingly powerful (and, indeed, coherent) and thus constitutes a significant threat to "apostate" and "imperialist" regimes. The geographical range of its attacks confirms al-Qā'ida's transnational strategy, which attempts to dispel any sense of international security; since 1998, it has claimed responsibility for attacks in Kenya, Tanzania, the United States of America, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, Istanbul and Iraq.

Ideologically, al-Qā'ida seeks to immediately change the world order, characterised as it is by globalisation and imperialism; it considers holy war against the infidels necessary to combat this 'global conspiracy to destroy Islam'.[26] Al-Qā'ida thus manages to frame its violent struggle to change the global status quo in terms of self-defence. Reminiscent of the GIA, the group advocates total war against the West, where civilians forego their protection as non-combatants because of their participation in democratic systems. In this binary interpretation, the 2003 Iraq war was enough to label American and British civilians as combatants – 'because a democratically elected government reflects the will of the people, a war against Islam of this magnitude must have popular support'.[27]

However, unlike the GIA, al-Qā'ida steers clear of the theological quagmire that the concept of *takfīr* presents, by ostensibly avoiding the targeting of Muslims. This is to protect its legitimacy as a Muslim vanguard waging defensive war on behalf of the *umma*,[28] not to mention bin Laden's belief that 'the political returns from confronting the near enemy were very low', [29] for doing so would not bring about any rapid – or significant – change in the global status quo.

Violence is instrumental to al-Qā'ida, formed as it was by Muslim guerrillas fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Defensive *jihād* against the invading enemy – an idea drilled into Muslim insurgents in Pakistani guerrilla camps, where the CIA, in addition to financing their operations, also sought to 'integrate guerrilla training with teachings of Islam'[30] – is one of al-Qā'ida's central pillars. The concept was adapted by Osama bin Laden to interpret the stationing of American troops in Saudi Arabia during Operation Desert Shield as an invasion; indeed, it was at this point that bin Laden began to direct his attention towards augmenting a holy war against the west. In his 1996 "Declaration of War", bin Laden specifically refers to this event as a betrayal by the Saudi regime, the point at which it 'joined the *kuffr*'. [31] Ironically then, the United States, a country al-Qā'ida owes much to, was to be bin Laden's target of choice. An analysis of the 9/11 attacks provides a good basis for understanding the reasons behind al-Qā'ida's use of violence.

At 8:46 a.m. on 11 September 2001 a plane, hijacked by members of al-Qā'ida, crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Centre. Two other hijacked planes crashed into the South Tower and the Pentagon respectively. A fourth was destroyed before it reached its intended target. The motives for the attacks, outlined in bin Laden's 2002 "Letter to America", were the aforementioned US military presence in Saudi Arabia, sanctions against Iraq and the US' unconditional support of Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories.[32] However, bin Laden also sought to exploit McCormick and Giordano's provocation effect of violence.[33] As mentioned in section I, violent means may be intended to provoke an indiscriminate response from the state, however, in al-Qā'ida's case, "the state" should be understood in international terms, rather than domestically, as the United States. The attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001 provide a fine example of the provocation effect: the ensuing 9/11 wars on Afghanistan and Iraq. Similar to the leaders of the GIA, Osama bin Laden hoped to bolster al-Qā'ida's ranks with Muslims radicalised as a result of a disproportionate US response. He thought that the war against the *dar al-Islām* would 'bring estranged jihadis back into the fold'. [34] However, it was a gamble that did not pay off, with most Muslims condemning the attacks.[35]

Another comparison may be drawn between al-Qā'ida and the GIA (and, indeed, the perpetrators of the Deir el-Baḥrī massacre): like the latter two groups, al-Qā'ida often targets economic institutions. Unlike the GIA, which took issue with the way that a single state is governed, and tried to topple that regime, al-Qā'ida rejects the entire global order. The 9/11 attacks, more than anything, highlight al-Qā'ida's international fixation. The World Trade Centre was targeted because an attack on it would be extremely costly to the world economy and would send a stark message across the world that no one is invulnerable. Indeed, for the United States alone, the attacks had devastating

# Why Do Islamist Groups Deploy Violence?

Written by Charles Cooper

financial implications, with bin Laden purporting that \$500,000 of investment in the attacks caused a \$500 billion loss for the Americans.[36]

The prominence of the 9/11 hijackings was also, Jarret Brachman argues, a means of advertising for al-Qā'ida, it was the organisation's 'attempt to become the brand to beat'.[37] Here, we see another of McCormick and Giordano's explanations for violence as a political tool: al-Qā'ida was using violence as 'an instrument of armed propaganda',[38] attempting to present itself as stronger than it actually was. Indeed, before the 1998 US embassy attacks, Brachman contends that al-Qā'ida 'was little more than a small band of well-funded and highly organised peripatetic bullies stirring up trouble and justifying it in Islam'.[39] After 9/11, the organisation appeared more formidable, the first Islamist group capable of taking the fight to the far enemy in such literal terms.

There is a combination of ideology and pragmatism at work with al-Qā'ida: while its ideology justifies the use of violence, pragmatic considerations lead it to cast aside peaceful means because they will not yield the desired results. Like the GIA, al-Qā'ida seeks immediate change in the status quo, and the only means of reaching this change is through violence. Because of its origins and the nature of its dichotomous worldview, this primacy on the strategic value of violence has persisted over decades. In its nature al-Qā'ida is an international organisation that attempts to draw support from Muslims across the world; there is no potential "state" for it to integrate into, though it attempted to do so in Afghanistan. For this reason, it is not able to insulate itself from marginalisation through non-violent means like Ḥizbullah has, as discussed below. Therefore, violence has taken and will continue to take precedence in its continuous struggle for survival.

## III. Ḥizbullah's Electoral Experimentation

When granted an opportunity to participate in politics, Islamist groups may take it in preference to pursuing a strategy of violence as a means of bringing about change. If the state does not seek to eliminate all Islamist opposition, and instead attempts to bring it into the political system, a trajectory that is not built upon violence may well be followed. Ḥizbullah's experience in Lebanon acts as evidence of this. The group's ideology is not to be confused with either the GIA or al-Qā'ida; Ḥizbullah is a Shi'ī political organisation that first emerged in the early 1980s and has its roots in religious circles in Najaf, Iraq in the 1960s,[40] though the importance of the Iranian revolution and the ideology of Ayatollah Khomeini cannot be overstated.

Ḥizbullah's complexity has meant that defining the organisation has become a point of contention between scholars. Many American policymakers and analysts, chief counterterrorism advisor to Barack Obama John Brennan to mention but one, have labelled Ḥizbullah a terrorist organisation.[41] However, this labelling, 'a useful rhetorical bludgeon',[42] has been contested by many scholars: anthropologist Lara Deeb instead describes Ḥizbullah as an 'umbrella organisation for myriad social welfare institutions';[43] political scientist Bryan Early takes care to mention that it is the 'largest non-state provider of healthcare and social services'[44] in Lebanon. There is no doubt that both of these observations are correct, what with institutions like the al-Rasul al-Azzam hospital and Jihād al-Binā'a, its Reconstruction Campaign that seeks to alleviate the damage done by the Israeli occupation and the civil war. However, it will be shown below that Ḥizbullah has not, and most likely will not, definitively renounced violence as a means of avoiding political marginalisation.

Ḥizbullah's conception was brought on by the Israeli occupation of Southern Lebanon that began in 1982. During the Lebanese civil war, which lasted from 1975 to 1990, numerous militias fought against each other, as well as outside forces, and this contributed to a general feeling of insecurity within which political and paramilitary groups were formed. Ḥizbullah emerged as a Shi'ī militia in this context, and numerous suicide attacks were – rightly or wrongly – attributed to it, most notably the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing in which 241 US marines were killed. In the "Open Letter to the Downtrodden in Lebanon", a document that acts as an early manifesto of the group, Ḥizbullah announced that its primary objectives were the expulsion of any imperialist entity from Lebanon (Israel, as well as America and France) and the establishment of an Islamic state.[45]

After the Tā'if accord was signed in 1989 and an end to the fighting drew closer, Ḥizbullah faced an existential crisis – for violence was one of the group's principal foundations – so it 'started to pursue pragmatic policies and initiated

## Why Do Islamist Groups Deploy Violence?

Written by Charles Cooper

dialogues with other religious and political groups'.[46] However, it in no way renounced violence. In fact, throughout the 1990s and the following decade, Hizbullah continued to wage a low intensity war with Israel in South Lebanon. The difference between it and a group like the GIA was that it was not using violence domestically to try and achieve political predominance. Judith Palmer Harik, in her penetrating account of Hizbullah, contends that Hizbullah's decision to integrate into Lebanon's confessional system came about because of a desire to survive.[47] The organisation's primary mission was, and has been since, 'the removal of [Israel's] illegal occupation',[48] and the means by which this objective could best be achieved was deemed since the early 1990s to be political, at least on a domestic level. Hizbullah, if it was to bring about a change in the status quo, would attempt to do so pragmatically; its leaders recognised that if they did not adapt it to the new situation, the group would face marginalisation.

It is important to comprehend the difficulties that Hizbullah faced in the years that followed the signing of the Tā'if accord in order to better understand the party's strategy. Amongst other things, it called for the disarmament of all non-state militias in Lebanon, including Hizbullah. The party signed the accord on the condition that it was able to maintain its military wing by labelling it an "Islamic resistance", a position that 'enjoyed wide, though not unanimous, support in Lebanon'.[49] It was at around this time that Hizbullah's leaders began to consider adapting the party's ideology to make it more applicable in Lebanese society. As is mentioned above, Hizbullah's primary objective was to continue the struggle against Israel in South Lebanon; the establishment of an Islamic state, rather controversially, came to be viewed as secondary. So, through ideological reshuffling, the Hizbullah leaders concluded that integration into the confessional system 'would allow the pursuit of *jihād* without compromising other Islamic imperatives',[50] even though it amounted to recognition of the (inherently un-Islamic) secular state.

By muting some of its more radical Islamist goals, and by placing absolute primacy on the national – and religious – struggle against Israel, Hizbullah managed to shift 'from the periphery of Lebanese society to its very core'.[51] Its strength now penetrates too deeply into the fabric of the state for it to be removed militarily, as Israel attempted in 2006. Regardless of the \$4 billion worth of infrastructural damage that the 2006 war caused,[52] Hizbullah was not turned upon, though its role in initiating the war was questioned by the Lebanese people.[53] Because it offers services and takes on responsibilities which the 'government remains incapable of fulfilling',[54] it enjoys a status that 'extends far beyond that of any traditional definition of a mere party or terrorist organisation'[55] shielding it from the brunt of much post-2006 discontent.

In 2005, Cavatorta wrote that, outside of occupied Lebanese territory, 'Hizbullah is not involved in the use of violence to further political goals'.[56] Since then, the group's actions tell a different story. Certainly, it does not maintain its position through constant violent struggle within Lebanon. However, it has been made clear by the group that any suggestion of disarmament or proposal to diminish its strength will be vehemently – and militarily – opposed. In 2008, responding to threats that its telecommunications network was to be shut down, Hizbullah demonstrated its strength by taking over a number of West Beirut districts.[57] Its military predominance asserted, and demands – which included veto power over all government decisions – met, it backed down.[58] In 2012, after Hizbullah's secretary general Hassan Nasrallah announced that his party would never lay down its arms no matter how much pressure was exerted by the UN,[59] it also claimed responsibility for the launching of a drone over Israel.[60] Shortly after that, and perhaps most strikingly, it was reported that Hizbullah fired rockets at rebel strongholds in Syria to aid its ally, the Assad regime.[61] Thus, in the last few years, violence remaining on its agenda, the group has not turned the corner that Cavatorta suggested it had.

One way or another, Hizbullah, with a level of 'pragmatism that few other Islamist organisations have been able to demonstrate',[62] has efficiently navigated the Lebanese political system. It substituted violence with social welfare in order to survive, defending itself by developing a broad base of grassroots popularity and intertwining itself with the state, rather than by sheer military strength alone. Out of Hizbullah's political program, which frames the struggle against Israel along both religious and national lines, Lebanon has developed a society of resistance (*najāt al-muqāwama*), the manifestation of a political *jihād*. Hizbullah is a complex example of an Islamist group that combines pragmatic political methods with the threat of violence, rather than the exclusive use or renunciation of it. As long as its war with Israel continued in the south, it did not need to justify its existence. Following Israel's 2000 withdrawal, the Sheba'a farms became the location within which Hizbullah continued to exact its "Islamic resistance", a place where it could continue to pursue its ultimate objective of defensive *jihād*. More recently, the presence of Hizbullah's

# Why Do Islamist Groups Deploy Violence?

Written by Charles Cooper

Manichean worldview in its discourse, its 'emphasis on "us" and "them" categories'[63] as found throughout the open letter of 1985, has diminished, though it has not disappeared. This allowed the evolution of the group into an organisation that is open to a large base of non-sectarian support, rather than just a radical, religiously driven one, an opportunity that neither the GIA nor al-Qā'ida ever came close to.

## Concluding Remarks

The three groups discussed above pursue very different goals: the GIA sought to topple the apostate Algerian regime and establish an Islamic state, al-Qā'ida seek to turn the global status quo on its end and Hizbullah's primary objective is the repulsion of foreign troops from Lebanon. Therefore, the fact that the extent to which they use violence varies is unsurprising. It is what led the groups to employ violent means that leads to difficulties when trying to compare them. The GIA had little choice but to use violence, considering the level of state repression that it faced. The expansion of Islamist-related violence in Algeria was certainly fostered by the oppressive state within which Islamist groups existed. Al-Qā'ida, on the other hand, formed as it was during the Islamist insurgency in Afghanistan, employs violent tactics because its ideology, the very reason for its existence, is violence. It seeks to categorically change the global order instead of focusing on the domestic political situation. Similarities between it and the GIA are undeniable – indeed, Wiktorowicz contends that al-Qā'ida's 'logic for killing non-Muslim civilians mirrors Zouabri [a GIA *amīr* in 1996]'s reasoning'[64] – but the two groups use violent means to pursue different ends. Lebanon's Hizbullah, contrary to the above two examples, has transformed itself from a militia into an organisation that largely resembles a social movement – though it does continue to use violence in part as it serves to legitimate Hizbullah's existence as the protector of Lebanon. An analysis of Hizbullah's tactics provides us with a framework to understand how a radical Islamist group may react to political opportunity. It would be brazen to suggest, though, that this framework is one that can be applied to any Islamist group: the organisation is unique, emerging as it has out of Lebanon's very distinct political system. However, what one can conclude is that, given the opportunity, political pragmatism is both more successful and less costly than an armed struggle, at least on the domestic political level. A glance at the GIA, almost totally incapacitated by 2002, and al-Qā'ida, the existence of which is increasingly imperilled by both Muslim and non-Muslim condemnation (though the situation in Syria seems to have somewhat reinvigorated it), demonstrates this fact.

So, it is evident that the circumstances in which all of these groups were formed, and in which they exist, have a profound impact upon their decision to employ violent means or cast them aside. This in turn leads to another observation: that there is no overarching reason as to why an Islamist group uses violence. It is thus imperative that the strategy and objectives of any Islamist group are judged on its own merit, for if similarities between what are often fundamentally disparate groups are overstressed, one reaches a reductive, essentialist understanding of their strategies from which little can be gained.

## Bibliography

### Books

Burke, Jason, *Al-Qaeda: The true story of radical Islam*, London: Penguin Books, 2004.

Brachman, Jarret M., *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice*, London: Routledge, 2009.

Burgat, Francois, *Face to Face with Political Islam*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2005.

Burgat, Francois, *Islamism in the Shadow of al-Qaeda*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008.

Gerges, Fawaz A., *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Hafez, Muhammed, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner

# Why Do Islamist Groups Deploy Violence?

Written by Charles Cooper

Publishers, 2003.

Martinez, Luis, *The Algerian Civil War 1990-1998*, London: Hurst & Company, 2000.

Mohammedou, Mohammad-Mahmoud Ould, *Understand al Qaeda*, London: Pluto Press, 2007.

Norton, Augustus Richard, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Palmer Harik, Judith, *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2005.

Roy, Olivier, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, London: Hurst & Company, 2004.

Willis, Michael, *The Islamist Challenge in Algeria: A Political History*, New York: New York University Press, 1997.

## Journal Articles

Azzam, Maha, 'Islamism Revisited', *International Affairs* 82 (2006), 1119-1132.

Bergan, Peter, 'Al Qaeda, the Organisation: a five-year forecast', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618 (2008), 14-30.

Bernholz, Peter, 'International Political System, Supreme Values and Terrorism', *Public Choice* 128 (2006), 221-231.

Cavatorta, Francesco, 'The "War on Terrorism" – Perspectives from Radical Islamic Groups', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 16 (2005), 35-50.

Coser, Lewis, 'Some Social Functions of Violence', *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science* 364 (1966), 8-18.

Cronin, Audrey, 'How al-Qaida ends: the decline and demise of terrorist groups', *International Security* 31 (2006), 7-48.

Deeb, Lara, 'Hizbullah: a Primer', *MERIP*, 31/7/2006, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero073106>, (19/12/2012).

Denoeux, Guilain, 'The Forgotten Swamp: navigating political Islam', *Middle East Policy* 9 (2002), 56-81

Gerges, Fawaz A., 'The decline of revolutionary violence in Algeria and Egypt', *Survival* 41 (1999), 113-125.

Hafez, Muhammed, 'Armed Islamist Movements and Political Violence in Algeria', *Middle East Journal* 54 (2000), 572-591.

Hamzeh, Nizar, 'Islamism in Lebanon: a guide to the groups', *ME Forum*, 9/1997, <http://www.meforum.org/362/islamism-in-lebanon-a-guide-to-the-groups>, (06/01/2012).

Høigilt, Jacob, 'Islamism, Pluralism, and the Palestine Question: The Case of Hizbullah', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34 (2007), 123-136.

Hoveyda, Fereydoun, 'Understanding and fighting Islamic terrorism', *American Foreign Policy Interests* 27 (2005), 503-512.

Karawan, Ibrahim, 'The Islamist Challengers', *The Adelphi Papers* 37 (1997), 13-27.



# Why Do Islamist Groups Deploy Violence?

Written by Charles Cooper

Lazreg, Marnia, 'Islamism and the Recolonization of Algeria', in Ali Abdullatif Ahmida (ed.), *Beyond Colonialism and Nationalism in the Maghreb*, New York: Palgrave, 2000, 147-164.

Lee, Alexander, 'Who becomes a terrorist?: Poverty, education and the origins of political violence', *World Politics* 63 (2011), 203-245.

Mamdani, Mahmood, 'Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A political perspective on culture and terrorism', *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002), 766-775.

McCormick, Gordon and Giordano, Frank, 'Things Come Together: Symbolic Violence and Guerilla Mobilisation', *Third World Quarterly* 28 (2007), 295-320.

Roberts, Hugh, 'Algeria's Ruinous Impasse and the Honourable Way Out', *International Affairs* 71 (1995), 246-267.

Tahi, Mohand Salah, 'Algeria's Democratisation Project: A Frustrated Hope', *Third World Quarterly* 16 (1995), 197-220.

Wiktorowicz, Quintan, 'A Genealogy of Radical Islam', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28 (2005), 75-97.

Woltering, Robbert, 'The Roots of Islamist Popularity', *Third World Quarterly* 23 (2002), 1133-1143.

## News Articles

Butcher, Tim, 'Hizbollah's Lebanon veto power boosts Iran's Middle East influence', *The Telegraph*, 21/5/2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2001235/Hizbollahs-Lebanon-veto-power-boosts-Irans-Middle-East-influence.html>, (20/12/2012).

DeYoung, Karen, 'Europe should label Hezbollah a terrorist group, U.S. urges', *The Washington Post*, 26/10/2012, [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-10-26/world/35501817\\_1\\_hezbollah-terrorist-organization-militant-group](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-10-26/world/35501817_1_hezbollah-terrorist-organization-militant-group), (21/12/2012).

Fantz, Ashley, 'Hezbollah claims it sent drone over Israel, but expert calls it 'rinky-dink'', *CNN*, 12/10/2012, <http://www.cnn.co.uk/2012/10/11/world/meast/israel-hezbollah-drone/index.html>, (20/12/2012).

'An Open Letter: The Hezbollah Program', *Stand With Us*, [http://www.standwithus.com/pdfs/flyers/hezbollah\\_program.pdf](http://www.standwithus.com/pdfs/flyers/hezbollah_program.pdf), (20/12/2012).

'Bin Laden's Fatwa', *PBS*, 23/8/1996, [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/military/july-dec96/fatwa\\_1996.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/military/july-dec96/fatwa_1996.html), (20/12/2012).

'Full Text: bin Laden's 'letter to America'', *The Observer*, 24/11/2002, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/nov/24/theobserver> (20/12/2012).

'Hezbollah chief rejects call by UN to disarm', *al-Jazeera*, 15/1/2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/20121154542742500.html> (20/12/2012).

'Hezbollah Takes Over West Beirut', *BBC*, 9/5/2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7391600.stm>, (20/12/2012).

'Hizbollah 'launching rocket attacks into Syria'', *The Telegraph*, 17/10/2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/world-news/middleeast/syria/9615925/Hizbollah-launching-rocket-attacks-into-Syria.html>, (20/12/2012).

[1] The greater *jihad* is a spiritual rather than physical struggle.

## Why Do Islamist Groups Deploy Violence?

Written by Charles Cooper

[2] This is the act of accusing a Muslim of apostasy.

[3] Francesco Cavatorta, 'The "War on Terrorism" – Perspectives from Radical Islamic Groups', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 16 (2005), 38.

[4] Guilain Denoeux, 'The Forgotten Swamp: navigating political Islam', *Middle East Policy* 9 (2002), 61.

[5] Maha Azzam, 'Islamism Revisited', *International Affairs* 82 (2006), 1119.

[6] Peter Bernholz, 'International Political System, Supreme Values and Terrorism', *Public Choice* 128 (2006), 224.

[7] Mohand Salah Tah, 'Algeria's Democratisation Project: A Frustrated Hope', *Third World Quarterly* 16 (1995), 214

[8] Laws derived from the Qur'an and the Prophetic *sunna*.

[9] Michael Willis, *The Islamist Challenge in Algeria: A political history*, Ithaca: Ithaca Press, 1999, 268.

[10] Francois Burgat cites 'irrefutable evidence' that the GIA militia was a 'product manufactured by the back rooms of the [Algerian] secret services' that was aimed at damaging the Islamist cause, and garnering international support for the regime. Burgat, *Face to Face*, 102.

[11] Burgat, *Face to Face*, 102.

[12] Muhammed Hafez, 'Armed Islamist Movements and Political Violence in Algeria', *Middle East Journal* 54 (2000), 588.

[13] Ideologies like that of the Bouyali group remained very much on the periphery of the broader Islamic current until the 1990s.

[14] Ibrahim Karawan, 'The Islamist Challengers', *The Adelphi Papers* 37 (1997), 19.

[15] Gordon McCormick and Frank Giordano, 'Things Come Together: Symbolic Violence and Guerilla Mobilisation', *Third World Quarterly* 28 (2007), 312.

[16] Hafez, 'Armed Islamist Movements', 573.

[17] Luis Martinez, *The Algerian Civil War 1990-1998*, London: Hurst & Company, 2000, 80.

[18] Marnia Lazreg, 'Islamism and the Recolonization of Algeria', in Ali Abdullatif Ahmida (ed.), *Beyond Colonialism and Nationalism in the Maghreb*, New York: Palgrave, 2000, 153.

[19] Hugh Roberts, 'Algeria's Ruinous Impasse and the Honourable Way Out', *International Affairs* 71 (1995), 247.

[20] Roberts, 'Algeria's Ruinous Impasse', 265.

[21] Burgat, *Face to Face*, 112.

[22] Burgat, *Face to Face*, 113.

[23] Quintan Wiktorowicz, 'A Genealogy of Radical Islam', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28 (2005), 81.

[24] Wiktorowicz, 'Genealogy', 75.t

## Why Do Islamist Groups Deploy Violence?

Written by Charles Cooper

- [25] Audrey Cronin, 'How al-Qaida ends: the decline and demise of terrorist groups', *International Security* 31 (2006), 36.
- [26] Jarret M. Brachman, *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice*, London: Routledge, 2009, 82.
- [27] Wiktorowicz, 'Genealogy', 91.
- [28] The global Muslim community.
- [29] Gerges, *Far Enemy*, 125.
- [30] Mahmood Mamdani, 'Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A political perspective on culture and terrorism', *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002), 770.
- [31] 'Bin Laden's Fatwa', *PBS*, 23/8/1996, [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/military/july-dec96/fatwa\\_1996.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/military/july-dec96/fatwa_1996.html), (20/12/2012).
- [32] 'Full Text: bin Laden's 'letter to America'', *The Observer*, 24/11/2002, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/nov/24/theobserver> (20/12/2012)
- [33] McCormick and Giordano, 'Things come together', 308.
- [34] Gerges, *Far Enemy*, 284.
- [35] Gerges, *Far Enemy*, 286.
- [36] Peter Bergan, 'Al Qaeda, the Organisation: a five-year forecast', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 618 (2008), 23.
- [37] Brachman, *Global Jihadism*, 40.
- [38] McCormick and Giordano, 'Things come together', 307.
- [39] Brachman, *Global Jihadism*, 39.
- [40] Nizar Hamzeh, 'Islamism in Lebanon: a guide to the groups', *ME Forum*, 9/1997, <http://www.meforum.org/362/islamism-in-lebanon-a-guide-to-the-groups>, (06/01/2012).
- [41] Karen DeYoung, 'Europe should label Hezbollah a terrorist group, U.S. urges', *The Washington Post*, 26/10/2012, [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-10-26/world/35501817\\_1\\_hezbollah-terrorist-organization-militant-group](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-10-26/world/35501817_1_hezbollah-terrorist-organization-militant-group), (21/12/2012).
- [42] Norton, *A Short History*, 75.
- [43] Lara Deeb, 'Hizbullah: a Primer', *MERIP*, 31/7/2006, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero073106>, (19/12/2012)
- [44] Early, 'Larger than a party', 115.
- [45] 'An Open Letter: The Hezbollah Program', *Stand With Us*, [http://www.standwithus.com/pdfs/flyers/hezbollah\\_program.pdf](http://www.standwithus.com/pdfs/flyers/hezbollah_program.pdf), (20/12/2012), 3.
- [46] Jacob Høigilt, 'Islamism, Pluralism, and the Palestine Question: The Case of Hizbullah', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 34 (2007), 125.

## Why Do Islamist Groups Deploy Violence?

Written by Charles Cooper

- [47] Judith Palmer Harik, *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2005, 58.
- [48] Harik, *Hezbollah*, 2.
- [49] Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: A Short History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, 83.
- [50] Harik, *Hezbollah*, 57.
- [51] Bryan Early, 'Larger than a party, yet smaller than a state', *World Affairs* 168 (2006), 121.
- [52] Norton, *A Short History*, 152.
- [53] Norton, *A Short History*, 152.
- [54] Harik, *Hezbollah*, 93.
- [55] Early, 'Larger than a party', 125.
- [56] Cavatorta, 'Perspectives', 41.
- [57] 'Hezbollah Takes Over West Beirut', *BBC*, 9/5/2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7391600.stm>, (20/12/2012).
- [58] Tim Butcher, 'Hizbollah's Lebanon veto power boosts Iran's Middle East influence', *The Telegraph*, 21/5/2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2001235/Hizbollahs-Lebanon-veto-power-boosts-Irans-Middle-East-influence.html>, (20/12/2012).
- [59] 'Hezbollah chief rejects call by UN to disarm', *al-Jazeera*, 15/1/2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2012/01/20121154542742500.html> (20/12/2012).
- [60] Ashley Fantz, 'Hezbollah claims it sent drone over Israel, but expert calls it 'rinky-dink'', *CNN*, 12/10/2012, <http://www.cnn.co.uk/2012/10/11/world/meast/israel-hezbollah-drone/index.html>, (20/12/2012).
- [61] 'Hizbollah 'launching rocket attacks into Syria'', *The Telegraph*, 17/10/2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9615925/Hizbollah-launching-rocket-attacks-into-Syria.html>, (20/12/2012).
- [62] Early, 'Larger than a party', 121.
- [63] Hoiglit, 'Islamism, Pluralism', 126.[64] Wiktorowicz, 'Genealogy', 92

---

Written by: Charles Cooper  
Written at: King's College, London  
Written for: Dr Craig Larkin  
Date written: 01/2013