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Chapter 4
Conceptualizing al-Qaeda and US Grand Strategy

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The US debate about the nature of al-Qaeda and the associated threat does not occur in a political or ideological vacuum. In fact, given its on-going political salience, questions such as what al-Qaeda is, how it can be conceptualized and defeated provide a large number of access points for those trying to shape broader US policies and underlying discourses. In the context of Middle East politics, for example, the perception of an on-going terrorist threat allowed some to argue for US policies that take into account Palestinian demands, whilst others stressed the need to uphold a close relationship with the Israeli government and to vigorously pursue the 'national interest'.[1] More recently, the answer to the question of whether al-Qaeda can still be thought of as having a coherent core or whether it simply serves as a brand for essentially local, bottom-up radicalization processes has direct implications for the question of whether the US-led military presence in Afghanistan and the aggressive pursuit of the Taliban should be at the heart of US counterterrorism efforts.[2] Ultimately, the US debate about al-Qaeda is inextricably linked to specific ontologies of international politics and long-held convictions about the global role which the United States should and can play. That is why the present analysis follows in the footsteps of those who have called for closer attention to be paid to individual perceptions and convictions as the intervening variable between international incentives and policy outcomes.[3]

Classic accounts of US foreign policy orientations juxtaposed either 'Isolationists' and 'Internationalists' or 'Realists' and 'Idealists'. Wittkopf distinguished not only between Isolationism and Internationalism, but also between a more cooperative multilateral Internationalism and its militant unilateral version.[4] Further differentiating international approaches, Ross and Posen came up with four ideal type grand strategies – Neo-Isolationism, Selective Engagement, Primacy and Cooperative Security – which they had distilled from their overview of the post-Cold War debate on how the United States should confront challenges to its national security.[5] These resemble Mead's conceptualization of four ideal-type schools – the Isolationist Jeffersonians, the calculating Hamiltonians, the muscular Jacksonians, and the idealist Wilsonians – which reflect distinct moral values and political views associated with deep-seated regional, economic, and social interests.[6] This chapter is devoted to an in-depth exploration of what these

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different approaches have to say about the nature of the threat al-Qaeda poses, its causes and the policies most likely to safeguard US interests.

The Isolationist Conceptualization of al-Qaeda

Based on a Realist view of international security, neo-isolationists call for a reduction in the presence of the United States as answer to Islamist terrorism. Domestically, Isolationists regard the focus on the defence of the US homeland as a safeguard against the national government from becoming a threat to US democracy.[7] Some of the leading Isolationist voices point out that by announcing a 'war on terrorism' the Bush administration had essentially pushed the United States into an open-ended war. Because it is difficult if not impossible to define what al-Qaeda is and who its members are, it will remain impossible to define exactly at which point the United States can declare victory. This is problematic because in US history, times of war have always seen the erosion of civil liberties at home.[8]

The isolationist account of al-Qaeda emphasizes either the futility of US engagement abroad in the face of an irrational other or the need to reduce US engagement abroad as a way of cooling the flames of rational objection to perceived US hegemony. The first view found its most prominent recent expression in libertarian Republican Representative Ron Paul's objection to the Iraq war. During a 2007 debate of Republican presidential hopefuls Paul was attacked by Senator John McCain for allegedly failing to grasp the true nature of the national security threat posed by al-Qaeda by calling for an early US withdrawal from Iraq:

> If we fail in Iraq, we will see Iraq become a center for al-Qaeda, chaos, genocide in the region, and they'll follow us home. After we lost the war in Vietnam, we came home, they didn't follow us home. You read Zarqawi, you read bin Laden, you read al-Qaeda, they'll tell you they want to follow us home.[9]

Ron Paul's defence rested on quoting Ronald Reagan's ultimate assessment of the futility of US engagement in Lebanon:

> Ronald Reagan in 1983 sent Marines into Lebanon, and he said he would never turn tail and run. A few months later, the Marines were killed, 241 were killed, and the Marines were taken out. And Reagan addressed this subject in his memoirs. And he says, 'I said I would never turn tail and run.' He says, 'But I never realized the irrationality of Middle Eastern politics,' and he changed his policy there.[10]

Paul's version of isolationism features a notion of the irrational other that is incapable or unwilling to appreciate the benevolent nature of US policies. Engagement abroad is thus costly and futile. At first glance, Paul's views seem

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to reflect the continuing relevance, at least on the level of political rhetoric coming from a quasi-political outsider, of Orientalist frames. At the same time, Paul's minority position shows that contrary to Edward Said and his disciples,[11] Orientalist 'othering' can even serve as the basis for questioning Imperialist projects. However, by focussing on the supposed irrationality of those who attack the United States, this version of isolationist thinking undermines its own argument for withdrawal from international politics. It is only with a rational actor that some sort of mutual non-aggression pact has a chance to survive.

The notion of rationality is central to a more widespread variant of Isolationist sentiment which sees the US involvement in regional conflicts as the main source of frustration and as a central motif of Islamist terrorism. Karabell, for instance, suggested that an appropriately defined set of limited US interests would decrease the likelihood of confrontation with Islamist movements and governments. In the end, Islamism could be as irrelevant for countries outside the broader Muslim world as 'Quebecois nationalism is for Thailand'.[12]

For Neo-Realist Stephen Walt, the United States should pursue a policy of offshore-balancing where the use of force would be reserved for instances of direct and immediate threat as occurred on 11 September 2001. Sharing some isolationist sentiments on these issues he believes that such a reduced (military) footprint would help initiate some sort of virtuous circle where the associated decrease in Anti-American sentiment would make it even less likely that the United States would have to become engaged militarily abroad.[13]

Such sentiments had already featured in some responses to initial US encounters with radical Islamist terrorism during the 1990s. The attack on the World Trade Centre on 23 February 1993 which killed six people and injured more than a thousand was the first attack committed by Islamist terrorists on the US mainland. The debate on its foreign policy implications saw Isolationist and anti-war voices arguing that the attack constituted a 'blowback' from the US support for the Afghan resistance against the Soviet occupation during the 1980s.[14] Andrew Hartman, for instance, claims that the USA in large part created some of the deadliest urban guerrilla warriors in the world – trained to use weapons of modern-day terror.[15] Members of the foreign policy establishment such as Democratic Senator Charles Schumer (NY) and President Reagan's Afghanistan envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, who would later serve as President George W. Bush's ambassador to Kabul and Baghdad, tried to separate the perceived foreign policy success of the 1980s from an emerging threat to US national security.[16] According to then-US ambassador to Pakistan, Robert Oakley, one had to differentiate between Afghan resistance against Soviet troops and the network of Arab fighters.[17] Milton Bearton, a former intelligence professional dealing with Afghanistan, added that the United States and Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia had supported different factions. The United States had not had direct contact with Arab volunteers because it channelled all its support for the Afghan resistance through the Pakistani intelligence service.[18] For Peter Bergen, the CIA was therefore guilty not of too much, but of too little engagement in Afghanistan.[19] Marc Sageman was unable to locate a single Afghan

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who had previously trained with Pakistani intelligence with the exception of one close personal friend of Osama bin Laden.[20] In his view, the Soviet withdrawal was mostly due to the efforts of US supported Afghan fighters and not the Arab volunteers on the payroll of Arab Gulf regimes:

> In summary, the United States indirectly supported the Afghan mujahedin, who did all the fighting, paid dearly for it, and deserved the full credit for their victory over the Soviets. The expatriate contribution to this victory was minimal at best, for they spread dissension among Muslim resistance ranks. Usually, the victors write history. For the Soviet Afghan war, there is no Afghan account, perhaps due to the high illiteracy rate or later developments in Afghanistan. Instead, the foreign bystanders got to write the history. These foreigners expropriated the native Afghan victory over the Soviet Union, created the myth that they had destroyed a superpower by faith alone, and argued that the same fate would lie ahead for the only remaining superpower (…) Thus the global Salafi jihad was able to hijack the Afghan mujahedin victory for its own ends. [21]

The Isolationist account of a purported link between US 'hegemonic' foreign policies and terrorist attacks on US targets is problematic for two interrelated reasons. First, its proponents fail to distinguish between terrorist attacks on civilians globally and guerrilla attacks on military targets in regions with a US military presence.[22] Second, in their attempts to find support for the rather tenuous link between Islamist terrorist attacks against Western civilians and US or Western foreign policies towards the wider Muslim world, they ignore the apparent mismatch between the widespread rejection of US or Western policies and the very limited support for such terrorist attacks.[23] Third, US security professionals have pointed out that as long as many societies experience globalization as Americanization, the political retreat of the United States would remain insufficient when not accompanied by economic retreat (Pillar 2001).

Given its continued unpopularity amongst major sections of the US public and foreign policy elite alike it is not surprising that a Council on Foreign Relations initiative led by Lawrence J. Korb did not include Isolationism in a list of possible ways of reacting to the security threats which the United States is facing at the beginning of the 21st century. Instead, it focussed on the options of emphasising US military superiority, of deterrence and containment, as well as of strengthening international institutions and rules.[24] These three approaches reflect the other three Grand Strategies outlined above. Their role in understanding and fighting al-Qaeda will be assessed in the following sections.

The Defensive Realist Conceptualization of al-Qaeda

According to the selective engagement approach, foreign policy should pursue a narrower set of policy objectives that focusses on maintaining cooperative

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relations with the European Union, Russia, China and Japan and the stability of the international order in general as a way of pursuing US economic interests. For its proponents, the cautious and defensive use of limited government resources becomes even more important in the context of increasing strains put on the US federal budget by retiring baby boomers.[25]

With their attachment to Realist thinking, adherents of this line of strategic thinking long viewed terrorism only in terms of its links to state sponsors. One classic example is Condoleezza Rice's *Foreign Affairs* article in which President George W. Bush's eventual National Security Adviser and US secretary of state had laid out the Republican foreign policy manifesto for the 2000 Presidential elections. There, she focussed on US relations with Russia and China and discussed terrorism only in the context of the spread of weapons of mass destruction and so-called rogue states.[26] Colin Ray makes clear that the Realist scepticism regarding the long-term impact transnational actors such as al-Qaeda can have on the foreign policies of leading powers was not limited to the pre-9/11 era.

> It may be worth my mentioning the fact that if the actual (the First and Second World Wars and the Holocaust) and potential (a superpower nuclear Third World War) horrors of the twentieth century failed to effect radical change in the means and methods of world politics, it is hardly likely that isolated terrorist atrocities, no matter how televisual, would succeed in their turn.[27]

His US colleague Stephen Walt added that the United States could absorb a replay of September 11 once every 10 years and continue to thrive as a society.[28]

Just like their Isolationist peers, traditional Realists are uncomfortable with the sweeping rhetoric that accompanied the Bush administration's 'war on terror'. Bemoaning the associated tendency to avoid the pragmatic assessment of national interests, Melvyn Leffler sees Bush's sometimes idealist rhetoric as another example of the way US foreign policy makers react when confronted with new and urgent threats. He points out that the Cold War taught a lesson in how a Manichean worldview can easily lead to mistake essentially local and regional struggles (such as nationalism and anti-colonialism) as part of a wider global effort.[29] For Michael Desch, American liberalism is to blame for the President Bush stark portrayal of the threat posed by al-Qaeda. He argues that American Liberalism with its emphasis on values views terrorism not simply as a manageable physical threat to the US homeland, but as a fundamental threat to the US way of life. Only American Liberalism would refuse to treat counterterrorism as simply another matter of criminal justice.[30]

The Realist scepticism towards the notion of a global, transnational threat to US interests translates into unease with President Bush's early statements that declared war on every terrorist group of global reach.[31] This prompted the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States which was relatively close to the Grand Strategy of selective engagement to remark that '[t]he catastrophic

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threat at this moment in history is more specific. It is the threat posed by Islamist terrorism – especially the al-Qaeda network, its affiliates, and its ideology.'[32]

Daniel Byman pointed out that the United States had to be careful in devising policies that addressed the fact that some Islamist insurgencies constitute important sources of recruits and public support for al-Qaeda without falling into the trap of 'chain-ganging' by getting involved in conflicts where governments have overblown rather tenuous or originally none-existing links with al-Qaeda.[33] In an attempt to illustrate the associated danger, John Mueller quotes bin Laden's 2004 videotape where the latter claimed that it is 'easy for us to provoke and bait … All that we have to do is to send two mujahidin … to raise a piece of cloth on which is written al-Qaeda in order to make the generals race there to cause America to suffer human, economic, and political losses.'[34] David Kilcullen, an influential commentator on counterinsurgency whose reflections on Western military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq enjoy widespread attention amongst US policymakers and the interested public, thus called for a policy of 'disaggregation' which would delink the numerous insurgencies that are taking place for various reasons across the Muslim world.[35] For adherents of limited foreign engagement, the war on terror is thus best pursuit through regional proxies that bear the brunt of tackling the challenge of actors such al-Qaeda. As Posen explained,

> Allied military and police forces are more appropriate instruments to apprehend terrorists operating within their national borders than are U.S. forces. They have information that the United States may not have, and they know the territory and people better. The odds of finding the adversary and avoiding collateral damage increase to the extent that the 'host' nation-state does the hard work. Moreover, host states can deal better politically with any collateral damage - that is, accidental destruction of civilian life and property.[36]

Another feature of cautious Realist thinking is the idea that deterrence as a tool of national security also applies to the fight against al-Qaeda. Elbridge A. Colby, who had served in the office of the Director of National Intelligence and the Commission on the Intelligence Capabilities of the United States Regarding Weapons of Mass Destruction, suggested broadening the notion of deterrence beyond the oftentimes hardly to deter terrorists to include those individuals, governments, or other entities whose material support, cooperation, complicity, or gross negligence enabled an attack.[37]

The problem with extended deterrence is the question of its credibility and the political fall-out from the private and public statements which this approach requires. One example of this was the public uproar associated with former Pakistani President Musharraf's assertion that after 9/11, Richard Armitage, Colin Powell's Deputy Secretary of State, had threatened to bomb Pakistan back into the Stone Age if Musharraf refused to join the war on terror.[38] Such private communication marked the backdrop to one of President Bush's most quoted

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statements of US counterterrorism policy. In his speech to a joint session of Congress on 20 September 2001, he declared:

> We will starve terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, drive them from place to place, until there is no refuge or no rest. And we will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime. [39]

Whilst conventional treatments of this statement put it in the context of the Bush administration's penchant for the rhetoric of primacy, it can also be read as a statement of deterrence which the much more pragmatic selective engagement approach would emphasize. As the sentences leading up to the 'with us or against us' remark indicate, the Bush administration was not simply repeating Manichean dichotomies about good and evil. Instead it tried to send a message to active and passive sponsors of terrorism that the new threat of transnational terrorism would make the United States less tolerant of possible cross-fertilizations in terms of expertise and weapons between locally and regionally operating terrorist groups and the global, anti-Western al-Qaeda. In fact, supporters of a more hard-line approach were shocked by what they saw as an offer of amnesty ('From this day forwards') for traditional state sponsors such as Syrian, Iran and Sudan.[40] Jonathan Stevenson disagreed: 'Constructive but cautious engagement with lesser evils – be they terrorist groups or their suspected state sponsors – is a price worth paying for the capacity to confront the greater evil without quarter.'[41]

The Offensive Realist Conceptualization of al-Qaeda

The post-9/11 emphasis on military means in combating international terrorism was widely hailed by those who favour the 'Jacksonian' Grand strategy of primacy. The reliance on military means and the scepticism towards international organizations makes this approach the one with the lowest approval rating amongst international audiences. Its inherently populist outlook, however, explains its popularity amongst segments of the White Protestant US middle class and thus helps to generate important domestic support for US international engagement.[42]

The administration of George W. Bush was not the first to use military means as an instrument of unilateral counterterrorism policies. In 1986, President Ronald Reagan, declared:

> For us to ignore, by inaction, the slaughter of American civilians and American soldiers, whether in night clubs or airline terminals, is simply not in the American tradition. When our citizens are abused or attacked, anywhere in the world, on the direct orders of a hostile regime – we will respond (…) I warned that there

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> should be no place on Earth where terrorists can rest and train and practice their deadly skills. I meant it. I said that we would act with others if possible, and alone if necessary, to ensure that terrorists have no sanctuary anywhere.[43]

President Reagan's statements on the terrorist threat and its possible linkage to 'state sponsors' offer some striking resemblance to the rhetoric of the George W. Bush administration. Specifically, he blamed the rise of international terrorist attacks during the 1980s on a 'confederation of terrorist states' bound together by a shared 'fanatical hatred' of the American way of life.[44] This confederation consisted of Iran and North Korea (which would join Iraq in an axis of evil in early 2002) as well as Libya, Cuba and Nicaragua. Because the terrorist attacks committed and commissioned by these states would constitute acts of war, the United States had the right to defend itself.[45]

The Clinton administration had to confront the fact that with the rise of al-Qaeda the role of state sponsors began to diminish. For many US officials the almost co-temporary attacks on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania which killed 224 people including 12 US. Americans in August 1998 constituted a turning point in the struggle with Islamist terrorism.[46] Just like the Bush administration after 9/11, the Clinton administration framed the bombings as armed attacks which would grant the United States the right to defend itself in accordance with article 51 of the United Nations charter.[47] Secretaries Cohen and Albright pointed out that Osama bin Laden had issued a declaration of war in early 1998 which would suffice in making him a legitimate military target.[48] A couple of months after the US missile strikes on al-Qaeda's Afghan training camps, government sources confirmed that the goal had been to kill Osama bin Laden. At first glance this seemed to have constituted a violation of President Ford's 1976 executive order which banned the US government from engaging in assassinations in light of the CIA's previous involvement in many Third World countries. According to White House lawyers, however, the President was still permitted to attack the 'infrastructure' of terrorist groups. When the infrastructure of transnational organizations of the type of al-Qaeda mainly consists of their members than these members themselves would become legitimate targets.[49]

Through its decision to phrase the campaign against the transnational al-Qaeda and its affiliates as war, the Bush administration suggested to the US public that military confrontations with other states would dominate.[50] This was made clear by Deputy Secretary Wolfowitz's announcement that the war on terror could also mean ending states who sponsor terrorism.[51] This approach was applauded by neoconservative commentators such as Charles Krauthammer who declared that the war on terror could not be over until Saddam Hussein's regime was gone and the governments in Tehran and Damascus had stopped their sponsorship of international terrorism: 'After Afghanistan, we turn to Damascus. What then? Stage three is Iraq and Iran (…) All we do know is that victory, cunning and cruel, will demand that if this president wants victory in the war he has declared, he will have to achieve it on the very spot where is own father, 10 years ago, let victory

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slip away.'[52] In fact, in December 2001, 61 per cent of US. Americans agreed that as long as Saddam Hussein was in power the war on terrorism could not be viewed as successful.[53]

Many observers either share Widmaier's view that President Bush's rhetoric should be seen as an attempt to galvanize an otherwise reluctant (or even isolationist) public to support the international engagement political elites deemed necessary in safeguarding US national interests or Flibbert's focus on the central role of specific ideologies and the individuals who espouse them.[54] Such assessments, however, tend to ignore the intensely political context of the 'war on terror'. In fact, there is substantial evidence to argue that the Bush administration's escalating focus on Iraq in the early summer of 2002 sought to address the inevitable post-9/11 slide in polls. Previous experiences with international terrorism have shown that US policymakers cannot rely on the enduring benefits of a rally-around-the-flag effect.[55] Kam and Ramos have shown that whilst events such as 9/11 help to link national identity with presidential approval, the long-term impact is limited.[56] They therefore suggest that President Bush's attempt to shift the emphasis from al-Qaeda to other threats such as Iraq constituted an effort to sustain the rally in his approval ratings which was strongly tied to a post-9/11 surge in patriotism. By framing counterterrorism in terms of war against a militarily inferior enemy the Bush administration increased the chances of war-like victories that are better for media consumption than clandestine work.[57] This strategy aimed to tap into American patriotism and nationalism in much the same way as previous administrations had done during the war against Spain in 1898, the two world wars and the Cold War.[58] In order to make the accompanying rhetoric more convincing, the notion of terrorist attacks with weapons of mass destruction had to take centre-stage.

President Bush laid the rhetorical foundation for the unfolding march to war in his 2002 state of the union speech where he declared: 'First we shut down terrorist camps, disrupt terrorist plans, and bring terrorists to justice. And, second, we must prevent the terrorists and regimes who seek chemical, biological or nuclear weapons from threatening the United States and the World'.[59] Around the same time, George W. Bush's advisor Karl Rove told a party gathering: 'Americans trust the Republicans to do a better job of keeping our communities and our families safe. We can also go to the country on this issue because they trust the Republican Party to do a better job of protecting and strengthening America's military might and thereby protecting America'.[60] By shifting the emphasis more clearly on Iraq, President Bush could hope to regain the political initiative on the ever-important issue of how to fight the terrorist threat. In his West Point speech in June 2002 President Bush insisted that deterrence does not work against terrorists and their state sponsors: 'Deterrence, the promise of massive retaliation against nations, means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend.'[61] He also pledged that the US would 'defend peace against threats from terrorists and tyrants'. Aside from the alliteration which always works nicely in speeches,[62] this quote is part of a long-term effort to link the emerging threat of Islamist terrorism with the old threat of rogues states. Despite the CIA having

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received only two days before information from a cabinet-level Iraqi official that Saddam Hussein had no previous or current ties with Osama bin Laden, President Bush stated on 25 September 2002 that

> Al-Qaeda hides. Saddam doesn't, but the danger is, that they work in concert. The danger is, that al-Qaeda becomes an extension of Saddam's madness and his hatred and his capacity to extend weapons of mass destruction around the world. …[Y]ou can't distinguish between al-Qaeda and Saddam when you talk about the war on terror.[63]

The US foreign policy establishment was very sceptical about claims that rational dictators would risk a US attack by giving weapons of mass destruction to terrorists. President George W.H. Bush's national security adviser, Bent Scowcroft, concluded that '(t)he most military part of this campaign may already be over. It is my sense that not many states are likely to volunteer to be the next Taliban.'[64] Walt also rejected the link between rogue states and terrorism as overblown: No foreign government is going to give up the weapons they need for deterrence and allow them to be used in ways that would place their own survival at risk.[65] He and fellow Neo-Realist John Mearsheimer were clear in their view that Iraq could be contained.[66] As Arreguín-Toft explained:

> The reason why WMD terrorism proved to be so valuable as a post-Cold War bogeyman was that the idealised WMD terrorist both maintained a state-like capacity to harm and the possibility of invoking a principle of responsibility for any state theoretically involved in providing terrorists with the means to execute such an attack.[67]

In October 2005, President Bush used a speech at the National Endowment for Democracy where he presented his administration's interpretation of what al-Qaeda constitutes that moved beyond the general descriptions offered in the 2002 National Security Strategy or the 2003 National Strategy on Combating Terrorism.[68] Whereas his pronouncements in the lead-up to the Iraq war were dominated by warnings over the threat of weapons of mass destruction, President Bush now focussed on transnational Islamist terrorism and al-Qaeda. Setting aside possible or real differences of the organizations involved, he raised the spectre of a broader Islamist movement aiming to end US and Western influence in the wider Middle East: 'Their tactic to meet this goal has been consistent for a quarter-century: They hit us, and expect us to run. They want us to repeat the sad history of Beirut in 1983, and Mogadishu in 1993–only this time on a larger scale, with greater consequences.'[69]

Whilst he differentiated between global, borderless terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda that facilities the activities of local groups and conducts the most spectacular attacks itself, and regional groups in Somalia, the Philippines, Pakistan, Chechnya, Kashmir, and Algeria and local cells that are not centrally

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directed, President Bush claimed that they all agreed on a fanatic and extreme plan to create a radical Islamic empire that stretches from Spain to Indonesia. With greater economic and military and political power, the terrorists would be able to advance their stated agenda: 'to develop weapons of mass destruction, to destroy Israel, to intimidate Europe, to assault the American people, and to blackmail our government into isolation.'[70]

Bush's portrayal of al-Qaeda closely mirrors the description provided by his former speech-writer David Frum and leading Neo-Conservative Richard Perle. In their neo-conservative manifesto about how to win the so-called global war on terror, Frum and Perle warn: 'A radical strain of Islam has declared war on us … All the available evidence suggests that militant Islam commands wide support, and even wider sympathy, amongst Muslims worldwide, including Muslim minorities in the West … In militant Islam, we face an aggressive ideology of world domination.'[71] Frum and Perle also move the transnational al-Qaeda closer to the long-established category of nation-states: 'al-Qaeda could never have achieved its murderous effectiveness if the governments of the Middle East had all been hostile to it. (...) The nexus between the terror groups and the terror states is a dangerous reality.'[72]

President Bush's 2005 speech shows how the inability or unwillingness to leave behind traditional notions of power and international politics brings about a tendency to reify al-Qaeda by ascribing it quasi-state-like attributes such as the ability to inflict catastrophic damage and a hierarchical, top-down organization with an executive on top that just like the other madmen Hitler and Stalin before harbours expansionist schemes. This last aspect is indicative of this approach's ambiguous view on al-Qaeda's rationality. On the one hand, notions of irrationality are used to construct the image of an immediate uncontainable threat. At the same time, however, Dick Cheney and others emphasize that al-Qaeda has learned from a history of perceived US weakness and feebleness in the face of terrorist provocations. Such ability to learn from the behaviour of others and adopt one's own strategies accordingly depends, however, on a level of rationality which the Bush administration claimed al-Qaeda does not possess.

The Liberal Conceptualization of al-Qaeda

The Wilsonian grand strategy of cooperative security sets itself apart by being the only one of the four outlined here that is informed by liberal thinking on international security. It views international cooperation and the use of soft power as the most cost-effective ways of promoting US interests in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world.[73] For Joseph Nye who coined the concept of soft power, world politics is changing in a way that means Americans cannot achieve all of their international goals acting alone.[74] In this view, irrespective of its exact nature as an organization, network or movement, the rise of al-Qaeda highlights the need

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to adopt new security policies that address the new threats of a globalized world. As the authors of the 9/11Commission Report made clear,

> 9/11 taught us that terrorism against American interests 'over there' should be regarded just as we regard terrorism against American 'over there'. In this sense, the American homeland is the planet.[75]

The extent to which US counterterrorism policy could be rebalanced away from the emphasis on military means, towards an intelligence and criminal justice approach supported by friends and allies around the world, depends to a not inconsiderable extent on the answer which policy-makers accept about the current nature of the terrorist threat. On one side of the debate, Marc Sageman argued that al-Qaeda had evolved into less than a formal organization and advanced what was referred to as a bottom-up view of al-Qaeda with a multitude of informal local groups trying to emulate their predecessors by conceiving and executing operations from the bottom up now posing the main threat.[76] By 2006, the official assessment of al-Qaeda had also moved towards questioning the existence of a coherent core. That year's National Intelligence Estimate on Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States claimed that United States-led counterterrorism efforts had seriously damaged the leadership of al-Qaeida and disrupted its operations.[77] At the same time, it acknowledged that such successes occurred against a global jihadist movement – which includes al-Qaeida, affiliated and independent terrorist groups, and emerging networks and cells that spread and adapt to counterterrorism efforts. It also warned that this global jihadist movement is decentralized, 'lacks a coherent global strategy, and is becoming more diffuse. New jihadist networks and cells, with anti-American agendas, are increasingly likely to emerge.'[78] Richard Barrett, coordinator of the UN al-Qaida and Taliban Sanctions Committee Monitoring Team, concurred: 'the whole presentation of al-Qaeda as an international movement with groups acting in concert all over the world – that, too, has deteriorated. They've not been able to sustain that image in the short term. And most of the targets for terrorist groups are now essentially local, and they are no longer so obviously linked to some sort of global agenda.'[79]

This has obvious policy implications. Matthew and Shambaugh, for instance, point out that whilst networks are very resistant in their ability to absorb external shocks and disruptions; collective action problems inherent in their set-up will make it 'extraordinarily unlikely' for terrorists to 'undermine the national or homeland security of countries.'[80] They point out that whilst the network structure provides 'vulnerability interdependence' insofar as other nodes might take over functions from those under attack, 'sensitivity interdependence' means that individual nodes are always more sensitive to attacks against other parts of the network.[81] Such weaknesses mean that attributing a high level of unity and capacity to al-Qaeda is misleading and runs the risk of wasting resources fighting on enemy that does not exist in the form imagined.[82]

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More sceptical observers point out that the 1990s assumption that the international terrorist scene had splintered into ever smaller autonomous cells was one of the reasons why intelligence experts had missed their interaction and cooperation that had occurred under the banner of al-Qaeda.[83] Peter Bergen, Bruce Riedel and Bruce Hoffman are thus all more concerned about what they view as al-Qaeda's reconstituted operational abilities.[84] Bergen rejects Marc Sageman's notion of leaderless jihad which would be unable to mount a serious threat to US security.[85] For Bruce Hoffman the only conclusion which can be drawn is that '(t)he United States and its allies must refocus their attention on Afghanistan and Pakistan, where al-Qaeda began to collapse after 9/11 but has now regrouped.'[86]

The notion of a resurgent al-Qaeda featured prominently in Barack Obama's efforts to undermine the national security credentials of his Republican opponent, John McCain, during the 2008 presidential election. During their first presidential debate Obama attacked McCain for supporting the war in Iraq which constituted an unnecessary distraction.[87] Instead he urged a change of focus to Afghanistan and Pakistan. His running-mate Joe Biden warned accordingly: 'I promise you, if an attack comes in the homeland, it's going to come as our security services have said, it is going to come from al-Qaeda planning in the hills of Afghanistan and Pakistan. That's where they live. That's where they are. That's where it will come from.'[88] For observers like Bergen the operative threat is posed by those individuals below the immediate leadership whose involvement in the planning of attacks makes their arrest or targeted killing paramount.[89] Reflecting increasing concerns about the influence of these operatives, the Obama Administration has dramatically increased the use of drones for targeted killings. Whereas the Bush Administration only made use of this instrument nine times in the years 2004 to 2007 and 34 times in its last year office, the Obama Administration conducted 53 such strikes in 2009, 118 in 2010, and 70 in 2012.[90] In its greater willingness to employ military means in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan, the Obama administration followed the call to pay close attention to failed states as the global terrorist network's equivalent of an international business's corporate headquarters, providing concrete locations, or stable 'nodes', in which to situate their factories, training facilities, and storehouses.[91]

In August 2009, John Brennan, Barack Obama's National Security Adviser for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, began to outline the Obama administration's take on the terrorist threat to the United States. First, the US government relegated counterterrorism from a level where Brennan saw it as 'defining – indeed, distorting – our entire national security and foreign policy to where it is just one part of larger policies.' This goes hand in hand with, second, a redefinition of the enemy. Brennan took particular issue with the Bush administration's emphasis on waging war against terrorism. For the Obama administration, the enemy was not terrorism per se, but al-Qaeda. Its description as a global jihadi effort was dropped because it lent credibility and religious legitimacy to a small number of people who are expressing a worldview of very limited appeal to the broader Muslim public.[92] This follows a theme established in

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Obama's inauguration speech in which he offered 'a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect' to the Muslim World.[93]

In the end, the Obama-Administration's approach seems torn between the inclination to relegate the terrorist threat to one amongst many other global challenges and the need to take the necessary precautions against another attack by individuals more or less closely associated with al-Qaeda. In the context of the ongoing debate amongst academics and counterterrorism professionals about the exact nature of al-Qaeda, the aggressive pursuit of mid- and high-level operatives affiliated with al-Qaeda and the wider network reflects the (re-emerging) notion of al-Qaeda as coherent entity with the ability to devise and conduct terrorist attacks.

Conclusion

Each of the grand strategies presented here offered very specific assessments of the nature of the threat posed by al-Qaeda and the policies required to address it. The isolationist account of al-Qaeda emphasizes either the futility of US engagement abroad in the face of an irrational other or the need to reduce US engagement abroad as a way of cooling the flames of rational objection to perceived US hegemony. The isolationist account faces the problem of a rather overwhelming elite and public consensus in favour of maintaining strong US links with the rest of the world. Yet, this lack of influence on a policy-making level has not prevented some of its favourite arguments such as the argument about the link between the rejection of specific US policies and the rise of Islamist terrorist attacks on US civilians from becoming ingrained in mainstream journalistic and academic discourses supported by those whose proposals are shaped by defensive Realist or liberal world views.

The benefits of a defensive Realist approach are evidently linked to the fact that its focus on great power relations and its scepticism regarding the long-term threat posed by al-Qaeda make its adherents less likely to step into the trap of over-reaction which lies at the heart of the terrorist calculus. Based on Realist ontologies of international politics, the adherents of the grand strategies of Isolationism and selective engagement are more concerned about the costs involved in misguided US policies than in the, in this view, essentially manageable threat posed by al-Qaeda. Their respective policy recommendations depend on the rationality of al-Qaeda members and sympathizers who are expected to be swayed by a possible re-orientation of US policies. At the same time, both approaches remain indifferent to policies that seek to address the rise of organizations such as al-Qaeda by tackling the lack of political freedom in large swaths of the Muslim world and the authoritarian political structures which until the Arab Spring nurtured Anti-Western discourses as a way of delegitimizing liberal calls for reform.[94]

Much ink has been spilled over the highly controversial grand strategy of primacy. The tendency to blur the lines between combating al-Qaeda and tackling the issue of state sponsorship of terrorism has served the Bush administration

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well in attempts to extend the post 9/11 rally far beyond historic timeframes. The image of a coherent, hierarchical organization features most prominently in this approach. By constructing al-Qaeda as a quasi-state, the supporters of this grand strategy are redefining the object of US policies in such a way as to make conventional, military tools seem appropriate.

With their particular sensitivity to the chances and risks associated with globalization liberal approaches appear, at the first glance, most at ease with the notion of a networked or only weakly structured phenomenon. The on-going debate in US policy and academic circles about the essence of al-Qaeda as either a bottom-up movement of loosely affiliated like-minded individuals or a top-down organization has broader implications for US counterterrorism policies. The less coherent an entity al-Qaeda is the more appropriate traditional criminal justice approaches are. The Obama-Administration's escalation of drone and Special Forces attacks on perceived al-Qaeda leaders and planers in South Asia, the Middle East and East Africa reflect an on-going wariness with regard to the existence of a coherent organization that is capable of threatening the United States.

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