

Guantanamo:

A less than tremendous recruiting tool for Al Qaeda



Literature Review Project

Guantanamo must be closed. The detention facilities at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba must be closed because keeping the facility open is a danger to national security. Detaining terrorist suspects at Guantanamo Bay serves as a “tremendous recruiting tool for Al Qaeda” (Obama 2010) and “likely created more terrorists around the world than it ever detained” (Obama 2009). These newly recruited terrorists are a greater danger to national security than the danger posed by releasing the suspected terrorists that are currently held at Guantanamo. That is the political rhetoric; what does the data say?

The research question posed by President Obama’s claims about the danger of Guantanamo as a recruiting tool is: what makes Guantanamo such a tremendous recruiting tool that the danger of keeping the facility open outweighs the danger of closing the facility and releasing additional detainees?

Both the current and former administrations have released detainees from Guantanamo and those detainees have been involved in the death of innocent people and in the most recent high profile attack on the United States on Christmas Day. Despite the danger, the releases continue as the Obama administration works towards its stated goal of closing Guantanamo. Guantanamo was scheduled to be closed a month ago and all but fifty detainees were to be released to various nations throughout the world. The national security argument made by those who want the facility closed is that the danger of keeping Guantanamo open outweighs the danger of closing it. The central issue with the statements made by President Obama, and frequently cited by others, is that there does not appear to be any data to support the assessment that Guantanamo is a major recruiting tool. The critics of Guantanamo rely on

rhetoric and subjective “judgment that [Guantanamo] has had an impact” on recruiting (Mullen 2009). It is plausible that Guantanamo is an important recruiting tool for Al Qaeda, based on the perception among some in the United States that the facility is the gulag of our times and a den of torture and abuse, but there is a lack of evidence supporting the claim.

The detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba accepted its first detainees from the battlefields of Afghanistan in January 2002 and it was controversial from the start as nations immediately began demanding the release of their citizens (Boucek 2007). Different special interest groups all cite different reasons for closing Guantanamo, from human rights issues to legal and national security reasons. This study will only address the national security threat of recruiting and radicalization compared to recidivism and will determine the greater threat to national security: closing Guantanamo or keeping Guantanamo open.

All of the case studies reviewed pointed to a set of core beliefs, or themes, that form the cohesive ideology espoused by jihadist organizations, including al Qaeda. Infidels and apostates are anti-Muslim and are responsible for the global suffering of Muslims, this suffering can be alleviated through the implementation of Islamic law and reestablishment of the Islamic caliphate, these goals can only be accomplished through violent jihad, and that violent jihad is permitted by Islam and necessary because of the actions of the infidels and apostates. The only role played by Guantanamo in the jihadist ideology is as proof that the non-Islamic world is against Islam. However, Guantanamo plays a fleeting role in this context, as other topics have done, and the jihadist media organizations move on to other examples of anti-Muslim

sentiment such as the discussed French ban on head scarves, the Swedish ban on minarets and Global Warming. As the studies show, only the core jihadist ideology is effective and long-lived.

McCants (2006) found that the most read and discussed jihadist documents revolved around five core themes: Unity of thought (conforming to the jihadist worldview); every country should be ruled by Islamic law; jihadist violence is necessary, religiously sanctioned and is the fault of the apostate and infidel regimes; the jihadist cause is best served when conflict is portrayed as conflict between Islam and the West; the Middle Eastern countries are weak and cannot reform their societies to meet the jihadist worldview without the help of jihad.

The Militant Ideology Atlas published by the Combating Terrorism Center at the U.S. Military at West Point is self-described as the “most recent and comprehensive attempt to better understand the ideology driving the Jihadi Movement” that analyzed “hundreds of al-Qa’ida’s most widely-read and influential texts.” The case study reviewed the documents used to recruit and radicalize jihadists and systematically analyzed both the document content and the work of the authors cited by the documents. The study provided both raw and refined data in the form of a list of the documents reviewed, including title, author and popularity ranking, which allows the reviewer to easily find the referenced document. An English language summary of each document is also provided to allow access to difficult to translate information for researches unable to read Arabic. A short biography of each cited author was provided to lend context to the document being analyzed and allow the researcher to weight the authority and influence of the author.

Conspicuously absent from the dozens of topics cited in support of the five core themes was any reference to Guantanamo. The 361 page study contains a single reference to Guantanamo in the short biography of Abu Basir al-Tartusi that notes al-Tartusi led a May 2005 protest in London decrying the alleged abuse of the Quran at Guantanamo. The single Guantanamo reference was not contained in the cited jihadist documents and is not very significant in the context of the author biography. In this context, Guantanamo is not central to the jihadist themes. Indeed, the reference to Guantanamo as the location of the alleged Quran abuse is secondary to the perceived abuse itself.

Akerboom (2009) researches the main themes in jihadist ideology in an effort to understand their goals and the strategies they implement to attain them. The study, published by the Dutch National Coordinator for Counterterrorism, reviewed jihad from a religious context by studying the Quran and Hadith, from a historical context by concentrating on socio-political events rather than terrorist attacks, and from an ideological perspective as espoused by the leading religious thinkers and authorities of the jihadist movement. The purpose of the study was to “increase the knowledge of jihadism, in particular among the large group of professionals in executive organizations who are involved in counterterrorism, but also among politicians and other people in society.”

The study finds that there are four main themes promoted by jihadists including the requirement to conform to the jihadist worldview and the denunciation of those who do not; the recreation of the Islamic Caliphate and the implementation of Islamic law and the rejection of all other laws, authorities and forms of government; the goal of worldwide Islamic rule

(domination); and the concept that all Muslims are charged with the duty to continue armed jihad against the infidels and apostates, in a continuous battle of good versus evil, until Judgment Day. The details of these themes require combating the core Western norms and values including democracy, secularism, separation of Church and State, modernity and any non-Islamic authority or law.

The study notes that the proliferation of jihad turned a corner in 1979 and accelerated from 1991, with the dual propellants of the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union on Central Asia and the Gulf War against Iraq. The report also cited the 9/11 attacks as a victory for jihadists and the War in Iraq as a new strategic theme for the jihadists as they continue to cast their cause as good versus evil – Islam versus the Jews and Crusaders. The report does not cite Guantanamo as a meaningful strategic theme.

Azzam (2007) found that the radicalization of Muslims in Western Europe is a “complex web of political, religious, and ideological currents” that is difficult to untangle but that ideology is the primary motivating factor among radicalized Muslims that “allows them to step outside their adopted societies and engage in violence.”

The author cites various often-discussed links between radical Islam and violence including Western foreign policy negatively affecting Muslims (being in effect “anti-Muslim”), alienation and isolation from their Western society but finds that “the most striking influence on radicalization ... is the impact of the 9/11 attacks on the United States.” Azzam went on to note that the growing appeal of jihadism has a direct link to successful attacks and al Qaeda’s

continued operations and statements. Singled out from al Qaeda's statement is the theme of the Western world being responsible for the choice of governments in the Muslim world, governments that are responsible for the worldwide plight of Muslims. Al Qaeda further uses Western interference in Muslim countries as justification for terrorist attacks and promotes violent jihad as a mean of forcing change and extracting retribution.

This study is tightly focused on the radicalization of Muslims in Western Europe and still finds the recurring themes of Western (corrupting) influence in the Muslim world, the West being responsible for the suffering of Muslims worldwide and the requirement to use jihad and terrorism to effect social (regime) change in Muslim lands and revenge against the West for the historical suffering of Muslims. Where the study cites more specific radicalization themes, such as banning the Muslim veil in European nations, Guantanamo is not referenced as being instrumental in radicalization.

In the study *Terrorist Recruitment and Radicalization in Saudi Arabia*, Hegghammer (2006) concluded that Saudi Arabia, like other regions, the primary factor in radicalization was politics and ideology rather than socioeconomic factors and "confirmed the extreme importance of social networks and group dynamics in radicalization and recruitment. Hegghammer analyzed the biographies of Saudi militants and focused on those who took part in the terrorism campaign in Saudi Arabia that started in early 2003 and the formation of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) but also looked at the historical roots of the group and the factors that influenced the eventual formation of AQAP. Another tightly focused study, the importance of *Terrorist Recruitment* to my research is that it reviews both a well-represented

demographic at Guantanamo (Saudis) and includes research on AQAP, a group directly linked to multiple former Guantanamo detainees. The study also supports the argument of the danger of recidivism for released Guantanamo detainees. Hegghammer introduced the Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) organization into his study and found that AQAP began growing in strength when a number of Saudi men traveled to Afghanistan for terrorist training starting in 1999. It is not hard to understand how two Saudis who attended terrorist training camps in Afghanistan during this time assumed leadership roles in AQAP after their release from Guantanamo. As these former Guantanamo detainees stated, "By Allah, imprisonment only increased our persistence in our principles for which we went out, did jihad for, and were imprisoned for."

With the importance of Guantanamo as a recruiting tool determined to be virtually non-existent, and therefore a relatively low-level threat to the national security of the United States, attention must be turned to the threat posed by the release of detainees held at Guantanamo as touched upon by the review of the Hegghammer study. In his commentary "Global Jihadist Recidivism: A Red Flag," Pluchinsky (2008) notes the absence of comprehensive studies on the threat of recidivism and the lack of reliable data to conduct those studies. Pluchinsky writes, "no total figure has been estimated in the open source literature concerning the number of global jihadists arrested or imprisoned over this period [since early 2002]" and "many countries that have arrested and imprisoned global jihadists do not accurately and consistently release such information to the public." The study also notes that "only about 15 percent of captured global jihadists are either executed or receive life sentences" and that "most receive sentences of less than 20 years." Coupled to the large number of jihadists who receive sentences of less

than 20 years is his finding that “terrorists receive sentence reductions for good behavior” and that “many countries have a tradition or policy of pardoning prisoners for special events of religious holidays” making it “unlikely that many global jihadists will serve out their full prison terms.”

Without access to reliable data and studies on recidivism Pluchinsky relies on anecdotal evidence to make his case based on the recapture or participation in terrorist activities by global jihadists who had previously been released from detention. Pluchinsky also noted that to be considered a recidivist a jihadist does not need to return to violence. The jihadist can continue to support his chosen cause in non-violent forms, including in the public view as a member of the political wing of an extremist organization.

This commentary is important to my working thesis and supports the argument that there is identifiable danger in releasing detainees from Guantanamo. A more comprehensive study of Guantanamo recidivism would be required to provide empirical evidence to the argument rather than the anecdotal evidence offered by the article.

Brachman (2007) found that 73% of the detainees at Guantanamo qualified as a “demonstrated threat” as an enemy combatant and that 95% qualified as either a “demonstrated” or “potential threat.” Nearly half of the summaries contained seven or more pieces of evidence that the detainee was a threat. Only six – 1.16% – of the 516 detainees reviewed contained no evidence that fit any of the CTC’s threat variables. Of the 181 detainees that were noted as having attended a terrorist training camp in Afghanistan, the vast majority,

approximately eighty detainees, were accused of having attended the Al Qaida run Al Farouq training camp. The Khaldan camp, run by Ibn al Sheikh al Libi but associated with multiple Al Qaeda members who trained at the camp, came in a distant second with approximately ten attendees.

At the request of the Office of Detainee Affairs in the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point reviewed the 516 Combatant Status Review Tribunal summaries released publically by the Department of Defense (DOD) in response to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request. Brachman disclosed issues with the data being analyzed and took steps to produce the highest quality review possible including traveling to Guantanamo Bay and meeting with personnel directly involved in the CSRT process to discuss coding rules and details of the process and ensuring the public has access to both the raw data, in the form of CSRT files, and the data refined by the researchers.

The primary issue with the study is the quality of both the data and the analysis that produced the data. The summaries are incomplete by design in order to meet the requirement that the summaries cannot contain classified material. Without access to the classified material the unclassified allegations are unsupported and lack detail and depth. If a summary did not explicitly state that a detainee did not attend a terrorist training camp it cannot be assumed that he did not. Additionally, the qualifications and experience of the analysts who produced the summaries is unknown, precluding the reader from assessing the quality of the analysis.

The study is of value as it documents a concrete threat: experienced jihadists who have already attended a terrorist training camp, traveled internationally and have the connections and references to complete training at an Al Qaeda affiliated training camp in Afghanistan. The demographic that is the focus of Al Qaeda recruiting material is a potential threat: possible jihadists who may eventually meet the requirements for attendance, the contacts and means to travel to, and the wherewithal to complete training at a terrorist training camp.

A review of the literature shows that jihadists subscribe to a set of core beliefs and that jihadist texts, documents, studies and propaganda serve only to state and reinforce those beliefs. The interconnected pillars of the jihadist ideology are repeated, supported and defended by those who believe in them and any and all topics are used to reinforce these core beliefs and recruit new subscribers to their worldview. The breadth of events cited as proof that the infidels and apostates are actively engaged in furthering the suffering of Muslims shows that taking away a single topic, such as attempting to remove Guantanamo as a cited event by closing the facility, has little net effect on their overall message and therefore little effect on the national security of the United States. The threat of recidivism posed by former Guantanamo detainees, however, has proven to be a credible, immediate and extremely dangerous threat to national security as evidenced most recently by the Christmas Day attack on an airliner by an extremist trained and equipped by Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, a group headed by two former Guantanamo detainees. Closing Guantanamo is a much greater threat to national security than keeping Guantanamo open.

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