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### **Abu Yahya's Six Easy Steps for Defeating al-Qaeda**

By Jarret Brachman

In his 10 September 2007 video release, Shaikh Abu Yahya al-Libi offered the United States several unsolicited tips for better prosecuting its 'war of ideas' against al-Qaeda.[1] Although his comments brought al-Qaeda propaganda to new heights of arrogance, the fact is that Abu Yahya's recommendations are nothing short of brilliant. Policymakers who are serious about degrading the resonance of the Jihadist message, therefore, would be remiss in ignoring his strategic recommendations simply because of their source.

Abu Yahya, a senior member of al-Qaeda, is one of the world's foremost experts on the strengths and vulnerabilities of the contemporary Jihadist Movement. He became a household name within the counterterrorism community when al-Qaeda began marketing him in their propaganda following his July 2005 escape from detention at Bagram air base in Afghanistan. In the past two years, Abu Yahya has become the al-Qaeda High-Command's attack dog, chastising a variety of Muslim groups for failing to follow the proper path: with the Shia, Hamas and the Saudi royal family seemingly bearing the brunt of his rage.[2] Al-Qaeda has also promoted Abu Yahya's softer side, showing him reciting poetry and informally dining with his students. He has become, in a very real sense, the Jihadist for all seasons.

Abu Yahya's decision to volunteer strategic advice to the United States was neither out of goodwill nor self-destructive tendencies. Rather, his comments embodied the explosive cocktail of youth, rage, arrogance and intellect that has made him a force among supporters of the Jihadist Movement. By casually offering his enemy a more sophisticated counter-ideological strategy than the U.S. has been able to implement or articulate to date, Abu Yahya's point was clear: the U.S. lags so far behind the global Jihadist Movement in its war of ideas that al-Qaeda has little to fear any time soon.

Abu Yahya's strategic plan for improving America's counter-ideology efforts centers on turning the Jihadist Movement's own weaknesses against it. He first suggests that governments interested in weakening the ideological appeal of al-Qaeda's message should focus on amplifying the cases of those ex-Jihadists (or "backtrackers" as he calls them) who have willingly renounced the use of armed action and recanted their previously held ideological commitments. Using retractions by senior thinkers and religious figures who already have established followings within the Jihadist Movement helps to sow seeds of doubt across the Movement and deter those on the ideological fence from joining.

Although Arab governments, most notably the Saudis and the Egyptians, have successfully leveraged this approach for decades, there may be particular value in amplifying these retractions in the West. In November 2007, for instance, the legendary Egyptian Jihadist thinker, Dr. Sayyid Imam Sharif, released a book renouncing his previous commitment to the violent Jihadist ideology.[3] As could be expected given Sharif's senior stature in the Movement, the story made front-page news across the Arab

world. In the English-language media, however, the story was little more than a minor blip. The media's non-coverage of such a major ideological victory against global Jihadism is due to the fact that few in the West appreciate Sayyid Imam's significance to groups like al-Qaeda.

Abu Yahya suggests that the public media can play an effective role in publicizing ideological retractions, particularly by conducting interviews with those reformed scholars, publishing their articles and printing their books. The media's effort to promote the retractions helps to redirect public attention away from the role of the host government in prompting those retractions in the first place. The more distance these reformed scholars have from their host governments the more they are likely to be perceived as legitimate.

Abu Yahya also recommends that the United States both fabricate stories about Jihadist mistakes and exaggerate real Jihadist mistakes whenever they are made. These may include blaming Jihadist terrorism for killing innocents, particularly women, children and the elderly. But he does not stop there. Jihadist mistakes should not simply be highlighted as being anomalous or extraordinary: rather, governments ought to characterize them as being at the core of the Jihadist methodology. In short, governments need to convince their populations that the murder of innocent people is a core part of global Jihadism.

The most effective way to pursue this strategy, he contends, is to exploit mistakes made by any Jihadist group, whether they are al-Qaeda or not, by casting that action as being emblematic of the entire Jihadist Movement. Abu Yahya calls this strategy of blurring the differences between al-Qaeda and other Jihadist groups when it serves propaganda purposes, "widening the circle." Pursuing this strategy offers the United States significantly more exploitable opportunities for discrediting the actions of the Jihadist Movement writ large.

Abu Yahya provides two clarifying examples of existing counterpropaganda initiatives that he found to be effective in damaging the Jihadist Movement's credibility. The first example is the rumor about an al-Qaeda constitution that stated that death should be the penalty for quitting al-Qaeda. Although Abu Yahya claims that the rumor is fabricated, he concedes that it has effectively painted al-Qaeda in a negative light within the Islamic world.

He also points to how the Saudi and Algerian governments successfully characterized Jihadist terrorist attacks against government targets in their countries as actually being attacks against the people of those countries. By downplaying the iconic significance of the buildings and focusing instead on the human victims, casting them as powerless and ordinary, both the Saudis and the Algerians were able to "move emotions" and "whip up storms" across the public against the Jihadist Movement.

Abu Yahya's third strategic point deals with the government's prompting of mainstream Muslim clerics to issue *fatwas* (religious rulings) that incriminate the Jihadist Movement

and their actions. Abu Yahya shudders at other Muslims' use of "repulsive legal terms, such as bandits, *Khawarij* (literally, "those who seceded," refers to the earliest Islamic sect) and even *Karamathians* or *al-Qaramitah*, ("extreme fanatics") in referring to the Jihadists. Abu Yahya is not the first to make these points, however. In fact, followers of the Saudi Salafist shaikh, Rabi bin Hadi al-Madkhali, frequently used the following terms in order to assault the Jihadists:

- **"Jihadi:"** Anyone who believes that Jihad is a purely individual duty to fight
- **"Takfiri:"** Anyone who excommunicates Arab rulers or Muslims
- **"Khariji Bandit:"** Anyone who actively seeks to overthrow Arab rulers
- **"Qutubi:"** Anyone who reveres, quotes or even positively mentions Sayyid Qutb (an early hard-line Egyptian thinker)
- **"Hizbi:"** Anyone who participates in anti-establishment activist group
- **"Dirty Groundhog":** a traitor to one's religion, used specifically against Saudi hard-line cleric, Shaikh Hamoud bin Uqla as-Shuaybi in the 1990s
- **"Rabid Dogs":** a generic label for extremists
- **"The Dog":** referring specifically to Usama Bin Ladin
- **"Perennial Defender of Innovators":** an attack against extremists for rejecting centuries of accepted historical teachings and interpretations of Islam
- **"Betrayer of the Salafi Way":** used to attack hard-line clerics who step outside the bounds of mainstream Islamic conservatism.[4]

Abu Yahya also points to the effectiveness of special committees of scholars who try to deprogram Jihadists in prison. These rehabilitation programs, which are now operating in Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, have become a central part of these countries' efforts to weaken the Jihadist Movement, at least in the war of ideas.[5]

The fourth component to Abu Yahya's proposed grand strategy is strengthening and backing Islamic movements far removed from Jihad, particularly those with a democratic approach. Beyond supporting them, he counsels governments to push these mainstream groups into ideological conflict with Jihadist groups in order to keep the Jihadist scholars and propagandists busy responding to their criticisms. This approach is designed to strip the Jihadist Movement of its monopoly on the dialogue and instead unleash a "torrential flood of ideas and methodologies which find backing, empowerment, and publicity from numerous parties" against them.

There is no doubt that the Jihadist thinkers are most threatened by groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas as well as mainstream Salafists. This is because these groups draw on many of the same religious texts and appeal to the same constituencies for recruitment and financial support.[6] The methodologies of groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, however, are significantly more palatable to their host governments than Jihadists. This bitter rivalry between Jihadists and those more moderated groups could be usefully exploited by governments interested in wearing down al-Qaeda's stamina.

Next, Abu Yahya's recommends aggressively neutralizing or discrediting the guiding thinkers of the Jihadist Movement. His point is that not all Jihadists are replaceable: there

are some individuals who provide a disproportionate amount of insight, scholarship or charisma. These individuals include key ideologues like Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada or Sayyid Imam Sharif; and senior commanders like, Khattab, Yousef al-Ayiri or Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

In order to effectively degrade the Jihadist Movement's long-term capacity, Abu Yahya suggests that these Jihadist luminaries need to be silenced, either through death, imprisonment or perceived irrelevance, thereby leaving the Movement "without an authority in which they can put their full confidence and which directs and guides them, allays their misconceptions, and regulates their march with knowledge, understanding, and wisdom."

The consequence of this power vacuum, he argues, is that "those who have not fully matured on this path or who are hostile to them in the first place, to spread whatever ideas and opinions they want and to cause disarray and darkness in the right vision which every Mujahid must have."

Finally, Abu Yahya advises the United States to spin the minor disagreements among leaders or Jihadist organizations as being major doctrinal and methodological disputes. He suggests that any disagreement, be it over personal, strategic or theological reasons, can be exacerbated by using them as the basis for designating new subsets, or schools-of-thought. These fractures can also serve as useful inroads on which targeted information operations can be focused: such an environment becomes a "safe-haven for rumormongers, deserters, and demoralizers, and the door is left wide open for defamation, casting doubts, and making accusations and slanders," he explains.

This "war of defamation" as he terms it, leaves the Jihadist propagandists almost impotent in that no matter how they try to defend themselves, dispel misconceptions, and reply to accusations, their voice will be as "hoarse as someone shouting in the middle of thousands of people."

In the case of the 10 September 2007 video, Abu Yahya may have let his ego undermine his goal of intimidating the West by offering useful strategic advice. Abu Yahya's most important contribution is identifying that the best way to defeat al-Qaeda is by tying it up in knots: Al-Qaeda must be continuously forced into a series of compromising positions from a variety of angles so that it hangs itself over the long term. The challenge for the United States is that it is not currently positioned to implement many of Abu Yahya's strategies, which is why he most likely felt fine sharing them. The fact is that the U.S. is speaking from a non-Islamic perspective, which discredits anything it says regarding the Islamic faith. Furthermore, there is little the U.S. government can say to the Islamic world that will be viewed as anything other than propaganda in support of its military occupation of Iraq as long as it maintains forces on the ground there. The U.S., therefore, must be open to, and innovative with, creating and leveraging a variety of flexible partnerships in its global efforts to degrade the appeal and legitimacy of al-Qaeda over the long-term.

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## NOTES:

[1] Abu Yahya al-Libi. 93-minute video tape. Produced by *As-Sahab*. Recorded early *Sha'ban 1428*.

[2] See Michael Scheuer, "Al-Qa`ida's Theological Enforcer" in the Jamestown Foundation's *Terrorism Monitor*. Volume 4, Issue 25 (July 31, 2007) for an in-depth examination of Abu Yahya's recent statements.

[3] The book, *Rationalizations on Jihad in Egypt and the World*, is being released in serialized format by the Egyptian daily newspaper, *Al-Masry al-Youm*, November and December 2007.

[4]"Summary of the Deviation of The Madkhalee 'Salafiyyah.'" *At-Tibyan Publications*.

[5] See Christopher Boucek's "Extremist Reeducation and Rehabilitation in Saudi Arabia" in the Jamestown Foundation's *Terrorism Monitor*.

[6] For a more in-depth discussion of these dynamics, see *The Militant Ideology Atlas*. Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. <http://ctc.usma.edu/atlas/> .