



'Dawa' in the Shadow of Covid-19: Al-Qaeda Leadership and the Western Civilians

Dr. Michael Barak

The Covid-19 pandemic and the strong protests against the racism shown to the African American population which started in the US and have spread to western Europe have been identified by al-Qaeda as an opportunity to deepen the gap between the western civilian population and the political leadership and leverage Islam as a solution to the above social malady. If previously al-Qaeda viewed the western civilian population as a target for attacks then these days their attitude changed, and they express solidarity with fringe disenfranchised non-Muslim populations and attempt to draw them to Islam.

On March 31st, 2020 and June 29th, 2020, al-Sahab media outlet, al-Qaeda's formal propaganda vehicle, posted two banners in English and Arabic where the organization addressed the civilian population in the west. The first, titled "The Road to Humanity's Exit from the Belly of the Beast (Instructions and Revelations on Covid-19)" was posted on the backdrop of the spread of the pandemic. The second, titled "A message to the Oppressed in the West", saw light on the backdrop of the protests around the murder of George Floyd, an African America citizen killed by a police officer in May 2020¹.

In both banners al-Qaeda described the political leadership as disconnected from its citizenry, trampling human rights and promoting only its own agenda and needs. The first banner accused it of criminally neglecting the healthcare system, manifested inter alia through lack of basic medical equipment such as gloves, protective clothing and disinfection equipment, which per al-Qaeda demonstrates the governments disregard to the citizens health. Per al-Qaeda, the lives of hundreds of thousands could have been saved from Covid-9 if the western leaders have avoided allocating resources to an arms race and instead allocate these resources to develop the healthcare system. The second banner accused the western leadership of oppressing its own citizens as well as other populations around the world, especially Muslims. Per al-Qaeda, the silence of the oppressed populations in the face of the above policy have caused them much harm and therefore



¹ The Protests spread across the US and reached other countries such as France, Germany the UK, South Africa and others. During the protests, statues depicting historic figures associated with oppression and slavery have been destroyed, among them a statue of Christopher Columbus under the claim that he was the one responsible for the European colonialism in America.

they must choose one of two options: (i) force their governments to return to their original national borders; or (ii) revolt against the current leadership and install justice.

Alongside these allegations, al-Qaeda leadership clarified that it supported the African Americans protest against the “condescending racists in the white house” and the “blood sucking bankers and big corporations and the oppressing racists behind them [who focus] only on promoting their own self-interests, subjugating all nations including the American one and stealing your districts’ property [...]”². Moreover, al-Qaeda justified its war on the west and likened it to the African Americans protest “know that we fight for you because it meant to deflect the oppressor and is a response to the dictator. It is akin to your reaction to the murder of [George] Floyd and his ancestors. The hatred to oppression and defense of the soul are the crest of human creation [...]. Our Muslim nation has suffered for decades from your dictators’ rule and from the murder of our women and children, from stealing our wealth and defacing our holy sites”³. Per al-Qaeda, Islam orders the believers to fight dictatorships and defend the oppressed and therefore should be sought after by all humanity who must accept it.

Al-Qaeda and the Use of Dawah

Al-Qaeda uses the Covid-19 pandemic in the protests in the west to sting their opponents, but it seems the organization puts an effort to convince Christian population to convert to Islam (Dawah), while using Christian motifs. For example, it likened the political leadership in the US to the Roman Empire which considered as evil in Christianity. Per the organization, both purported to represent an advanced civilization and a superior set of values but in reality, persecuted populations that threatened their stability. It also likened the current state of the Islamic nation to Jesus’ because he too was the subject of curses and attacks, the former by the west and the latter by Romans and Jews.

The hatred for Jews, typical to antisemitism and early Christianity is intertwined in al-Qaeda’s Dawah. For example, they said that when the Muslims started their conquests, they managed to liberate many people and proved that Jesus preached the right values. That, in contrast to the lying Jews who framed him and incited the Romans against him. Another component of the Dawah manifested as a presentation of Islam as a religion of equality that guarantees to its followers a life

² The basis of jihad – the general leadership “A Message to the Oppressed in the West”, *al-Sahhab*, June 29th, 2020.

³ Ibid.

of freedom, honor, peace, without any racial discrimination and opposition to tyrannical regimes. Per al-Qaeda, since the dawn of history the prophets fought the oppressors and assisted the weak and oppressed. For example, Moses stood up to Pharaoh and fought for his people's freedom and honor; Jesus confronted the chief priests to disseminate superior values such as freedom; Muhammad, too, confronted tyrants to spread god's word. Therefore, the starting point of Islam is that one must fight oppressing powers but if that fight might fail then one must wait until god will decide to replace the reigning regime with his own rule as per Matthew 21: 42⁴ "Jesus saith unto them, did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes?". Al-Qaeda provided additional reasons why it was beneficial to convert to Islam. Per it, Jesus himself announced the appearance of Muhammad after his death, as was written in the Quran "Jesus son of Mary said, the children of Israel, I am god's emissary to you and come to affirm the bible in front of me and let you know of the next emissary after me and his name is Ahmad. And when he provided clear signs, they told him this is clear magic (Sura 61:6)⁵. Per al-Qaeda, the economic crisis in the west stems from collecting interest on loans which is forbidden in Islam and the spread of Covid-19 is connected to the consumption of impure foods forbidden by Islam. Per al-Qaeda, Muhammad disseminated clear instructions on hygiene and purity such as the obligation to cover one's face when sneezing, and prevention of spread of plagues and viruses such as the prohibition to leave a plague-ridden location (i.e. quarantine).

In light of the above al-Qaeda's leadership encouraged the westerners to convert to Islam. "The Islamic nation is the most obedient to god and the strongest believer in justice, liberty, and encouragement of revolting against dictatorship. Therefore, we call you, in a peaceful manner, to convert to Islam, accept god's religion harbingered by Jesus as mentioned in the Quran"⁶. Per al-Qaeda, whoever converts to Islam will be happy in this world and redeemed in the afterlife as is manifested in the following: "we proclaim that we want you to be our partners in heaven. By god we yearn to live together the eternal life in the beautiful gardens of Eden"⁷.

The question that is raised is whether in light of Covid-19 pandemic and the global protests the current al-Qaeda Dawah represents a real change in the organization's attitude towards the civilian population in the west. Does it see the latter as journeymen in the oppressed-oppressor struggle or is

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The basis of jihad – the general leadership "The Road to Humanity's Exit from the Belly of the Beast (Instructions and Revelations on Covid-19)", *al-Sahhab*, March 31st, 2020.

it a mere opportunism to achieve political goals?

It should be noted, in April 2002 al-Qaeda's leadership published a detailed document interwoven with religious authorities arguing why hitting civilian population in the west is legitimate. The document saw light on the backdrop of 9/11 attacks and among the arguments raised was the implementation of "an eye for an eye" principle and punishing civilians who have indirectly assisted military forces fighting Muslims⁸. Indeed, the document saw light almost two decades ago however recent statements by senior al-Qaeda leaders such as Ayman al-Zawahiri⁹ and Hamza Bin Laden¹⁰ in favor of lone wolf attacks point that no real change has occurred in al-Qaeda on that topic. In light of the above, it is most likely to assume that al-Qaeda's leadership wishes to leverage the fault lines that deepened on the heels of pandemic and the anti-racist protests to further widen the gap between the western civilian population and its leadership and bring the former closer to Islam as part of its strategy.

⁸ Quintan Wiktorowicz and John Kaltner, "Killing In The Name Of Islam: Al-Qaeda's Justification For September 11", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. X, Summer 2003, No. 2.

⁹ "Praising Palestinians, al-Qaeda urges lone wolf attacks on West", *Times of Israel*, Nov 3, 2015.

¹⁰ "Osama bin Laden's son calls for lone-wolf attacks on Jews, Americans", *Jerusalem Post*, May 14, 2017.

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