

16 June 2009

The Cartoon Case from al-Qaida's ideological perspective

Summary

Ideological propaganda is a key element of the viability of terrorist groups. Whether left- or right-wing extremist, separatist or Islamist, terrorist groups use ideological argumentation to radicalise members and sympathisers as well as to justify acts of terrorism. Al-Qaida's focus on the Cartoon Case and Denmark, along with the June 2008 attack on the Danish Embassy in Islamabad, serve as illustrative examples.

Since the Cartoon Case and, especially, the 2008 reprinting of the Mohammad Cartoons, al-Qaida has increased its focus on Denmark. The al-Qaida leadership has repeatedly condemned the publication of the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad, which from their ideological perspective is considered an attack against Islam.

While al-Qaida reacted relatively late to the publication of the cartoons in 2005, the reaction following their reprinting in 2008 has been considerably stronger, and the case has become a key issue for al-Qaida, so far culminating with the June 2008 attack on the Danish Embassy in Islamabad. Al-Qaida has claimed responsibility for the attack, e.g. in a lengthy video from 4 September 2008. Al-Qaida has subsequently published a number of videos mentioning Denmark and the Cartoon Case.

Aside from al-Qaida, other groups associated with al-Qaida have also reacted to the cartoons, publishing videos mentioning Denmark. Thus, Denmark has become a point of focus for al-Qaida and other militant Islamist groups and networks that share or are inspired by the al-Qaida ideology.

Introduction

This analysis reviews the Cartoon Case from al-Qaida's ideological perspective. Ideological propaganda is a key element of the viability of terrorist groups. Whether left- or right-wing extremist, separatist or Islamist, terrorist groups use ideological argumentation to radicalise members and sympathisers as well as to justify acts of terrorism. Al-Qaida's focus on the Cartoon Case and Denmark, along with the June 2008 attack on the Danish Embassy in Islamabad, serve as illustrative examples.

Al-Qaida condemnations of the cartoons

On 30 September 2005, the Danish daily *Jyllands-Posten* published twelve cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammad. Al-Qaida's official reaction to the cartoons came relatively late and only when public protests erupted in a number of Muslim countries in January and February 2006.

However, following the reprinting in 2008 there was a shift in the intensity and frequency of al-Qaida's rhetorical attacks against the cartoons and Denmark.

In a speech posted on the internet on 19 March 2008, Usama Bin Laden denounced the cartoons as part of "the crusade [against Islam]". Denmark was not mentioned specifically in the speech in which the cartoons were described as being worse than killing Muslim women and children.

In April 2008, the leading al-Qaida member, Ayman al-Zawahiri, called for all Muslims to cause damage to Denmark with all means possible as a result of the cartoons. The call to do so was part of an answer to questions posted on the internet.

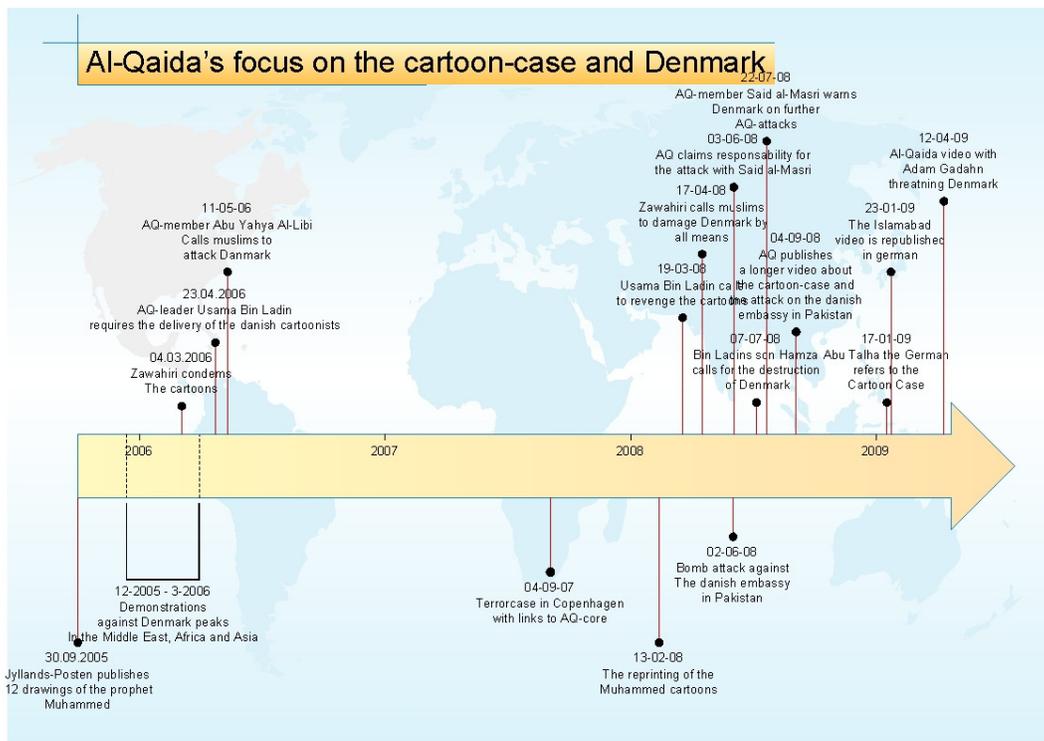
After the suicide attack on the Danish Embassy in Islamabad on 2 June 2008, a key al-Qaida leader, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid aka Sheikh Said al-Masri, claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement dated 3 June 2008. According to this statement, the attack was retaliation for the cartoons.

On 22 July 2008, Said al-Masri announced on Pakistani TV that al-Qaida was proud to have carried out the attack and that Denmark was a nation that had insulted the Prophet Mohammad and that "her heart was filled with antagonism/hatred towards Muslims". He warned of new attacks against Denmark and other countries insulting Islam.

In a lengthy video posted on the internet on 4 September 2008, al-Qaida once again mentioned the terrorist attack against the Danish Embassy in Islamabad. The video also contained statements from the suicide bomber. In the video, the Cartoon Case was used once again to justify the attack.

Al-Qaida's focus on the Cartoon Case and Denmark continued in 2009. In a lengthy video from 17 January 2009, a German al-Qaida member, Abu Talha, commented on the Cartoon Case and other issues. On 23 January 2009, the video from 4 September 2008 was published with German subtitles, and on 12 April 2009, the American al-Qaida member Adam Gadahn mentioned the Cartoon Case and Denmark in a lengthy video.

The illustration below shows the fluctuations in al-Qaida's focus on the Cartoon Case and Denmark as well as key event related to the case. However, during the same period, al-Qaida has also been active in relation to e.g. the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, co-operation with other terrorist groups and the issuance of threats to other countries than Denmark.



Al-Qaida's ideology and rhetoric

Al-Qaida's ideological message is rather simple. Al-Qaida is presenting an image of itself as a frontline defender of Islam and Muslims across the world. According to the al-Qaida worldview, Islam and Muslims are under constant attack by the West, or more specifically, the so-called "Zionist/Christian alliance". Al-Qaida demands for all Muslims to partake in the holy war against this alliance.

The simplicity and universal nature of this message facilitates its delivery and opens for the possibility of including a broad spectrum of political and religious issues as well as historical events etc.

The al-Qaida leadership often makes use of the same rhetorical technique when communicating the above message. The following topics are combined in order to legitimise their threats, calls for terrorism and acts of terrorism:

- **Islamic principles**, including selected Quran verses as well as the words and deeds of the Prophet Mohammad (the so-called *hadiths*), which are taken out of their original context. The religious references are used to justify al-Qaida's militant activities from a religious perspective. As an example, in the statement following the embassy bombing in Islamabad Said al-Masri quoted a Quran verse as part of the justification of the attack, saying that "those who molest the Messenger of Allah they shall have a painful punishment".
- **Historical events** such as wars during the time of the Prophet, the crusades and western colonialism. Al-Qaida typically uses historical events that are widely known in the Muslim World to support its views on current events.
- **Current events** are used by al-Qaida to support its claim that there is a constant and ongoing attack on Islam and Muslims by the Western World. The primary topics include the role of the Western World in terms of the conflicts in e.g. Iraq and Afghanistan as well as the western military presence and political and cultural influence in the Muslim World.

In doing so, al-Qaida links political, historical and religious considerations

into one coherent “narrative”, which constitutes a key component of the group’s ideological platform. Through its rhetoric and actions, al-Qaida seems to have chosen to make the cartoons part of this narrative.

The Cartoon Case from al-Qaida’s ideological perspective

When applying al-Qaida’s ideological perspective, the cartoons merely constitute yet another western attack on Islam – this time from Denmark.

However, when Bin Laden in his speech of March 2008 described the cartoons as being worse than killing Muslim women and children, it may be construed in such a way that the cartoons constitute an attack on the very essence of the global Muslim community and on Islam it self. Thus, the cartoons are considered an attack on the very heart of what al-Qaida claims to defend.

From this simplified ideological perspective, Denmark’s role in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan is less relevant and, therefore, not mentioned in al-Qaida’s statements concerning Denmark and the cartoons.

While al-Qaida reacted relatively late to the publication of the cartoons in 2005, the reaction following their reprinting in 2008 has been considerably stronger, culminating with the attack on the Danish Embassy in Islamabad.

Al-Qaida may have reacted to the cartoons due to both ideological and more pragmatic motives. Thus, it has been easy for al-Qaida to criticise something that thousands of people had already renounced. Since then, the reactions in 2008 have shown that al-Qaida is now focusing on Denmark as an enemy and that the cartoons have become a key issue.

Al-Qaida has probably acknowledged the fact that the brutal approach by al-Qaida-related groups in e.g. Iraq, which has resulted in a large number of Muslim casualties, has had a negative effect on al-Qaida’s possibilities for gaining public support, and that the lack of support has been a contributing factor to the weakening of al-Qaida in Iraq.

Al-Qaida’s attention to the fact that civilian, Muslim casualties may weaken the support from other militant networks is e.g. apparent in a statement by the al-Qaida leader Said al-Masri in which he claims that the attack on the

Danish Embassy in Islamabad was planned in such a way that no innocent Muslims would be killed during the attack.¹

Relevance to the threat from militant Islamist networks

Al-Qaida's focus on and rhetorical attacks against Denmark may have a rub off effect on al-Qaida-related groups such as "al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb" (AQIM) and al-Shabaab in Somalia. However, this may also be true for other groups and networks inspired by the al-Qaida ideology, including networks in Denmark or other European countries.

Such groups and networks may promote themselves vis-à-vis al-Qaida by following its calls for attacks on Denmark. Additionally, attacks on Danish interests may increase the media coverage of such groups as well as improve their possibility for support from militant sympathisers.

¹ The attack took place outside the opening hours for visa processing etc., but a number of random Pakistanis were still killed.