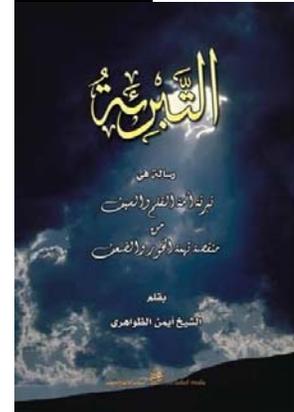


21 April 2008

Zawahiri Tries to Clear Name, Explain Strategy

For the past two months, Al-Qaida's number two, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, has engaged in an ideological counter offensive against his detractors. First, in early March 2008, he published a 188-page Arabic book online titled The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness.¹ In it, he responds to the November 2007 criticisms of his former mentor, Sayid Imam Abdel-Aziz Al-Sharif (Abdel-Aziz), who lambasted him for misapplying the doctrine of jihad and for bringing harm to the Muslim world. Then in late March, Zawahiri released part one of his response to questions he solicited online from other militants.² Around the same time, he also released a statement on the plight of the Palestinians.³ Many of the themes and arguments in the book, the Q&A, and the statement overlap, suggesting a campaign to repair the ideological and public relations damage done to Al-Qaida over the past year.⁴ The broad thrust of the campaign is to defend the religious legitimacy and political efficacy of attacks that affect civilians. It is also to explain why Al-Qaida's strategic focus has been on Iraq, Afghanistan, and Algeria instead of the Palestinian Territories and Egypt or responding to European insults to the Prophet Mohammed. The number of his statements which have been released and their detailed nature suggest that Al-Qaida's senior leadership is concerned that it is losing its relevance among its base.

Figure 1: Zawahiri's Exoneration.



Source: [Ekhliaas](#)

Zawahiri gives four indications as to Al-Qaida's current strategic orientation. First, he wants Al-Qaida in Iraq to shift its violence away from Shi'a civilians and towards Shi'a militias. Second, Zawahiri calls for militants to increase attacks against Jewish targets abroad in the near term and against Israeli targets in Israel and the Palestinian Territories in the long term. Third, he calls for the death of those associated with the cartoons of the Prophet in Europe. Fourth, Zawahiri wants militants in Egypt to ready themselves to seize the opportunity when Hosni Mubarak dies. By focusing on Israel, ending sectarian violence against civilians in Iraq, punishing Europeans who have

¹ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف ("The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness)." [Ekhliaas](#) January 2008, 16 April 2008 <<http://www.ek-ls.org/forum/showthread.php?t=127920&highlight=%C3%ED%E3%E4>>.

² Zawahiri, Ayman. "اللقاء المفتوح مع الشيخ الظواهري—الحلقة الأولى." [Qassimy.com](#) 3 April 2008, 16 April 2008 <<http://www.qassimy.com/vb/showthread.php?t=178383>>.

³ "هبوا لنصرة أهلنا في غزة" ("Rise to Support Our People in Gaza") [Ekhliaas](#) 24 March 2008, 16 April 2008 <<http://www.ek-ls.org/forum/showthread.php?t=133917&highlight=%C3%ED%E3%E4>>.

⁴ See Global Issues Report, "2007 Retrospective: Al-Qaida and its Followers Alienate Potential Supporters," 5 February 2008.

insulted Mohammed, and overthrowing the unpopular Mubarak, Al-Qaida may be trying to increase its diminished popularity by highlighting issues that resonate with popular Muslim resentment.

Zawahiri's Strategic Thinking

One reason for the negative popular response is Al-Qaida's tactics, which have been criticized for harming Muslim civilians and for failing to further the organization's stated goals of driving the

Figure 2: Banner Announcing Part 1 of Zawahiri's "Open Meeting."



Source: [Ekhlaas](#)

U.S. from the Middle East and creating Islamic states.⁵ The most pointed criticism has come from Zawahiri's former mentor and previous head of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) organization, Abdel-Aziz. In November 2007, Imam serially published a short book in which he criticized Al-Qaida and other Sunni militant organizations for attacking civilians because they were too weak to attack the government directly. He argued that the weakness of these groups should prompt them to abandon violent jihad and adopt nonviolent means of coping with un-Islamic regimes. Imam's criticisms came at the end of a year of similar criticism from prominent hard-line clerics who had previously supported Al-Qaida.⁶

In the Exoneration, Zawahiri retorts that Imam and other hard-liners eviscerate jihad by arguing that noncombatants should not be harmed or that militants should have parity with their enemies.⁷ "If Muslims wait until they have full parity with their enemies," Zawahiri asks rhetorically, "then how will they ever be able to defeat an oppressive ruler or powerful foreign nation who has invaded their lands?"⁸ "If a Muslim's family is threatened by an oppressive regime or foreign power, why would he adopt nonviolence to protect them?"⁹ "If a Muslim never attacks the enemy for fear of killing fellow believers or innocent people, how can he put pressure on a much more powerful enemy?"¹⁰ In short, the overwhelming power of local "apostate" regimes and their foreign supporters means that violence is not voided; rather, it is the only way to defeat the enemy. Thus, whereas Imam maintains that asymmetry in power means militants should lay down arms, Zawahiri believes that asymmetry means that Muslims have no choice but to use violence.

⁵ See Global Issues Report, "2007 Retrospective: Al-Qaida and its Followers Alienate Potential Supporters," 5 February 2008.

⁶ See Global Issues Report, "Abdel-Qadir Abdel-Aziz: A Chief Militant Radical Islamic Ideologue Moderates His Teachings," 4 December 2007.

⁷ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness)." [Ekhlaas](#) January 2008, Ibid. 122-3.

⁸ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness)." [Ekhlaas](#) January 2008, Ibid. 81.

⁹ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness)." [Ekhlaas](#) January 2008, Ibid. 66, 77.

¹⁰ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness)." [Ekhlaas](#) January 2008, Ibid. 81.

Zawahiri's strategic thinking and understanding of asymmetrical warfare and revolutionary violence is heavily indebted to vanguardism, a Leninist theory of revolution which posits that a small, revolutionary elite uses violence to rouse the people to fight against the government. The inevitable government crackdown will further fuel popular discontent and increase support for the vanguard. "[This method] was our means of raising the awareness of the *Ummah* (Islamic nation) and awakening it," Zawahiri says.¹¹ He adds that by attacking Americans and Jews, their allies in the Middle East will be forced to defend them, which will further demonstrate their subservience to foreign powers.¹²

Although revolutionary vanguardism does not necessarily imply terrorism, or violence against civilians for political ends, this has been Zawahiri's primary method in countries where guerilla campaigns are impossible. Thus, in his Q&A, Zawahiri explains that Algerian militants use guerilla tactics because they have great freedom to maneuver. Conversely, in Egypt militants can only prepare for terror attacks because their activities are so circumscribed.¹³

The potential problem with Zawahiri's application of the theory of vanguardism in countries that are inhospitable to guerilla campaigns is that terrorism, in the sense of violence against civilians for political ends, usually diminishes the support of both the government (because of its harsh reprisals) as well the terrorist organization. This was the result of the terrorist campaign initiated by Zawahiri in the 1990s in Egypt during his tenure as head of the EIJ. Zawahiri acknowledges that his organization was completely discredited because of these attacks, but he does not reconsider his application of vanguardism. Rather, he posits that the true reason his organization did not gain popularity is because the U.S. supported Mubarak's regime and prevented its collapse. This was the reason, he concludes, that the revolutionary vanguard had to focus on the U.S. before trying to topple local regimes.¹⁴ In Zawahiri's analysis, applying the principles of revolutionary vanguardism and fighting the U.S. resulted in an increase of Muslim support for Al-Qaida after the inevitable U.S. reprisals:

*By attacking America and Israel and then goading them into two jihadi wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Jihadi Movement gained the love, support, and affection of the vast majority of the Muslim community. It became a symbol of popular resistance against the Zionist-Crusader campaign against the Muslim community.*¹⁵

¹¹ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness)." Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 167.

¹² التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness)." Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 167.
¹³ Zawahiri, Ayman. "اللقاء المفتوح مع الشيخ الطواهري—الحلقة الأولى." Qassimy.com 3 April 2008, Ibid. 42.

¹⁴ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness)." Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 171, 173-5.

¹⁵ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness)." Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 172.

Clerical Support

According to Zawahiri, this popular support for the “jihadi movement” has been eroded by the criticism of clerics, particularly clerics who previously supported Al-Qaida. This criticism, he contends, is part of a recent U.S. effort to use religious leaders against the organization.¹⁶ To dampen its effect, Zawahiri lists nineteen religious scholars and thinkers who still support Al-Qaida. Although clerical approval is not necessary for Al-Qaida’s “defensive jihad”—the presence of foreign troops in Muslim lands obviates the need—it is important for a religious militant group to cite prominent clerics that support its positions. Thus, Zawahiri claims the support of several of the most influential Sunni militant thinkers identified by a recent West Point study.¹⁷ But, as seen below, none of these figures are prominent outside militant circles.

Perhaps to demonstrate Al-Qaida’s broad appeal, the clerics Zawahiri mentions are from a variety of countries: Egypt (4), Jordan (3), Afghanistan (3), Pakistan (2), Saudi Arabia (2), Libya (2), Mauritania (1), Yemen (1), and Syria (1). Of the nineteen individuals named, five are imprisoned and fourteen are at large. The five in prison are:

1. Abu Al-Mundhir Al-Sa’idi – a Libyan militant¹⁸
2. Abu Mus’ab Al-Suri – Syrian militant strategist, believed to be in U.S. custody¹⁹
3. Nasir Bin Hamd Al-Fahd – a Saudi cleric in Saudi custody²⁰
4. Abdel-Aziz – Egyptian former head of EIJ and author of the book Zawahiri is rebutting²¹
5. ‘Umar ‘Abd Al-Rahman (aka “The Blind Sheikh”) – an Egyptian cleric and former head of Jema’a Islamiya; in U.S. custody²²

The fourteen at large are:

1. ‘Abd Allah Dhakiri – president of the Ulema Union of Afghanistan²³
2. ‘Abd Al-Hakim Hassan – an Egyptian scholar who has his own website, which Zawahiri mentions²⁴

¹⁶ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيوف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 3-4. Zawahiri credits an article by Jarret Brachman and William McCants, “Stealing Al-Qa’ida’s Playbook,” with formulating this strategy (see page 175 of the Exoneration).

¹⁷ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيوف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 36-47. See McCants, William. “Executive Summary,” Militant Ideology Atlas (West Point: Combating Terrorism Center, 2006) <<http://ctc.usma.edu/atlas/Atlas-ExecutiveReport.pdf>>.

¹⁸ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيوف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 46.

¹⁹ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيوف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 47.

²⁰ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيوف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 44.

²¹ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيوف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 38.

²² التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيوف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 36.

²³ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيوف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 44.

3. Abu 'Abd Allah Al-Muhajir – a cleric who setup a missionary center at the Khalden training camp²⁵
4. Abu Al-Walid Al-Filistini (aka Abu Al-Walid Al-Ansari) – an Al-Qaida operative and strategist²⁶
5. Abu Hafs Al-Mawritani (aka Dr. Mahfuz oud Al-Walid) – a religious adviser to Usama bin Laden²⁷
6. Abu Al-Hasan Al-Qari (“The Reciter”) – an Egyptian Quran reciter²⁸
7. Abu Muhammad Al-Maqdisi – an influential militant Jordanian cleric; was Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi's mentor²⁹
8. Abu Qatada – another influential militant Jordanian cleric, living in England³⁰
9. Abu Yahya Al-Libi – viewed by many as Al-Qaida's third in command³¹
10. 'Atiyyat Allah – presumably Lewis 'Atiyyat Allah, a Saudi militant and popular online pundit³²
11. Fadl Muhammad – a professor of *hadith* in Karachi³³
12. Husayn 'Umar Ibn Mahfuz – a Yemeni religious scholar³⁴
13. Jalaluddin Haqqani – a Taliban commander³⁵
14. Muhammad Yasir (aka Ustad Muhammad Yasir) – a Taliban spokesperson³⁶

Almost all of these figures are marginal in the Sunni Muslim community, with the exception of those in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In his treatise, Zawahiri gives particular attention to the latter two countries, relating that many of them (and their students) came to visit Usama bin Laden personally.³⁷ He also boasts several times of the

²⁴ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 45-6. His website is <<http://www.kanzhassan.net/blog/blog.php>>.

²⁵ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 46.

²⁶ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 46.

²⁷ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 47.

²⁸ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 46.

²⁹ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 39.

³⁰ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 41.

³¹ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 46.

³² التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 47.

³³ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 38.

³⁴ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 44.

³⁵ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 38.

³⁶ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 38-9.

³⁷ التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness).” Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 34-5.

He also says that many clerics and seminary students from Mauritania came to visit bin Laden (see page 47).

Taliban's support, claiming that bin Laden fights under the banner of Mullah Omar.³⁸ To further demonstrate the credibility of Al-Qaida in the region, Zawahiri quotes the Urdu poetry of Muhammad Iqbal, a national hero in Pakistan, several times—an unusual maneuver in an Arabic text.³⁹ All of this is meant to show that Al-Qaida's high command has the support of the locals and is inspired by their heroes.

Current Operational Priorities and Challenges

In explaining his theory of revolutionary vanguardism and rebutting the charges of his critics, Zawahiri provides insight into Al-Qaida's current operational priorities. Egypt, for example, is a subject he returns to repeatedly in both the Exoneration and the Q&A. This is partly due to the fact that both he and his primary detractor, Abdel-Aziz, are Egyptians. But there is also a sense that Zawahiri would very much like to refocus efforts on his old stomping grounds. Thus, he asserts that Egypt would be an ideal place to start a new caliphate.⁴⁰ Moreover, he urges cooperation between the local Coptic Christians against Mubarak.⁴¹ They would fare much better under an Islamic regime, he suggests, than under the current regime.⁴² Zawahiri admits that the current state of Sunni militancy in Egypt is moribund, but he hopes it will soon change.⁴³ He entertains high hopes for prospects after Mubarak's death, when he believes the regime will fall.⁴⁴ "The mujahideen must be ready to reap the harvest when the regime collapses."⁴⁵

As for the fight in Iraq, Zawahiri assures his audience in both the Exoneration and his Q&A that Al-Qaida has no argument with non-partisan Shi'a. In the Exoneration, he is at some pains to explain Zarqawi's call for total war against the Shi'a was misunderstood and was later clarified by the Sharia committee of Al-Qaida in Iraq.⁴⁶ The real threat, Zawahiri argues, are Shi'a collaborators and militias working with Iran.⁴⁷

Zawahiri acknowledges that many militants want Al-Qaida to focus more on Gaza and Israel. But he responds that others are capable of doing so and that Al-Qaida will get

³⁸ "التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف" (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness)." Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 159.

³⁹ Iqbal's Urdu poetry is quoted on pages 7, 107, and 180.

⁴⁰ "التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف" (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness)." Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 170.

⁴¹ "التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف" (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness)." Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 148.

⁴² "التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف" (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness)." Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 147-48.

⁴³ Zawahiri, Ayman. "اللقاء المفتوح مع الشيخ الظواهري—الحلقة الأولى" (The Open Meeting with Sheikh Ayman Al-Zawahiri—Part One)." Qassim.com 3 April 2008, Ibid. 24.

⁴⁴ "التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف" (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness)." Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 170.

⁴⁵ "التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف" (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness)." Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 83.

⁴⁶ "التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف" (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness)." Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 143.

⁴⁷ Zawahiri, Ayman. "اللقاء المفتوح مع الشيخ الظواهري—الحلقة الأولى" (The Open Meeting with Sheikh Ayman Al-Zawahiri—Part One)." Qassim.com 3 April 2008, Ibid. 21; and "التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف" (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness)." Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 143.

more involved once the U.S. has left Iraq.⁴⁸ Moreover, he takes special care to call for attacking Jewish interests abroad, perhaps indicating a renewed focus on Jewish and Israeli targets outside Israel.⁴⁹

One other issue is mentioned repeatedly by Zawahiri: the cartoons of Mohammed printed in Denmark. In the Exoneration, he argues that those who insult the Prophet should be put to death.⁵⁰ Zawahiri even hypothetically talks about the assassination of offensive cartoonists in Europe.⁵¹ This dovetails with bin Laden's latest statement calling for attacks on the cartoonists and may indicate Al-Qaida's active involvement in an attack on the cartoonists.⁵² The recent arrest of a Moroccan Dane and two Tunisians plotting to kill one of the cartoonists indicates that something is afoot.⁵³ At the very least, it plays to popular Muslim resentment of the cartoons.

It is unclear from Zawahiri's statements if his treatment of the political situation in Egypt, the plight of the Palestinians, and the offending cartoonists in Europe are just public relations ploys, current operational concerns, or long-term interests. He is coy about active operations to deal with these issues while being upfront about operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. But presumably, Zawahiri's coyness does not equal disinterest; he can afford to be candid about operations in open theaters of conflict because doing so does not have significant operational security consequences, in contrast to operations elsewhere. If Zawahiri's statements are operationally significant, Al-Qaida may be targeting Jewish interests abroad, individuals and agencies associated with the cartoon controversy, and planning operations in Egypt around the time of Hosni Mubarak's death. At the very least, his public relations counteroffensive demonstrates that Al-Qaida is feeling the heat of the criticisms coming from former supporters. The intricacy of Zawahiri's responses, their number, and their rapid release are all indicative of an organization that is trying to burnish its reputation.

Figure 3: Zawahiri's Statement on the Palestinians of Gaza.



Source: Ekhlaas

⁴⁸ Zawahiri, Ayman. "اللقاء المفتوح مع الشيخ الظواهري—الحلقة الأولى" (The Open Meeting with Sheikh Ayman Al-Zawahiri—Part One)." Qassimy.com 3 April 2008, Ibid. 4, 32.

⁴⁹ Al-Qaida has not operationally focused on Jews and Israel since 2002, when it bombed tourists visiting a synagogue in Jerba, Tunisia; bombed a hotel frequented by Israelis in Mombasa, Kenya; and fired a shoulder-launched missile at an El Al plane leaving Mombasa. See Zawahiri, Ayman. "اللقاء المفتوح مع الشيخ الظواهري—الحلقة الأولى" (The Open Meeting with Sheikh Ayman Al-Zawahiri—Part One)." Qassimy.com 3 April 2008, Ibid. 24.

⁵⁰ "التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف" (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness)." Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 90.

⁵¹ "التبرئة: رسالة في تبرئة أمة القلم والسيف من منقصة تهمة الخور والضعف" (The Exoneration: A Treatise Exonerating the Community of the Pen and the Sword from the Debilitating Accusation of Fatigue and Weakness)." Ekhlaas January 2008, Ibid. 102.

⁵² "New Alleged Bin Laden Message." YouTube 20 March 2008, 16 April 2008 <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reMttDCB8I&feature=related>>.

⁵³ "Arrests in Denmark in Cartoonist Plot." Nytimes.com 12 February 2008, 16 April 2008 <<http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/world/AP-Denmark-Prophet-Drawings.html?ref=world>>.