



CREST

Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats



The Internal Brakes on Violent Escalation

# Trans-national and British Islamist Extremist Groups from 2001 to 2016

ANNEX A

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You can read the other two case studies; The Extreme Right, and The Animal Liberation Movement, plus the full report at: <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/news/internal-brakes-violent-escalation-a-descriptive-typology/>

To find out more information about this programme, and to see other outputs from the team, visit the CREST website at: [www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/internal-brakes-violent-escalation/](http://www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/internal-brakes-violent-escalation/)

#### About CREST

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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The contemporary jihadi movement consists of a disparate set of actors who seek to employ what they see as religiously sanctioned lethal violence to defend, protect and promote what is regarded as sacred, to topple an existing order they perceive to be unjust and to replace it with a new social, legal and political construct which in their view reflects what the first generation of believers intended (Wagemakers, 2012; Lahoud, 2005; Hegghammer, 2011).

To many observers this particular realm, epitomised by acts of mass-scale indiscriminate violence and terrorist outfits such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (IS), is largely characterised by a seemingly limitless desire to kill, destroy and spread terror. Yet within this movement, there is entrenched disagreement about the extent, scope and nature of the violence that can and should be employed. Debates rage regarding the overall concentration of political activism more broadly and the interpretation and contemporary implementation of scriptural evidence that is used to legitimise violent means (Brown, 2007, pp. 8-9; Meijer, 2009; Wiktorowicz, 2005).

This case study will explore elements of the transnational discourse and local manifestations of jihadism within the UK, recognising that these are intertwined. The former concentrates on public and (at the time) private output from the leadership of al-Qaeda. This organisation was chosen both because a large amount of data shedding light on its approach to violence is now available and because its leaders have had to confront questions about the appropriate levels of violence during several key junctures during its history, most recently with the rise of IS in Iraq and Syria. The public-facing part of this output stretches back to 2001, when al-Qaeda targeted the US using hijacked planes. That year, memoirs from the group's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Knights under the Banner of the Prophet*, leaked to the press. In them, the veteran *jihadi* reflected upon his experiences in Egypt where he had led a militant group before he decided to embrace transnational militancy, expressing regrets about some of the consequences for his violence.

The internal discourse studied also includes letters written by al-Qaeda's inner circle to the leader of its Iraq franchise, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, in 2005 warning him of the consequences of advocating excessive and sectarian slaughter. Zarqawi since developed his group into the organisational and ideological foundations of IS, the tactics of which have provoked debates among British jihadis locally. The remainder of internal documents scrutinised for this study were captured in May 2011 when US special forces stormed Osama bin Ladin's compound in Pakistan. These revealed the al-Qaeda leadership's concerns regarding the tactics by so-called affiliate organisations, including those operating in North Africa, as well as the actions of allied outfits such as groups identifying with the Pakistani Taliban. The letters were since translated and published by the US government.

Actors more specifically associated with the United Kingdom are also scrutinised in order to gauge how more localised groups and cohorts reacted to developments on the global stage, especially the emergence of IS.<sup>1</sup> The UK provides the context for the other case studies scrutinised: the animal liberation movement and the extreme right, but has also seen the evolution of jihadi groups and cohorts involved in violence at home and abroad. These cohorts are both formal and informal. The current case study explores communication among individuals involved in an informal social network who were seeking to plan attacks in the UK, for which they were convicted in 2016. Members of this network discussed the purpose of their activism and their position within a wider milieu, including IS, via the encrypted social networking platform 'Telegram' and these deliberations are examined here.<sup>2</sup>

Whilst this group was actively supporting and participating in dedicated attack planning involving targets in the London area, members nonetheless expressed some doubts about their participation in political violence and some of the expressions of violent Islamism that they had witnessed. These references are scrutinised below.

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<sup>1</sup> For jihadi militancy in particular, an exploration of 'internal brakes' locally requires a broader assessment of transnational debates that have shaped the global discourse, since these are intertwined. Local activism does not exist in isolation of these broader debates.

<sup>2</sup> The transcripts of this correspondence were included in the court papers for their trial and made available following conviction

# INTRODUCTION

## The Internal Brakes on Violent Escalation

The case study also considers the approach of al-Muhajiroun, a radical Islamist collective set up by Omar Bakri Mohammed which existed in different guises between 1996 and 2016, when key members were convicted for promoting terrorism. Al-Muhajiroun has played a prominent role on the UK radical Islamist scene. In relation to internal brakes, however, it is an especially intriguing example since it demonstrates how different types of brakes that appeared to be in place were gradually removed. I explore this element in more detail below.

In order to provide necessary context and chronology in the briefest way possible to such a complex environment, the following figure 2 (below) plots key events relating to these interweaving stories on a timeline.

This sequence includes key milestones in the evolution of al-Qaeda, the proliferation of its affiliate organisations and the emergence of IS. The timeline also pinpoints key events more specific to the UK scene that are relevant to the current case study.

### 1.1 TIMELINE

Important debates in this case study about the need to resist adoption of greater violence for a variety of reasons have taken place on a global, strategic, stage that have impacted activism more locally. Local actors, in turn, do not exist within their own political or ideological vacuum. They identify with these transnational, movement-centric currents and seek to conform to the framework that they have created. The way to do justice to these debates, therefore, is to incorporate insights from local and global actors.

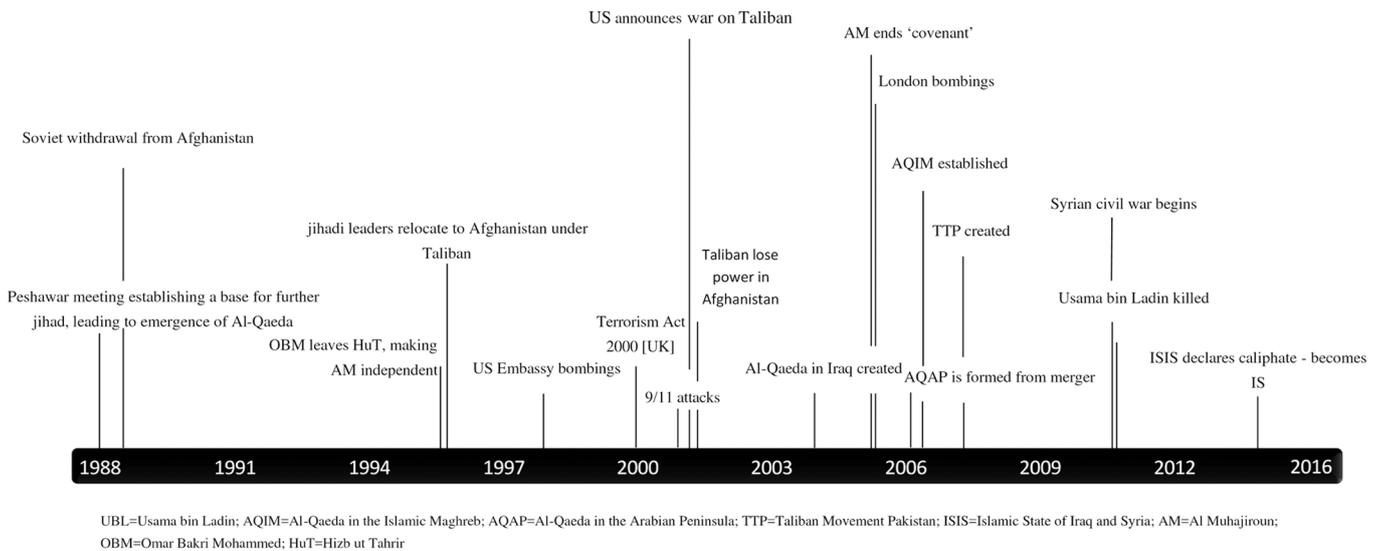


Figure 2. Timeline of key events.

## 2. AL-MUHAJIROUN AND THE REMOVAL OF BRAKES

Al-Muhajiroun (AM) represents a case where a social collective evolved from an indirect association with violent action to unambiguous endorsement of the most extreme forms of terrorist violence. It also represents a case whereby outer-tier members and associates became involved in terrorist activity whilst leadership largely managed to keep its distance and freedom to operate by remaining just within legal boundaries. Whilst organisational manifestations of the grouping, going by a variety of different names, were proscribed on numerous occasions, the collective managed to persist from 1996 till 2016 without key members ever being convicted for their association with terrorist activities. This changed in 2014 when leaders of AM endorsed IS and openly welcomed its authority over others. They were eventually convicted for inviting support for terrorism in 2016. The case of AM thus offers an interesting example worthy of further examination in relation to ways in which brakes *did not* take hold as the movement evolved.

The operating principle of AM was to endorse campaigns of violence within a wider repertoire of radical action and provocation whilst avoiding direct association with those campaigns in order to avoid conviction.

Speaking after the 2016 trial a senior police officer commented:

*These men have stayed just within the law for many years, but there is no-one within the counter-terrorism world that has any doubts of the influence that they have had, the hate they have spread and the people that they have encouraged to join terrorist organisations. Over and over again we have seen people on trial for the most serious offences who have attended lectures or speeches given by these men (BBC, 2016).*

AM was established as an independent group in 1996 after its founder Omar Bakri Mohammed split from the UK chapter of the Islamist umbrella organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT) which he had led since 1986 (Klausen et al, 2012, p. 38). Under Omar Bakri's leadership, AM assumed a more radical and provocative stance compared to HuT, advocating the creation of an Islamic state through armed uprising. Members underwent rigorous religious training and attended extensive seminars led by Omar Bakri and his aides. They organised provocative demonstrations to court media attention and used their heightened publicity to spread the group's message via proselytising stalls and other outreach efforts. Followers were told to support *jihad* against infidels in Muslim lands and promote lethal violence as part of a broader political toolkit to achieve change (ibid).

Omar Bakri welcomed al-Qaeda's double bomb attack in East Africa in 1998 (Wiktorowicz and Kaltenhaler, 2006, p. 314; Connor, 2005, p. 121) and openly endorsed Osama bin Laden (Connor, 2005, p. 122). After the 9/11 attacks, AM co-sponsored a conference titled 'A towering day in history' at Finsbury Park Mosque and planned a subsequent event celebrating the 'magnificent 19', referring to the perpetrators who carried out the attacks (Wiktorowicz and Kaltenhaler, 2006, p. 303).

Yet AM's mission was still to retain its freedom to provoke without crossing the line where its leaders might risk facing prosecution. Omar Bakri had become a legal resident of the UK in 1993 and applied for citizenship on a number of occasions and clearly had every desire to remain in Britain (Connor, 2005, pp. 121-122). Whilst endorsing violence, therefore, the message the AM leadership communicated to its followers was ambiguous. The option was left open for AM leaders to argue that any association with individuals who identified with the group who had gone on to carry out acts of violence, whilst celebrated, was not a direct result of the group's activism, which had a more multifaceted agenda. There was also at a strategic level absence of investment in violence per se, with emphasis placed on raising the organisation's public profile (ibid). Other 'brakes' on violence could also be discerned at this stage in AM's evolution.

After the outrage caused by its celebration of the 9/11 attacks, AM leaders tried to stave off some of the

harshest criticism by promoting the idea that a ‘covenant of security’ existed between Muslims in Britain and the state whereby the latter’s provision of services and a formal right to remain in the country meant that attacks could not be carried out on British soil for those who had entered into such arrangements with the authorities (ibid, pp. 126-127). The idea was ostensibly based on the group’s interpretation of scriptural evidence and the Prophet Mohammed’s experiences in dealing with non-Muslim tribes in Arabia, and had been employed by jihadists in the UK throughout the 1990s in order to fend off scrutiny that might jeopardise their existence (Peter and Ortega, 2014, p. 173). AM’s promotion of the ‘covenant’ did not equate to a renunciation of violence, which was still welcomed and supported abroad. Rather it articulated the stance that limited targeting would be a more feasible strategy for the time being. This mechanism is captured in the discussion below.

Indeed, by early 2005, and as the pressure on his group mounted, Omar Bakri began covertly and overtly to convey to his supporters his view that the covenant was broken and followers were now in the state of war with the UK. As Connor argues, (2005, p. 127), the fact that Omar Bakri no longer had an official organisation to protect, he abandoned the pragmatism of his covenant theory in favour of a more radical position. Omar Bakri left for Lebanon following the 7 July London bombings in 2005 and British authorities prevented him from re-entering the UK. AM limped on under different aliases, which were quickly proscribed by the Home Secretary, yet managed to maintain the organising principles of the original group. Anjem Choudary, Omar Bakri’s disciple and a trained lawyer, largely took over as leader of this collective and excelled at attracting media attention both in the UK and the USA through stunts and pronouncements that were largely focused on the envisaged establishment of an Islamic state (Kenney et al, 2013; Klausen et al, 2012). Yet rhetoric aside, including some thinly veiled if carefully articulated endorsements of violence, he never committed the group to any concrete measures to achieve this goal.

This meant that any government attempts to proscribe various organisational manifestations of the collective were based on this rhetorical and provocative dimension of its output, rather than any more tangible association with violence. In November 2011, for instance, the Home Secretary ordered a ban on ‘Muslims Against

Crusaders’, one iteration of the AM cohort, due to its supposed plans to organise a protest during Armistice Day commemorations. (Klausen et al, 2012, p. 50).

AM’s cautious approach to political violence, whereby they promoted and celebrated attacks while ensuring that this did not threaten the ability of leadership to operate, makes it all the more intriguing that group leaders, including Choudary, decided after a meeting in June 2014 to declare their allegiance to IS (which then referred to itself as the ‘Islamic State’). Such overt recognition of one of the most notorious terrorist organisations of the time would undoubtedly risk far greater legal sanction, including through existing legislation concerning support for terrorist organisations, than the group had faced thus far.

This begs the question, why were these caveats on the use of violence abandoned? There is no clear answer to this question, but three key interrelated factors seem particularly relevant.

First, the decision came at the time when scores of people, including AM followers, had already pledged their allegiance to IS and travelled to Syria (BBC, 2013; BBC, 2017). AM’s central message had always been to strive towards a hypothetical creation of an Islamic State. Now that many of its potential followers, radicals in the UK, had found an entity that had put these thoughts into practice, the AM leaders risked losing what little appeal, reach and purpose they had left.

Second, researchers have always described AM as a multi-layered entity with several concentric circles of membership, with an inner core of dedicated followers and an outer layer of individuals inspired by some of its teachings (Kenney et al, 2013; Wiktorowicz and Kaltenhaler, 2006). With the establishment of IS’s ‘caliphate’ and the fact that numerous individuals had ‘migrated’ (*al-muhajiroun* in Arabic refers to the migrants who left Mecca for Medina with the Prophet Mohammed) from the UK to Syria and Iraq, the inner circle within AM risked being overtaken by an outer circle ready to observe far greater commitment to a cause that the inner circle purported to promote.

Third, given that the AM’s leadership modus operandi consisted largely of courting controversy to attract attention in the press, perhaps the rise of IS and the

attention it received in the world's media had made attracting headlines and media coverage through street demonstrations and publicity stunts harder to accomplish.

The emergence of IS thus created a predicament for AM and its leadership. Choudary and other key figures in the group may well have decided that the least bad option amid this new reality was to risk crossing legal boundaries by endorsing the terrorist organisation, perhaps hoping that some notoriety and capacity to be heard would be retained following release from prison after the likely convictions that awaited them.

## 3. INTERNAL BRAKES IN TRANS-NATIONAL AND BRITISH JIHADI GROUPS

### 3.1 BRAKE 1

*Identification of non- or less violent strategies of action as being as or more effective than more violent alternatives.*

Most of the brakes uncovered in material reviewed for the Islamist case study related in some way to strategic logics. This is partly due to the nature of data examined, which consisted to a large degree of senior leadership communication, public and private, about ways in which to shape the movement. But this prevalence of strategic issues also reflected the prominence of key debates within this milieu about the organisation of Islamist militancy more broadly. In this regard, questions were asked about ways in which to ensure militancy remained sustainable, about ways in which target prioritisation reflected strategic interests, and how the wider support of identified constituencies could be encouraged and retained.

#### Brake 1a

*Expressions of scepticism about their ability to beat their opponents in a violent struggle, including concerns that greater militancy will increase backlash or repression from opponents or the state towards them and their supporters.*

Al-Qaeda's leaders frequently alluded to the need to provoke an overreaction from its adversaries in order to rally support for armed confrontation against them. Such provocation was seen as part of its strategy. Yet at the same time, a delicate balance needed to exist between tactics that attracted the right sort of attention, without risking the operational viability of the organisation.

Al-Qaeda's leaders spoke of strategic boundaries that needed to be respected in order to retain a level of fluidity and flexibility that that was needed for survival. This, in part, reflected their own experiences as leaders of al-Qaeda and other militant groups. Bin Ladin and other senior leaders, for example, came under considerable criticism for having overstepped the mark with the 9/11 attacks which prompted a war in Afghanistan that removed its safe haven (Lia, 2009).

These same leaders, in turn, later admonished the head of their Iraq franchise for expanding operations to Jordan, where his attacks resulted in a major government crackdown on Islamist groups in that country (and provoked a public outrage, see brake 1b) (Rahman, 2005).

Questions about the effectiveness of particular forms of violence sometimes involved efforts to resist a backlash from opponents that would adversely affect the interests of the movement. Al-Qaeda's internal documentation revealed how leaders warned affiliates to refrain from escalating violence until they were prepared to deal with the consequences. Writing to his deputy in Yemen, bin Laden cautioned al-Qaeda's affiliate in the region that "blood should not be shed unless we have evidence to show that the elements of success to establish the Islamic State [concept, not group]" (bin Laden, 2010b). This more cautionary approach to state-building differentiates al-Qaeda from IS which ignored warnings about expanding and solidifying and the inevitable response such manoeuvres would provoke.

Whilst these discussions were mostly concentrated in the outer circle of our framework, some of this correspondence could be placed closer to the middle, action planning, circle as specific advice was handed down to regional commanders in the Middle East and North Africa to ensure actions were in proportion with affiliates' ability to deal with their consequences (Abu Yahya, 2009).

Target prioritisation also featured at this strategic level. Al-Qaeda spearheaded a policy that involved cutting off the "head of the snake" (al-Zawahiri, 2014). Bin Ladin laid out this strategic emphasis in a letter to one of his deputies using a different analogy:

*The Ummah's enemies today are like a wicked tree. The trunk of this tree is the US. The diameter of this trunk is 50 centimetres.*

*The branches of this tree are many and vary in size. The branches include NATO and many other organizations in the area. We want to bring this tree down by sawing it while our abilities and energy are limited. Our correct way to bring it down is to focus our saw on its American trunk. If we focus at the depth of the American trunk until we reach 30 centimetres, and then the opportunity presents itself for us to saw the British branch, we should not do so, as long as we have the ability to saw the American trunk. This would be distracting to our efforts and energy. If sawing continued into the depth of the American trunk until it falls, the rest will fall. (Bin Laden, 2010a).*

Describing these strategic emphases as internally imposed limitations on the use of violence is perhaps inaccurate, but they nonetheless constitute efforts to channel force in particular ways in order to maximise its impact, thus avoiding a certain list of targets.

On the UK scene, AM's promotion of a 'covenant of security' may be seen in a similar way. This strategy was not underpinned by any moral concerns—indeed violence against a variety of targets was still celebrated abroad—but rather an effort to secure operational freedom for the group.

### **Brake 1b**

*Expressions of concern that violent escalation will undermine support for the group.*

Sustaining public support for revolutionary change emerged as a central and prominent theme in the current case study. This involved concerns about acknowledging the parameters of violent action that appeared acceptable to perceived constituents, both as a general principle and as an imperative learnt from past mistakes.

Leaders of al-Qaeda made several references to the importance of public opinion and their fear that certain tactics and types of violence might alienate key members of those publics whose support would be needed to sustain campaigns of militancy. There was acute realisation, especially in more recent public output, that some aligned militant groups had far exceeded what was considered appropriate form of

resistance. "We would like to advise our brothers that in order to succeed any armed opposition must mobilise public support. Experience has shown that without this support combat does not turn into victory or success", Ayman al-Zawahiri warned in a statement aired in April 2014 (As-Sahab, 2014).

A decade earlier, he tried to caution Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, then leader of al-Qaeda's franchise in Iraq, against alienating the public by pursuing a campaign of sectarian targeting. Support from the masses was the "strongest weapon" the militants could wield, Zawahiri argued, and any action that they did not "understand or approve" would thus need to be avoided (al-Zawahiri, 2005a). Another al-Qaeda commander issued a similar warning to Zarqawi, reflecting upon his experience from the civil war in Algeria:

*Ask me whatever you like about Algeria between 1994 and 1995, when [the movement] was at the height of its power and capabilities, and was on the verge of taking over the government. [...]. However, they destroyed themselves with their own hands, with their lack of reason, delusions, their ignoring of people, their alienation of them through oppression, deviance, and severity, coupled with a lack of kindness, sympathy, and friendliness. Their enemy did not defeat them, but rather they defeated themselves, were consumed and fell. (Rahman, 2005).*

Following a coordinated suicide bomb attack targeting hotels in Amman, Jordan, in November 2005 which Zarqawi ordered, Rahman (a.k.a. `Atiyatullah al-Libi) wrote to Zarqawi, urging him to refrain from such violence, not out of moral outrage but out of concern that the widespread public condemnation that resulted would jeopardise the movement's ability to operate and become entrenched in the region (Rahman, 2005). Whilst the hotels were frequented by westerners, the attackers killed mostly Muslims, including scores of Jordanians attending a wedding party. People gathered in the streets following the attacks, chanting "burn in hell, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi!" and the public outrage led to the adoption of far more stringent counterterrorism policies within Jordan (BBC, 2005).

Zarqawi's movement, as noted, eventually morphed into IS following outbreak of civil war in Syria. Several

jihadi leaders have subsequently made similar analogies with loss of support for militants in Algeria, predicting the ultimate implosion of IS as their grassroots following evaporates due to the group's violent excess.

There have been other efforts to learn from past mistakes and feed these lessons back to affect the trajectory of the movement. Zawahiri reflected in his 2001 memoirs how his militant outfit in Egypt suffered widespread condemnation when it carried out an attack targeting an official which resulted in the death of a young girl who attended a nearby school (al-Zawahiri, 2001). Strategists' concerns about limiting 'collateral damage' thus feature in this discourse too. Seized documents from bin Ladin's Pakistan compound revealed how reflections from past mistakes were fed to the senior command which was concerned that botched targeting by affiliates was harming the appeal of their 'brand' (see e.g., Abu Basir, 2010).

Al-Qaeda's existence stretches back to the end of the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. The attitude of senior leaders towards violence has thus evolved over a considerable length of time, resulting in further lessons being drawn to shape the movement. Encouragement for further or escalated violence has, in some cases been replaced with cautionary advice instead.

In 2004, for instance, Zawahiri published a book titled *The Scent of Paradise*, extolling the virtues of suicide bombings, which he called 'martyrdom operations'. Nine years later, after a deluge of suicide bombings had resulted in scores of civilian deaths, especially in Muslim countries, Zawahiri published a second edition of his book with a new introduction where he wrote:

*this increase in martyrdom operations has been accompanied by some deviation and exaggeration which must be corrected and admitted to; some of the operations were undertaken under circumstances that did not justify sacrifice of the life of a Jihadist martyr; at times there were no precautions taken to try and protect innocent lives and at other times the target was the wrong one or at other times it was not in the general interest to undertake such an operation either due to the bigger damage it would have caused or because the general public would not understand its reasons and so they would not*

*sympathise with the Jihadists which is our greatest victory (al-Zawahiri, 2013a).*

Here, concern about public acceptance (brake 1b) is combined with moral norms about the moral limits of violence in terms of appropriate targeting (brake 2b). Zawahiri's hope was that these cautionary lessons would help generate a framework for militancy that would respect the perceived limits of the constituency's appetite for violence, thus ensuring the sustainability of the revolutionary movement. These concerns are primarily focused on 'what works' rather than 'what is inherently right', though these moral considerations (brake 2) certainly influence the former too.

#### **Brake 1c**

*Attempts to build or maintain ties with strategically useful allies who are not supportive of violent escalation.*

No examples identified in this case study.

#### **Brake 1d**

*Identification of political opportunities that favour (re)adoption of non- or less violent strategies of action.*

No examples identified in this case study.

#### **Brake 1e**

*Identification of non- or less violent strategies of actions that are perceived to be effective, including identification of 'sufficient' levels of violence.*

Jihadi leaders' attitudes towards non- or less violent campaigns, especially protests and street demonstrations have varied in the discourse assessed for this case study. Zawahiri, for instance, appeared on occasion to mock those who flocked to the streets to protest, rather than taking up arms. "Reform will never be realized through endless talk and chatter about the corruptions of America, or through hoarse shouting at demonstrations", he noted in his first interview with al-Qaeda's premier propaganda outlet, *As-Sahab* (Zawahiri, 2005b). Later, though, he called on all Muslims to "exploit all methods of popular protest, like demonstrations, sit-ins, strikes, refusing to pay taxes, preventing cooperation with the security forces, refusing

to provide the Crusaders with fuel, hitting traders who supply the Crusader forces, boycotting Crusader and Jewish products, and other ways of popular protest” (Zawahiri, 2006). During and following the Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East, moreover, such calls for participation in public demonstrations became even more explicit, though they did not translate into organisational shifts or reprioritisation within al-Qaeda itself.

Bin Ladin, similarly called on citizens of Saudi Arabia to “stage public demonstrations and exercise civil disobedience until the overthrow of the traitorous governments” (bin Ladin, 2002). Al-Muhajiroun, as noted, recognised the value of street demonstrations and static protests too and even suggested these would bring rewards similar to those granted to warriors in battle.

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## 3.2 BRAKE 2

*Construction of moral norms and evaluations that inhibit (certain forms of) violence and the emotional impulses towards violence (e.g., revenge).*

Moral restrictions and inhibitions on the escalation of violence were threads running throughout the material studied for this case. These were often woven together with other mechanisms that emerged and are delineated here, especially strategic concerns about the limits of public acceptance of violent means and the risk of provoking moral outrage within the constituency through badly executed or excessive violence (see above on brake 1b) that might, in turn, harden the state’s response (brake 1a). Debates about ‘just’ violence and targeting in particular separated groups like al-Qaeda from even more extreme organisations such as IS. Al-Qaeda’s leaders made the case that targeting people due to their essence of being—such as the fact that they were Shia Muslims—was inherently wrong.

Targeting had to be limited to particular actions perceived as hostile, though these could be stretched to include payment of taxes in the West, or working for government departments in Muslim-majority countries. Closer to action planning, in turn, doubts emerged among movement members about IS and its graphic display of violence and beheadings, which appeared to provoke shock and revulsion.

### Brake 2a

*Articulation and performance of general moral norms and principles that problematise certain forms of violence, require violence to be justified or enable activists to forestall on entering the ‘tunnel of violence’ (e.g., the conception of violence as a tactic of last resort; positioning non-retaliation as a virtue; emphasising values such as mercy and compassion).*

Actors on both the campaign planning and attack planning stages of our analytical schema (Figure 1 in main body of the report) raised concerns about what was ‘right’ and morally correct without specific reference to any practical constraints that might emerge as a result of breaching moral codes. On the outer, campaign-planning level, these were frequently dressed in religious language and concerned the need to respect sharia law as a fundamental source of the movement’s legitimacy. In this regard, moral inhibitions were closely related to the group’s self-description of its mode of activism (see brake 3 in the next section). Concerns voiced closer to attack planning revealed more personal doubt about the paths chosen and the type of activism that would ultimately be accepted within the moral framework adopted.

At the level of campaign planning, detailed communiqués were released denoting, effectively, the ‘laws of war’ that needed to be respected and the consequences, including compensation, if those laws were violated (bin Laden, 2007). Zawahiri addressed the topic in several statements, most notably and explicitly in 2013 when he issued his ‘General guidelines for the work of a jihadi’. Here he warned that certain forms of targeting were prohibited with reference to his interpretation of scripture. Following the logic of reciprocity, a prominent emotion used to legitimise killings in al-Qaeda’s discourse, violence, Zawahiri argued, would thus be limited to those groups whose participation—however remotely—in acts of aggression against perceived constituencies could be established (see brake 2b).

Acts of terrorism, in turn, were presented as reactionary and defensive. People could not be wantonly killed simply by association with ideas or religious sects, irrespective of how erroneous they might be seen to be. Whilst the alleged heresy of the Shia, Sufis, Christians, Hindus and others ought, in Zawahiri's mind, to be challenged, these groups could not be subjected to indiscriminate violence simply because of the way they chose to worship. Only those who were "engaged in the fight" could be targeted, Zawahiri argued (Zawahiri, 2013b). This approach is radically different from the position adopted by IS and its followers where sectarian and confessional targeting, encased in dehumanising justificatory rhetoric, is openly promoted and practiced.

Internal documents, by extension, reveal the al-Qaeda leadership's concern that affiliates and allies were not operating within the boundaries of permissible combat (unknown author, unknown date). In a letter to a sub-commander from 2010, for instance, bin Laden, expressed his objection to the fact that Faysal Shahzad, who attempted to detonate a car bomb in Times Square that same year, had proceeded with attack planning despite being granted US citizenship. His oath of allegiance to the United States meant that he had accepted and entered into a covenant with his host country which he was not permitted to break. "We do not want the Mujahidin to be accused of breaking a covenant", bin Laden warned (Bin Laden, 2010c).

Closer to the action planning scope of our analysis, where members of a UK cohort involved in attack planning conversed on Telegram, specific concerns emerged about jihadi militants who were seen to have gone 'too far' and breached moral codes which these individuals felt needed to be respected. At one point a member warned that the beheadings carried out by IS in Iraq and Syria were "completely contradictory to the Sunnah", the way of the Prophet. Beheading people "in this crazy manner" and "parading them" was not normal. "Having little kids hold their heads is not normal", "taking pictures with [their] heads isn't normal", he exclaimed. Other members of the group conceded: "Yeah beheading needs to be addressed", one of them commented (HM Courts and Tribunals Service, 2016).

As a result of IS's excess, therefore, there was doubt about its legitimacy within this group. Some pointed out that scholars, including those who identified with

the jihadi militants, disapproved of the group and its declaration of a 'Caliphate'. Others suggested that its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was not the universal commander of Muslims that he purported to have become.

### **Brake 2b**

#### *Identification of some groups of actors as illegitimate targets for violence.*

As moral reasons were given for proportionality in infliction of violence and legitimacy featured strongly in activist self-depictions (brake 2), the logical extension of these arguments was delineating groups that were seen as having limited culpability for the grievances that were being addressed.

Internal documents from the Abbottabad compound, for instance, revealed how the al-Qaeda leadership was keen to protect those westerners who had expressed sympathy with the group's cause and warned other jihadi militants to ensure they would not be targeted (bin Laden, 2011).

Zawahiri's 'General Guidelines', cited above, set out moralistic reasons for discriminate violence and identified swathes of people, divided by sect, religion, nationality and other criteria, who, it was argued, could not be targeted without reference to specific actions, since their association with legitimate targets was too peripheral or the degree to which they could be held accountable was too remote. This, we should be clear, has not been a static topic as far as al-Qaeda's discourse is concerned. Zawahiri and others within the group's leadership, expended considerable effort to justify an expansion in targeting that included vast swathes of the public, including tax payers in the West, who in turn were killed in indiscriminate attacks which the leadership orchestrated and sponsored.

Latterly, however, the focus, partly with the rise of IS, has been on limiting violence and identifying groups of people who cannot or should not be targeted. Much rests on notions of intent. Sectarianism, as noted, did not dictate al-Qaeda's targeting principles, for example. There was concern, at the campaign planning level of our analysis, of the 'innocent'—both Muslim (in-group) and non-Muslim (out-group)—and regret about 'collateral' damage, as noted above, was referenced

and revisited in the public discourse to shape the future trajectory of the movement.

Similar caveats shaped both public and private correspondence from the al-Qaeda leadership, where effort was made to direct local campaigns of violence spearheaded by affiliates and allies. “Beware of killing innocent people”, bin Ladin warned in a statement addressed to militants in Iraq in 2004 (bin Ladin, 2004b). Similar concerns had been voiced internally and communicated within the movement, as letters captured from bin Ladin’s compound later revealed, especially concerning the targeting of Muslims—irrespective of sect or denomination—in Afghanistan and Pakistan by forces identifying with the Taliban (bin Ladin, 2010d).

In a few public statements, meanwhile, especially during the polarising rhetoric surrounding the invasion of Iraq in 2003, al-Qaeda sought to make it clear that not all governments were culpable for the in-group’s grievance. In October 2004, for instance, bin Ladin issued a statement titled ‘Letter to the Americans’ where he dismissed George W. Bush’s charge that al-Qaeda was against freedom and universally recognised notions of liberty. If this was the case, bin Ladin asked, why did al-Qaeda not attack Sweden, a neutral country? (bin Ladin, 2004a). The point, again, was that culpability could be traced to specific harmful actions of targets, not their essence of being.

### 3.3 BRAKE 3

*Self-identification as a group that is either non-violent or uses only limited forms of violence.*

Identity logics incorporated both elements of strategic and moral logics in the way in which group members sought to present themselves and their activism. Combatants were presented as merciful or respectful of codes of conducts, such as covenants of security, whilst rewards for alternative (non-violent) forms of activism were recognised. At the same time, some activists sought to distance themselves from or criticise actors who were seen to have displayed excessive violence that could not be justified.

#### Brake 3a

*Production of group narratives that emphasise non-violence or the limited use of violence either by themselves or by those they claim have inspired their movement.*

As noted above, legitimacy and proportionality (including notions of reciprocity) was key to the way in which al-Qaeda’s leaders could present their group as occupying the moral high ground, leading an uprising against forces that were fundamentally unjust and immoral. Such justifications were also central in their public outreach efforts, ‘selling’ their mode of combat to the perceived constituents.

This projection of al-Qaeda operatives as morally superior actors uncovered some implicit brakes to violent escalation as a result, especially through reflections and accounts about the movement’s activism that were articulated to illustrate the permissible scope of combat.

In his eulogy for bin Ladin, for instance, Zawahiri reflected how his predecessor as leader of al-Qaeda had apparently respected a ceasefire with enemy forces seeking to occupy the Tora Bora mountain range in Afghanistan, and even ordered his men to desist from exploiting opportunities to ambush the enemy when they presented themselves.

*Osama bin Ladin (may God have compassion on him) cared about complying with what he agreed to. In Tora Bora, after agreeing to ceasefire, about a hundred of the hypocrites fell in[to] the ambush of the mujahidin. He just needed to order the mujahidin to open fire on them and kill them, but Sheikh Osama bin Ladin ordered his brothers to let them out of the ambush and to not shoot a single bullet. After agreeing to a ceasefire, some of the mujahidin attacked the hypocrite’s position and took some spoils. The Sheikh [Osama] ordered them to return what they took (Zawahiri, 2011a).*

#### Brake 3b

*Disassociation from more violent groups or factions and/or association with less violent groups or factions.*

The excesses displayed by Zarqawi's Iraqi franchise, as noted above, caused such concern within al-Qaeda's leadership circles that they reached out to him both publicly and privately, seeking to convince him to rein in his violence, especially in terms of sectarian targeting. Captured documents from the Abbottabad compound also revealed bin Ladin's concern about his group's association with networks such as the Pakistani Taliban who had orchestrated indiscriminate attacks against civilians in Pakistan.

With the rise of IS, Zawahiri and others, moreover, have condemned the former as a splinter organisation that displayed excessive violence that was not in proportion or responsive to the nature of the threat they were facing.

At a more local level, closer to involvement in nascent acts of violence, we see in the Telegram debates among the UK youths, that there was discomfort about the excesses of IS, as noted above, which provoked discussion about groups that were more justified in their actions, as I discuss in more detail in the section on allies, below.

### Brake 3c

*(The threat of) sanctions for activists who advocate or undertake violence beyond the established parameters of the group's action repertoire, and/or opportunities to achieve intra-group respect and prestige without undertaking or encouraging the use of violence at or beyond the parameters of the group's action repertoire.*

In terms of prestige positions, AM leaders celebrated 'jihad of the tongue', i.e., proselytising, and 'jihad of the sword', meaning violence, as part of its activism and encouraged—even demanded of—followers to become involved in such activities. Crucially, they argued that individuals who supported militant campaigns at home, either vocally or financially, would reap the same rewards as those who travelled abroad to fight, as discussed. Street protests, it was argued, were also part of this armed struggle since they served to demoralise the enemy (see brake 1e) (Mohammed, no date). Furthermore, followers were invited to "motivate people for the jihad verbally and through the internet" and appreciate such communicative acts as part of the

broader activist experience (In Connor, 2005: 123). In terms of sanctions, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, as noted above, was reprimanded on repeated occasions for his sectarian killings and large-scale bomb attacks that resulted in Muslim deaths, both since these were inherently wrong (moral logics) and counterproductive (strategic logics).

### Brake 3d

*Circulation of limited expectations that they will be involved in greater levels of violence.*

No examples identified in this case study.

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## 3.4 BRAKE 4

*Boundary softening in relation to putative out-groups (e.g., opponents, opponents' perceived supporters, the general public or state actors).*

Logics of identity concerning relations with external actors were much less prominent in the material studied than identity logics concerned with ego maintenance. Still, efforts at the level of campaign planning within al-Qaeda especially, were made to define and redefine non-Muslim populations as non-hostile entities and even, in some cases, as potential allies.

### Brake 4a

*Resistance to generalizations about their opponents.*

Sectarianism offers an example of al-Qaeda's outlook being far less based on generalizations and notions of alleged inherent qualities compared to the stance adopted by IS and its followers. Shia Muslims in al-Qaeda's rhetoric, are—holistically—depicted as ignorant and misguided, whilst justifications for their targeting are based on more tangible acts which in turn justify a response in kind.

Given al-Qaeda's preference for presenting violence in defensive terms, as a *reaction* to a set of circumstances and processes put in place by adversaries, whilst their approach to state building and societal creation has at least some elements of inclusivity, dehumanising references are not nearly as common in its rhetorical output compared to other jihadi actors more aligned

with IS and its thinking.<sup>3</sup> References to adversaries, as noted above, have not been static in al-Qaeda's discourse over time, and perhaps bear closer resemblance to a spectrum rather than clear or stable characterisations.

References to Christians are especially ambiguous. Whilst Zawahiri has condemned vast swathes of Coptic Egyptians and even though al-Qaeda has repeatedly denounced the Pope and other Christian figures, some references to followers of the Christian faith describe misguided human beings, rather than inherently impure, subhuman or polluting beings, which means they are not seen as priority targets. References to other faiths in this discourse, meanwhile, especially Judaism, are invariably derogatory in the extreme. In an extensive essay, published in 2008 as a rebuttal of a former Egyptian militant's criticism of al-Qaeda, Zawahiri for instance accepted that not all Christians were equal, and that some had resisted an alleged alliance between Jews and Crusaders, whilst seeking to mend relationships among Arabs (Zawahiri, 2008). Zawahiri reiterated this point in several statements addressing Egyptians in the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring' uprisings that spread from Tunisia in late 2010 and again as leader of al-Qaeda after the rise of IS, which has embarked on a far more widespread campaign against Arabs whose religious interpretations differ from their own (Zawahiri, 2011b).

#### Brake 4b

*Identification of segments of the public beyond their previously-imagined support base as potential converts to their cause.*

Despite its self-depiction as a vanguard fighting on behalf of religious believers, al-Qaeda's public communiqués have also appealed to the "world's weak and oppressed", irrespective of faith, and also, on occasions, contained explicit invitations to Islam, thus presenting conversion as part of their benchmark of success (Zawahiri, 2007). This reflected the ideals and myths of ancient Muslim military campaigns, which al-Qaeda and other contemporary jihadists purported to recreate. Moral boundaries of legitimate combat, therefore, were inherently tied to the groups' self-identification.

#### Brake 4c

*Limited intra-movement pressure to 'burn-bridges' with social contacts outside of the movement or outside of the radical flank of the movement.*

No examples identified in this case study.

#### Brake 4d

*Expressions of reluctance to conceive of the state security forces as 'the enemy'.*

No examples identified in this case study.

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### 3.5 BRAKE 5

*Organisational developments that either (a) alter the moral and strategic equations in favour of non- or limited violence, (b) institutionalise less violent collective identities and/or processes of boundary softening, and/or (c) reduce the likelihood of unplanned violence.*

Fairly little evidence concerning organisational logics was found in the material studied, with the exception of examples at the action planning stage whereby individuals came to the realisation that their preparedness for violent activism—ideological as much as physical—was insufficient or needed to be addressed.

#### Brake 5a

*Limited investment in capabilities to escalate violence, and/or development of capabilities to undertake strategies of action that either entail non- or limited violence or more controlled violence.*

Limited capabilities emerged particularly on the second—action planning—circle of our inquiry. Two themes from the Telegram chat group conversations in this regard seemed particularly relevant: one concerned an ambiguity about roles and how activism could be channelled and fulfilled, and the other concerned general lack of preparation for violent activism.

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<sup>3</sup> Zarqawi, IS' ideological forefather, for instance, was far more explicit in his calls to target Shia Muslims in Iraq directly, referring to them in derogatory terms, than al-Qaeda's leaders. Zawahiri, then deputy commander of al-Qaeda, admonished his erstwhile subordinate in Iraq for this prioritisation, warning him that wholesale targeting of Shia communities in Iraq was both counterproductive and lacking in historical precedent, an essential marker of the apparent legitimacy of contemporary Islamist militant campaigns that were presented as following the Prophet's example. See Zawahiri (2005).

The former is related to muddled conceptualisations of ‘fighter’ put forward by AM and similar organisations, where, at times, it was suggested that those who protested, or voiced support for activism online or through other channels of communication, were militants in their own right, and could even reap similar esoteric rewards (see brake 3c). In the Telegram group, one key member, as mentioned above, claimed that he had pledged allegiance to the leader of IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. He did not, however, associate any immediate obligations with this role and claimed he could continue his studies as long as they fell within what was sanctioned by IS. As this group of youths inched closer to putting their plans in action to carry out acts of violence on the streets of London, doubts emerged among members about their knowledge and preparation. One member complained that they had talked about jihad so much they had neglected other aspects of their faith and failed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their religion. Gaining knowledge, it was felt, would be a prerequisite to further involvement in activist roles, in order for these efforts to remain sincere.

Lack of capabilities, of course, can greatly limit the impact of violence and inhibit its escalation, even if key participants are willing to do so. It is hard to trace al-Qaeda’s relative inaction on the global stage in recent years to any particular causal elements, though lack of resources, networks and other capabilities would seem to have played a role.

On a more granular level, moreover, we see resource deficits playing out in different ways. Whilst jihadists have demonstrated how easy it is to carry out a violent attack, using knives or vehicles for example, the Telegram conversations reveal concern about less tangible capabilities, including cognitive dimensions whereby insufficient preparedness includes a lack of understanding of the theological context of battle. Gaining such knowledge is seen as a sign of commitment, and by extension, of having the right intentions before participating in violence.

#### **Brake 5b**

*Foregrounding more modest or intermediate objectives and de-prioritising revolutionary goals.*

No examples identified in this case study.

#### **Brake 5c**

*Construction and maintenance of spaces in which a range of activists that includes and extends beyond the radical flank are able to freely discuss tactics and movement objectives.*

No examples identified in this case study.

#### **Brake 5d**

*Concerns among some group members that violent escalation will compromise their ability to shape the direction of the movement and/or negatively affect their position within the movement.*

No examples identified in this case study.

#### **Brake 5e**

*Concentration of energy on targeting movement rivals, leading to reduced capability to prosecute campaigns of violence against their external enemies.*

Internal quarrelling, debates, even admonishment of members of the in-group featured in the examples cited above. Whilst in these cases, this may not have amounted to debilitating feuds that ultimately sapped any capacity for violence, or directed it inwards, such dynamics clearly exist within the wider jihadi universe. The dramatic rift on a strategic level between al-Qaeda and IS, the latter emerging as an autonomous entity after splitting from al-Qaeda, has sent shockwaves throughout this universe, with sympathisers and fans online expressing confused loyalties, debating merits of both camps or calling for unity among fighting ‘vanguards’. These sentiments all featured on the Telegram chat logs analysed here.

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## 4. SUMMARY

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This case study incorporated transnational actors seeking to develop or sustain campaigns of jihadi militancy globally, as well as local actors—both established and informal—who operated within the UK.

These two geographic perspectives were combined because the debates, doubts and approaches to violence within this ideological context are intertwined: local actors respond to developments within the transnational jihadi movement which in turn seeks to adapt to new local realities.

The most significant development within this milieu in recent years is undoubtedly the emergence of IS as a terrorist entity fighting in local wars in Syria and Iraq as well as sponsoring militant campaigns and attacks abroad. IS has displayed and promoted a level of violence that exceeds the established norms of this radical flank: both in terms of the breadth of targeting, based on sectarian justifications and large-scale denunciation of Muslims, and the nature of the tactics employed.

This rise of a new and more aggressive terrorist entity has provoked different reactions among other players in this field with implications for our understanding of internal brakes.

This case study has illustrated how al-Muhajiroun, traditionally cautious in its promotion of militancy, became more overt in its support for terrorism and embraced IS and its methods, whilst IS's competitor on the global stage, al-Qaeda, emphasised the need for restraint and to respect limitations on the use of force, for strategic and moral reasons.

We also catch a glimpse of the impact the rise of IS has had on the grassroots through examination of private discussions within an informal network of British youths seeking to become involved in violence.

Whilst some members of this group expressed their support for IS others recoiled when they viewed some of their more graphic media content and expressed

their dismay that violent tactics had been used against individuals they deemed innocent.

The rise of IS thus serves as an illustrative example of the way in which new developments within a particular radical flank can play out differently among actors with respect to attitudes towards violence, including prospects of its enhanced or diminished scope.

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