Why do the Islamic fundamentalists in general—and followers of al Qaeda in particular—resort to terrorist tactics against Americans and other Westerners around the globe? This question has haunted Americans since 9/11 and prompted a host of antiterrorist policies throughout the world. Much has been written and spoken on the subject, and more will be written and spoken in the years ahead. Political geography offers a frame of reference to learn about al Qaeda and other militant Islamic groups and their anti-West, anti-U.S. posture. To explore the point of view propounded by Osama bin Laden and others, this case study uses the five levels of analysis introduced in chapter three, examined here from a geopolitical perspective. The five levels of analysis are the: 1) international system, 2) regional, 3) state, 4) substate (tribal groups), and 5) individual.

**INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM LEVEL**

From the international system perspective, consider the following historical context of al Qaeda's militant Islam. Militant Islamic fundamentalists and followers of Islam are heirs to one of the great civilizations of the world. While today's Arab Muslims and non-Arab Muslims are in a dire crisis of underdevelopment, poverty, and oppression, yesterday's Arab Empire was larger than the Roman Empire. The Arab Empire flourished during the seventh through thirteenth centuries. It was truly spectacular (Figures 8.9a and 8.9b). Its achievements—in art, literature, architecture, mathematics, philosophy, medicine, trade, and finance—were profound not only in their time; they left their mark on modern civilization. Moreover, in that era, Muslims, Jews, and Christians coexisted peacefully. Non-Muslims were assured of considerable freedom as well as cultural and intellectual autonomy, as long as they paid a tax. The political geography of the time was dominated by Islam.

Then came the eleventh century Crusades, followed by Western colonialism and violent European intervention in the Middle East, creation of the state of Israel in 1948, Western-driven globalization, Westernized greedy rulers and their police states. The twentieth century stands in stark contrast with the glory years of the Arab Empire—and it was an utter disaster from the Arab/Muslim perspective. Elite Middle East rulers, backed by the United States,
dominate the masses in one Arab state after another. Poverty, illiteracy, and vast social inequality are facts of daily life. The United States supports Israel, which, as Arabs see it, makes life unbearable for the stateless Palestinians. In short, the Western impact on the Islamic world is viewed as simply horrendous. As one scholar of Middle East politics, Bernard Lewis, states, “In the course of the twentieth century it became abundantly clear to the Middle East and indeed all over the lands of Islam that things had indeed gone badly.”

Extremist Islamic groups are driven by these perceptions—underscored by the attack of the United States on Iraq in March 2003, and the subsequent occupation. Al Qaeda, an organization of Islamic militants, has declared “holy war” on Americans, Jews, and their allies. Al Qaeda sees itself as avenging the wrongs committed by Christians and Jews against Muslims over the ages. It seeks to reshape the Muslim world by replacing secular states with a single Islamic political leadership. Some radical Islamists reject the existence of any state and seek only one government on Earth uniting all Muslims. At the same time al Qaeda wants to drive Americans and non-Muslims out of all Muslim countries, destroy Israel, and overthrow pro-Western dictatorships in the Middle East. This al Qaeda ideology is referred to as “jihadism,” a holy war to reestablish former Islamic glory—even though it is at odds with most Islamic religious thought.

Islamic fundamentalists declare that only a *jihad*, or “holy war,” against the enemies of Islam will restore former glory. This is the same conviction that spurred the initial spread of Islam at the start of the Arab Empire. In the words of two authors who have researched this point: Muhammad had used the Arabic tribal custom of the raid in the struggle against his enemies. Now his successors turned to the same custom to expand the authority of the movement. The Koran called this activity “striving in the way of the Lord,” or *jihad* (holy war). The *jihad* grew out of the Arabic tradition of tribal raids, which were permitted as a way to channel the warlike energies of the Bedouin tribes. Once the Arabs had become unified under Muhammad’s successor, they began to conduct a *jihad* on a larger scale, directing outward against neighboring peoples the energy they had formerly directed against each other.

**THE REGIONAL LEVEL**

Southwest Asia—Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, the Arabian Peninsula, and Pakistan—is the crossroads of three religious faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—that emerged between 1200 BC and AD 1500. The ideas of these three great religions, and their capacity to reach out to growing numbers of followers and spread around the globe, were in part shaped by Southwest Asia’s location on the East-West axis.

This part of the world, the location of the great Tigris-Euphrates river system and the Fertile Crescent, is one of the world’s earliest culture hearths, with its rich sources of food production, innovation and ideas, and traits and technologies that spread beyond the region. South of this area lies the bleak Arabian Desert, millions of square miles of sand; west of the Nile lies the huge Sahara, and in Southwest Asia’s north are rugged mountain ranges. Much, of today’s Muslim world lies in this area.

Any regional geopolitical analysis of the radical Islamic war against the United States must take note of this backdrop to what might be termed the volatile vortex of Southwest Asia. It is a regional arena of income disparities, grinding poverty, elite rule, ethnic conflicts, unstable states, and divided Islamic loyalties—an unstable mix, as the name implies. Thus, this region contains ancient and complex roots that contribute to terrorism against the West.

**STATE-LEVEL FACTORS**

State-level factors that contribute to al Qaeda’s anti-U.S. terrorism require looking at each state in the Middle East and elsewhere in Southwest Asia, as each has its own set of circumstances. We focus here, however, briefly on Afghanistan (see chapter 2’s case study), Pakistan, and the Israel-Palestine conflict. Saudi Arabia is covered in chapter 5’s case study.

**Afghanistan:** Its many ethnic groups (tribes) historically have fought for dominance in the region. The largest tribe (40 percent of the total population) is the Pashtun (known also as Pathans). The Taliban leaders and the majority of their supporters belong to this tribe, and a large number live in neighboring Pakistan. So numerous is this group that when Pakistan was forming in 1947, the Afghan government pushed for Pakistan’s Northwest Frontier Province to be made the independent sovereign state of Pashtunistan.

This proposal soured Afghanistan’s relations with Pakistan, and the division of the Pashtun tribe has been a source of friction ever since. With the influx of millions of Afghan refugees into Pakistan, the Pashtun tribe has become a sizable force in Pakistani politics. Its political strength is probably the main reason why the Pakistani government chose, before 9/11, to support the training of Talibani mujahideen in Pakistan and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

**Pakistan:** Pakistan’s geographic proximity to Afghanistan, its role as a training ground for Talibani militants, and its turbulent tribal areas in the north, which have served as a refuge for Talibani and al Qaeda members, are all-important state-level factors. Pakistan’s upper-echelon government officials are willing to cooperate with the United States in its war with al Qaeda, yet the middle and lower levels are riddled with al Qaeda sympathizers. Since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, al Qaeda members have found a safe haven in Pakistan. These individuals are periodically arrested and imprisoned by Pakistan’s security forces. However, these captures are only the tip of the iceberg when it
comes to the total numbers of al Qaeda's members reputed to be living in this state—a key U.S. ally in the Bush administration's war on terrorism. Pakistan's high unemployment problem increases the appeal of al Qaeda.

The Israel/Palestine issue is another key factor at the regional level. Al Qaeda, the Arab world—and the non-Arab Muslim world—resent that the United States gives arms and aid to Israel, which the Islamic world feel has led to the present plight of the Palestinians. They see U.S. policy toward Israel as one of double standards. Israel has acquired nuclear weapons, appropriated Muslim lands, and strengthened its position in the Middle East with U.S. support. Muslim states have come under U.S. military attack and economic and political sanctions.

**SUBSTATE-LEVEL FACTORS**

Al Qaeda and its affiliates may be operating as a network and movement rather than as a single group or single hierarchical organization. From this perspective it uses information technology to revitalize and project older patterns of tribalism on a global dimension. From this perspective the United States is not at war with Islam, but with terrorists that operate as a network of tribes and clans—with various smaller groups adopting al Qaeda's radical Islamic jihad principles and tactics to wage war against the United States the West, and Jews.3

**INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL FACTORS**

Al Qaeda emerged in the late 1980s, when Arab volunteers joined U.S.-backed mujahideen fighting to drive out occupying Soviet forces. At this time Osama Bin Laden organized to help the volunteers, who became known as al Qaeda—or “the base.” So as the original organizer of al Qaeda, analysis has focused on the rise of Bin Laden—his ideas, his tactics, and strategy. Bin Laden is from Saudi Arabia, to which he returned after the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan. He was studying radical Islam thinking there, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, and the United States reacted by stationing troops in Saudi Arabia. That act infuriated Bin Laden, because Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam—and the rest is history. Another top al Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri merits attention too. He is a leading theological figure behind al Qaeda thought and practices.

**QUESTIONS**

**Check Your Understanding**

1. What key global-, regional-, and state-level issues have spawned radical Islamic hatred of the West in general and the United States in particular?
2. In what ways has history shaped today's radical Islamic perceptions of the United States?
3. What is it about U.S. foreign policies that fan the flames of radical Islamic views within the Middle East geographic setting?

**Analyze the Issues**

1. The chapter notes a number of geographic factors that shape world politics, among them 1) location and development, 2) location and territorial security, and 3) location and perceptions. How does each of these forces come into play to explain the war waged by al Qaeda?
2. Chapter 4 discussed oil as a key power factor in world politics. Where does the political geography of oil come into the picture in this case study of radical Islam?
3. Chapter 5 discussed foreign policy as a means to translate power capabilities into policies in pursuit of core interests. Discuss radical Islam's war on the United States from the perspective of how political geography shapes foreign policymaking and execution, to become either decentralizing or centralizing in its overall impact.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

To discover more about the geopolitics of radical Islam's war against the West, consult the following books, journal articles, newspapers, and websites:


*NOTES*