In July of 2008, the *New York Times* ran an article about the evolution of the Algerian militant group, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), into a branch of al-Qaeda called “al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb.” The Armed Islamic Group emerged after the Algerian government cancelled the second round of parliamentary elections in 1992. The government did this to prevent a victory by the Islamic Salvation Front, a party led by a broad coalition of Islamic activists. The GIA was not interested in parliamentary politics: its goal was to overthrow the Algerian government by violence and establish an Islamic government in its place.

According to the article, in 1994 the group was approached by Osama bin Laden who sought to establish a base in Algeria. The group refused bin Laden’s request. In an interview obtained by the *New York Times*, one of the group’s leaders stated that he told bin Laden, “We don’t have anything to do with anything outside….We are interested in just Algeria.” Ten years later, in the fall of 2004, a spin-off and successor to the GIA, called the “Salafist Group for Preaching and Struggle” (GSPC) reversed the GIA’s decision and contacted Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi, the (now deceased) leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq. What caused the group to reverse its predecessor’s decision?

According to one account, immediately following 9/11 the Bush administration changed its designation of the GSPC from a “regional insurgency” to a terrorist group. It also began targeting the group as part of the Global War on Terror. In March of 2004, a covert American operation led to the capture of one of the group’s leaders in Chad. In the wake of the incident, the group contacted al-Zarqawi and began operations against
Westerners and Western interests in Algeria and beyond. Said the GSPC’s leader, “If the U.S. administration sees that its war against the Muslims is legitimate, then what makes us believe that our war on its territories is not legitimate?”

There are two aspects of this story that are important for the argument I wish to make here. First, there is the difference between the two statements: “We don’t have anything to do with anything outside….We are interested in just Algeria,” and “If the U.S. administration sees that its war against the Muslims is legitimate, then what makes us believe that our war on its territories is not legitimate?” The significance of the two comments will become apparent in a moment.

The second aspect of this story that is important for us concerns the problem of labeling and the transformative power of labels. This problem has not gone unnoticed. In April 2008 the United States Department of Homeland Security issued a “guidance memorandum” entitled, “Terminology to Define Terrorists: Recommendations from American Muslims.” “Words matter,” the memorandum begins. "We must carefully avoid giving bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders the legitimacy they crave, but do not possess, by characterizing them as religious figures, or in terms that may make them seem to be noble in the eyes of some." The memo goes on to critique various words used to identify those behind 9/11.

So what words are “out” and what words are “in” for identifying America’s enemies in what used to be called the Global War on Terror—a phrase which itself was rhetorically downgraded at the outset of the Obama administration to “overseas contingency operations”? “Out” is anything having to do with religion: all variations on jihad (jihadi, jihadist, mujahid, mujahidin), salafi, Islamist, Islamic terrorist, holy warrior, and the execrable neologism, “Islamo-fascist.” “In” is “violent extremist” (to differentiate al-Qaedaists and their ilk, one might suppose, from pacifist extremists) and
“terrorist.” The Department of Homeland Security memorandum thus takes us from the world of religion to the world of terrorology.

We should appreciate the Department of Homeland Security’s attempt to bring order and sense to the problem of nomenclature. Naming is, of course, inextricably linked to the process of classification and understanding. And we should also applaud the department’s quick tutorial in things Islamic in their attempt to try to get things right. In terms of moving away from religious markers for identifying the perpetrators of 9/11 and their ilk, there is much to commend the Department of Homeland Security’s efforts. Let us take a look at two examples:

First, the ever-popular term jihadi: The Department of Homeland Security memo rightly points out that since jihad is a central tenet of Islam, applying the term jihadi to bin Laden and his cohort blurs the distinction between al-Qaeda ideology and the beliefs of most Muslims. This is distinction that should not be blurred. Al-Qaedaists read into jihad meanings alien to most mainstream Islamic scholars, if not most Muslims, in two ways: First, al-Qaeda equates jihad with armed struggle. Since the end of the first Islamic century, when the caliphate consolidated its position, most mainstream jurists—and, indeed, most Muslims—have not equated the two. Second, al-Qaeda also views armed struggle against Islam’s enemies as a personal obligation to be undertaken by all Muslims. Their reasoning is that waging a defensive jihad is incumbent on all when the Islamic community is under attack—as it has been, they claim, since the beginning of the Reconquista. For them, jihad-as-armed-struggle is a sixth (neglected) pillar of the faith, and those who do not undertake it cannot be considered true Muslims. Most mainstream jurists, on the other hand, have viewed armed struggle under present circumstances as a responsibility to be delegated to proper authorities, such as governments and their armed forces. And most jurists associate any
litmus test for being a true Muslim with the heterodox Kharajite sect of the first Islamic century. According to most jurists, the Kharajites’ gravest sin was that they sowed the seeds of fitna (discord) in the community by doing what bin Laden and others do: pronouncing Muslims they disagreed with to be non-Muslims, and thus rendering them suitable for killing.

Furthermore, as the Department of Homeland Security memo points out, identifying bin Laden with jihad bolsters his religious credentials—something he has, in the past, been very concerned about. And bin Laden has reason to be concerned: Bin Laden was educated in business—not religious sciences. Nevertheless, he has taken upon himself the right to issue fatwa (religious pronouncements)—a task usually reserved for those with special training. It is not for naught, then, that various leaders of al-Qaeda themselves designate their group as part of a greater “jihad movement” or as “jihadi-salafis.”

This brings us to a second term that has begun to dominate the literature about al-Qaeda and its spin-offs: “salafi.” Salafis are distinguished by two characteristics: First, salafis reject all sources for religious knowledge except two: the Qur’an and hadith (collections of the sayings and acts of the Prophet and his companions). Second, salafis look back to the original Medinan community established by Muhammad as the ideal community, worthy of emulation.

Al-Qaedaists certainly are salafis, as anyone remotely acquainted with their pronouncements can attest. But they are not the only salafis. In fact, we can identify at least two types of salafis who would use salafism for the purpose of tajdid (renewal of Islamic society). Each uses the foundational texts in a different way: One group uses them as an instructional manual, the other as a jumping-off point. In terms of the first group, there are salafis like the Taliban who believe the sources provide them with a
strict roadmap to be followed without deviation. Hence, their single-mindedness when it comes to dress codes, gender relations, prescribed punishments, and the like. Counterposed to these salafis are the so-called “modernist salafis.” The concern of the modernists is to align Islam with the modern world. As a result, they self-consciously make their interpretation of the Qur’an and hadith compatible with post-Enlightenment ideals. Thus, the modernists argue that one can find women’s rights, human rights, democracy, etc. in the Qur’an and hadith. When Muhammad died, for example, the elders of the community met to “elect” the first caliph. Is this not parliamentarianism, the modernists ask? The same elders committed the caliph to fulfill certain conditions and swore loyalty as long as he did so. How is that different from constitutionalism?

Using the term salafi to designate bin Laden and his ilk lumps “good” modernist salafis in with “bad” “fundamentalist” salafis. And, if there ever is to be that “Islamic Reformation” that Western commentators have so patronizingly been demanding, it will have to come from the “modernists,” so that would be a mistake. (I have always been amused by the audacity of those who stand outside the Islamic tradition and call for an “Islamic Reformation.” According to Islamic tradition, Islam is already a reformation: After all, God gave the same message to the Jews and Christians, but they managed to corrupt it. Furthermore, if one looks at the position of Martin Luther on such matters as scripturalism, iconoclasm, purity of the faith, and the use of incendiary rhetoric, the closest strain in Islam to those who carried out the Protestant Reformation in Europe would include Osama bin Laden, among others.)

Overall, then, using religious terminology for either bureaucratic or propagandistic reasons is neither accurate nor smart. On the other hand, neither is the solution proposed by the Department of Homeland Security—simply designating our enemies as “terrorists” or “violent extremists.” The problem with using these terms is
that they are too vague to be of any analytical utility. The pages of the numerous terrorology journals which have proliferated in the wake of 9/11 are inhabited by an eclectic cast of characters: Osama bin Laden, Ted Kosinski, Basque separatists, ancient Zealots, Timothy McVeigh, PKK guerillas, Indian Thuggees, bomb-throwing anarchists, radical environmentalists, the Isma‘ili Assassins of the twelfth century, fringe animal rights and abortion rights advocates, Saddam Hussein, at least three prime ministers of Israel, the aforementioned Algerian insurgents, the Red Brigades, the government of Syria (but no longer Libya), etc. At the time the Department of Homeland Security issued its memorandum, the U.S. State Department listed forty-two groups that met one or more of six criteria as terrorist organizations—a number that was only limited, one supposes, by a lack of imagination. These groups have articulated widely differing ideologies and use violence for widely different purposes. So in the end, one must ask: What does al-Qaeda have in common with the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia? They kill people. But so do shark attacks.

Terrorism is a relational term: One rarely finds anyone identifying themselves as a terrorist. There is, of course, the occasional exception: the Stern Gang, active in mandatory Palestine, did so, and one al-Qaedaist website quotes ʿAbdullah ʿAzzam, the mentor (and probable victim) of Osama bin Laden, as stating, “We are terrorists, and terrorism is a sacred duty.” But here Azzam is referring to terror in its original sense, as in the Qur’anic verse, “And prepare against them what force you can…to frighten thereby the enemy of God.” When we use the word “terrorism” we are using a neologism which entered the English language after the great terror of the French Revolution. Our terrorism connotes something far different from merely scaring off an enemy—although international jurists cannot agree upon a common definition. No wonder, then, bin Laden was able to appear outraged in his videotaped statement of
September 2007 when he declared that a country that had committed genocide against its indigenous peoples and had dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had no right calling him the terrorist.

So, then, if religious terms are out and terrology neologisms are, at best, imprecise and, at worst, an abomination, what then are we left with? In terms of categorizing movements which use Islam as their primary marker, I think we might be well advised to go to an expert—Ayman al-Zawahiri, considered the number two man in al-Qaeda—and see how he does it. Once the categorization is in place, the labeling comes easily.

Like others associated with al-Qaeda and its ilk, al-Zawahiri consistently identifies the Zionist-Crusader alliance as the main enemy of Islam and the Islamic community. But in his writings and speeches, al-Zawahiri also castigates two types of fifth columnists within the Islamic world: those who have abandoned their previous commitment to jihad, and those who are guilty of the sin of particularism.

First, those who have abandoned their previous commitment to jihad: In his book *Knights under the Prophet’s Banner*, al-Zawahiri identifies two groups that are guilty of this sin. The first is the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, the premier Islamist political association in the Arab world. Since its founding in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood has had a checkered history with both the Egyptian government and with political violence. In 1987, the brotherhood renounced violence and pledged allegiance to the Egyptian government (the Egyptian government rewarded the brotherhood by reaffirming its refusal to allow the group to participate in the electoral process as a formal political party). The second group al-Zawahiri castigates for abandoning jihad are those jailed members of something called the “Islamic Group” who renounced their jihad in 1997 and agreed to a ceasefire with the Egyptian government. Before its
repression in the 1990s, the Islamic Group had attempted to disrupt the Egyptian economy—and thus bring down the Egyptian government—by attacking tourists, among other targets. In his book, al-Zawahiri treats both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Group “defectors” with scorn, writing, “Has it become the job of the jihadi groups…to repeatedly beg corrupt secular governments to grant us permission to establish an Islamic state?”

The second group al-Zawahiri castigates consists of those who might be accused of the sin of particularism; that is, those whose geographic and philosophical horizons fall short of encompassing the entirety of the Islamic umma. For example, one might expect al-Qaeda and Hamas to be natural allies: Both employ a discourse in which jihad takes pride of place (For example, the Hamas Charter mentions jihad no less than eleven times, and article fifteen of the charter explicitly states that jihad is an individual duty incumbent on every Palestinian). So if we were to go back to the banished terminology, both might be called jihadi. Both claim to derive their ideology from the principles of the Medinan community, so again going back to the banished terminology, both might be called salafi. Both want to have all of Palestine governed according to the dictates of Islamic law, so going a third time to the banished terminology, both might be called Islamist. And both have committed acts of violence against civilians, so both might be called terrorist. Nevertheless, al-Zawahiri has condemned Hamas (and, unsurprisingly, its Lebanese Shi'i analogue, Hizbullah) for a number of reasons: He has condemned Hamas for reaching agreement with secularists. (For example, Hamas joined Fatah in a unity government and thus committed itself to “respecting” previous agreements with Israel. As a result, according to al-Zawahiri, Hamas “fell into the quagmire of surrender” and “committed aggression against the rights of the Islamic umma.”) Al-Zawahiri has condemned Hamas for “entering polytheistic councils” (Hamas
(participated in the Palestinian parliament). And al-Zawahiri has condemned Hamas for basing its right to rule on *vox populi* rather than divine commandment (it ran in and won in parliamentary elections). Most important, al-Zawahiri has condemned Hamas for privileging the bond of nationality over the sacred bond of religion and for transforming a front in the struggle to liberate all Islamic lands from Spain to Bosnia to Kashmir to the Philippines into just another movement for national liberation. For al-Zawahiri, the liberation of Palestine provides a way station on the road to liberating the entire Islamic umma. For Hamas, the liberation of Palestine is the goal. (Hamas’s most direct response to date to al-Qaeda’s ill-will came last August: After a local al-Qaeda affiliate took over a mosque in Gaza, Hamas surrounded it, killed about two dozen militants inside and arrested another 155.)

Following the typology suggested by Ayman al-Zawahiri instead of the typology suggested by the Department of Homeland Security, then, we find al-Qaeda arrayed against two types of politically-active organizations within the Islamic community: One might be called reformist, the other Islamo-nationalist. Let’s look at these in turn:

Reformists might be considered the social democrats or Fabians of political Islam. They come in two varieties. First, there are those who advocate incremental change and function as a lobby and sometimes a political party. Included in this category are Jordan’s Islamic Action Front, which has participated in parliament; and factions within the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, which, as was mentioned earlier, cannot itself act as a political party. The second type of reformist includes those who have abandoned high politics and instead concentrate on transforming—Islamizing—society. They frequently undertake missionary work for that end. Their view is that Islamic rule cannot be imposed from the top down on a society that is unprepared and undeserving of it. While they do not participate in parliamentary or local governance,
they do participate in politics in its broader sense: For example, they reclaim for civil society real and metaphorical spaces abandoned by the government, and they participate in redefining the nature and limits of political discourse.

The second category identified as fifth columnist by al-Zawahiri might be described as Islamo-nationalist. This category includes those who seek to control the instruments of state, engage in wars of national liberation, or both. These organizations then seek to use the disciplinary capabilities of modern states to Islamize their societies from the top down. As opposed to the reformists, who might participate in affairs of state playing by the rules of the game, Islamo-nationalists seek to redefine the nature of the state. There are a number of examples we might look to: Hamas, Hizbullah, and factions within the Taliban (in spite of the organization’s close association with al-Qaeda). Hasan al-Banna, who founded the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, went so far as to tell a British newspaper—with perhaps more than a touch of calculation—“[we are] neither politicians nor a political party but simply nationalists working for the welfare of Egypt and the restoration of usurped Egyptian rights.” Whatever al-Banna’s motivation in making this statement, it is significant that it was to the category of nationalism al-Banna turned in order to explain his organization to a foreign audience.

Islamo-nationalists may not, at first glance, appear to comprise a coherent category. They have, for example, used a number of tactics to assume power. In Iran, they participated in revolution (and here the emphasis should be on the words participated in); in Palestine, they have participated in elections; in Somalia and Afghanistan, they have participated in armed struggle. Islamo-nationalist groups also come in a variety of forms: Some, such as the Taliban of Afghanistan are vanguardist, mobilizing a small number of activists to take power. Others, such as Hizbullah and Hamas, have built mass-based political operations. Both Hizbullah and Hamas are
totally interconnected with their societies through a network of charities, social service organizations, militias, etc. Whatever their differences, however, all Islamo-nationalist organizations (like the reformist organizations identified above) do have something in common: They have chosen to work within the established nation-state system. Hamas seeks the liberation of Palestine; Hizbullah claims to fight for Lebanese sovereignty; the Taliban (or factions thereof) even sought to represent Afghanistan in the United Nations. Now compare the Taliban’s quest to represent Afghanistan in the United Nations with the attitude of al-Qaeda toward the UN. According to al-Zawahiri and others, the Crusader powers created the UN which, in turn, created Israel, which is the linchpin in the Zionist-Crusader alliance. For al-Zawahiri and his associates, the UN is little more than “an instrument for applying the decisions of the Zionist/Crusaders, among which are decisions to wage war against us and to divide and occupy our lands.”

The fact that both reformists and Islamo-nationalists work within the nation-state system drives Ayman al-Zawahiri and his associates to distraction. According to the online magazine Voice of Jihad, “There has to be a collapse of national identities. When these are opposed to the Shari’a or attempt to rival it, and when they cause division among people and [provide a basis for] allegiances, then these national identities should fall.”

At first, it might seem a bit counterintuitive to believe that groups whose primary marker is Islam should work within the nation-state system. But it is necessary to remember two things. First, other nationalisms also use transnational religious identities to differentiate themselves. One need only think of the Irish, Hindu nationalists, or Israelis. Second, one must remember that Islam does not exist apart from social practice and the beliefs social practice confirms. After all, Muslims whose social existence is defined by the modern state and state system have two choices with regard to Islam: On
the one hand, they can subsume Islam within categories of belief coherent with their lived world. That lived world includes notions of distinct national identities, cultural authenticity, public vs. private spheres, and the like. On the other hand, they can banish Islam from the “public sphere” entirely by rendering it phenomenologically “other.”

If one thinks about this, it should not be surprising: Beginning in the nineteenth century, the inhabitants of the Middle East were affected by the same transformative processes that were simultaneously affecting the inhabitants of Europe and much of the rest of the world. Included among those processes was the imposition of the modern disciplinary state, which first arrived in the Middle East in two ways: First, it arrived as a result of emulation of the Western model of statecraft by Middle Eastern rulers and potentates. Second, it was directly imposed through colonialism. The ability of Middle Eastern states to impose the new regimen varied from place to place and took decades to evolve to the level of the sort of state present today, of course. Nevertheless, over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries these states were increasingly able to extend their reach and engage their populations in common practices. This extension and engagement, in turn, activated and reinforced modes of conceptualizing society and government very similar to those that developed in Europe.

This being the case, one would naturally assume that the social and political movements that have emerged in the region during the last century—including those movements that use Islam as their primary marker—would be analogous to European social and political movements. On the flipside, one would assume that the social science categories developed to classify European social and political movements would be applicable to the Middle East—or else not valid for Europe either. Hence our use of the labels “reformist” and “Islamo-nationalist” to refer to movements singled out for criticism by al-Zawahiri, and hence al-Zawahiri’s criticism of these movements in the
first place. But if it is the case that al-Zawahiri’s criticism of the reformists and Islamo-nationalists goes back to the willingness of the reformists and Islamo-nationalists to work within the parameters of the nation-state system, and if it is the case that socio-political movements that have emerged in the Middle East would naturally correspond to socio-political movements that emerged in Europe in response to similar conditions, how then should we classify al-Qaeda and its ilk?

As in the case of the various organizations and parties that might be included within the categories of reformist and Islamo-nationalist, al-Qaeda-type groups should not be understood in terms of a special, impenetrable category of religion. Nor should they be defined by the level of political violence they are prepared to commit. Finally, if the social sciences have any validity at all, it should not be necessary to invent some unique new category, based, perhaps, on some irreducible Islamic civilization or tradition. Instead, as I recently wrote in the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence*, the category most appropriate for al-Qaeda and its various spin-offs and imitators is Islamo-anarchist.

Before we can deal with the appropriateness of this classification, let me explain what I mean by the word “anarchist.” Social scientists have defined anarchism in a number of ways. Some look at anarchism as a subcategory located within the category of eschatology or political violence. Some look at anarchism as a form of psycho-pathology. Most commonly, social scientists with a historical bent identify anarchism with a specific intellectual tradition—the deformed twin of Marxism, if you will, or a stepchild of the Enlightenment. This, of course, was the anarchism that was preeminent during the movement’s heyday, which lasted from 1880-1920. And if we were to restrict anarchism to one geographic region, one time period, and one intellectual tradition, their case is plausible. There is, however, a different way of looking at
anarchism: Anarchism does not represent an intellectual tradition, per se; rather, anarchism, like nationalism, is a distinct category of political phenomenon.

As in the case of nationalist movements, all anarchist movements are fundamentally the same. Anarchist movements throughout the modern period and the world over share a distinctive discourse. For the sake of this discussion, we might identify four characteristics of that discourse. Not coincidentally, the discourse of al-Qaeda displays the same four characteristics:

First, in its discourse, anarchism claims to be defensive. As I said earlier, the struggle the “Zionist-Crusader alliance” is waging against the Islamic umma—and the legality of and obligation to self-defense—plays a preeminent role in al-Qaeda’s polemics. Here’s how bin Laden has put it:

Why are we fighting and opposing you? The answer is very simple: Because you attacked us and continue to attack us. You attacked us in Palestine…. You attacked us in Somalia; you supported the Russian atrocities against us in Chechnya, the Indian oppression against us in Kashmir, and the Jewish aggression against us in Lebanon. Under your supervision, consent and orders, the governments of our countries, which act as your agents, attack us on a daily basis. These governments prevent our people from establishing the Shari’a, using violence and lies to do so.

The second characteristic of the discourse of anarchism—and the discourse of al-Qaeda—is that it is anti-systemic. In other words, it targets the system and its agents that are, for anarchists, the source of oppression. But there is more: that targeting provides the central axis around which the discourse revolves. The system against which anarchists rail varies from time to time and place to place. It might be the nation-state or capitalist system, or, most recently, the globalized world order. The agents of
the system also vary, and have included the bourgeoisie, individual politicians, or, most recently, the IMF and the World Bank. To a certain extent, it is the anti-systemic nature of anarchism that differentiates anarchism from nationalism—nationalists want to join the system, not destroy it.

For al-Qaeda, the state-system was imposed on the Middle East by the Zionist-Crusader alliance to keep it weak and subjugated. Again, to quote Voice of Jihad:

The general aim of the jihad and the mujahidin is to strike at the foundations and infrastructure of the Western colonialist program or at the so-called world order—or, to put it bluntly, to defeat the Crusaders in the battle that has been going on for over a century. Their defeat means, simply, the elimination of all forms of nation-states, such that all that remains is the natural existence familiar to Islam—the regional entity under the great Islamic state.

The third characteristic that the discourse of anarchism and that of al-Qaeda hold in common is that because anarchism is anti-systemic, anarchists are put in the position of counterposing an alternative to the system they oppose. In other words, anarchists put themselves in a position of proposing some form of counter-community. They sometimes do this explicitly, sometimes implicitly: Bakunin had his romanticized Gemeinschaft. Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri have their caliphate.

A lot—probably altogether too much—has been made of the call to reestablish a caliphate. This is probably because it reeks of exoticism and medievalism—thus we can caricature and stigmatize those who attacked us. But for al-Qaeda, the term caliphate has, so far, escaped rigorous definition. Various al-Qaeda have used the term “caliphate” in various ways: Sometimes al-Qaeda have used it as a metaphor. For example, al-Zawahiri once defined the caliphate as a place “in whose shade will retire
every Muslim—nay, every wronged one and seeker of justice on the face of this earth.”

Sometimes for al-Qaedaists the caliphate recalls Evangelical post-millenarianism. Hence, bin Laden once said, “that the entire Islamic community has set in motion the establishment of a rightly-guided caliphate which our prophet foretold in an authentic hadith; to wit: the rightly-guided caliphate will return, God willing.” The one thing we can say for sure after reading or listening to texts written by self-proclaimed al-Qaedaists is that al-Qaedaists do not envision the establishment of an Islamic superstate with the disciplinary attributes and hierarchies of a modern nation-state. Rather, in the al-Qaeda imagination it seems that the caliphate might be defined as a territorial expanse freed from the constraints of the nation-state system and ordered and administered according to the precepts of Islamic law.

If one compares the al-Qaedaist view of the caliphate with that of the Party of Liberation, one can see the danger of placing too much significance in the call for its reestablishment. The Party of Liberation was founded in Palestine in the 1950s, and shares a political and social vision not unlike other parties founded during the heyday of decolonization—as might be gleaned from its chosen name. Like al-Qaeda, the Party of Liberation advocates the restoration of the caliphate. Unlike al-Qaeda, however, the party’s vision of the caliphate is that of a modern, corporatist state, albeit a very large one. It has even laid out the blueprint for a functionally divided, hierarchical apparatus for caliphal governance. And, unlike al-Qaeda, the party claims not to believe in defensive jihad or, under present circumstances, the use of violence. Advocating a caliphate, in other words, is similar to labeling something as terrorism: it tells us nothing useful about a group’s ideology.

The final characteristic of anarchism that is displayed by al-Qaeda is that the discourse of anarchism draws from the cultural milieu in which it is embedded. This
might appear self-evident, but it is not. Anarchist discourse differs from, for example, scientific socialism, inasmuch as the latter provides its adherents with an invariable vocabulary and mode of argumentation and logic. Think of how little the discourse of the Bolsheviks differs from the discourse of Cuban revolutionaries. Now think of how much the discourse of Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky differs from that of Sacco and Vanzetti, not to mention Ayman al-Zawahiri. Nineteenth century European anarchist movements drew from the language of Christian communitarianism or utopian or scientific socialism, for example. The cultural tool box from which al-Qaedaists draw includes a variety of Islamic tropes and the argumentation and logic of salafism.

Now it should be noted that the discussion above privileges a small, albeit notorious, group of al-Qaedaists: Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden, and their immediate cohort. If, as Olivier Roy has written, the term “al-Qaeda” no longer refers to a distinct entity but has become “a brand name ready for franchise,” one must be cautious with generalizations based on such a narrow sample. After all, the actions and pronouncements of Abu Mus‘ab al-Zarqawi earned the Jordanian-born thug a strong reprimand from al-Zawahiri. Taking it one step further, it is worth emphasizing that the three categories of political Islam discussed in this chapter—reformist, Islamo-nationalist, Islamo-anarchist—should be seen as ideal types. As we saw with the Algerian example with which the chapter began, it is possible for groups to evolve from one to another type over time. And as we know from the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, it is possible for boundaries within organizations to be fuzzy or for organizations to house multiple perspectives. Hence, the ongoing argument within the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt about the relative importance of da‘wa (missionary work) vs. siyasa (political work). And the Muslim Brotherhood has not been the only Islamist group torn in multiple directions: The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood tried to resolve
the da‘wa/siyasa dilemma—and avoid government repression—by setting up a separate party, the Islamic Action Front in 1992. The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood concentrates on da‘wa; the Islamic Action Front on siyasa.

But even if the three categories are ideal types, it should appear evident by now that both the language of religious studies and the language of terrorology are inadequate for identifying and thus understanding the phenomena we are witnessing in the Islamic world. Besides the problems underscored by the Department of Homeland Security, there are two problems with the language of theology. First, it mystifies our object of study: It treats religion as a distinct phenomenon that is impervious to analysis and that must be accepted on its own terms. Second, it reinforces the idea of Islamic exceptionalism. This might be acceptable to a Samuel Huntington or a Bernard Lewis, but for most scholars of Islam and/or the Middle East, this battle is long over. The language of terrorology also presents us with two problems. First, it mistakes an attribute—political violence—for essence. Second, it can only be wielded as a blunt instrument.

That is the bad news. But there is good news as well: First, in March 2009 the British government announced it was interested in reestablishing contact with the “political wing” of Hizbullah. Soon after taking office, the Obama administration leaked that it might be interested in talking with more “reasonable” (i.e., “statist”) elements within the Taliban. It has also reformulated the “Global War on Terrorism” as “overseas contingency operations.” These three events indicate a shift among policymakers that takes us from a paradigm in which terrorism is viewed as a fundamental unit of analysis to a paradigm in which terrorism is viewed merely as a tactic. The second piece of good news is that we already have existing social science categories that are up to the task of typologizing political Islam.