Charisma: Approaching a Blighted Concept through a New Lens

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Charisma: Approaching a Blighted Concept through a New Lens

by Cameron Harris

Ground Zero

On September 11 2001, al-Qaeda changed the course of history. Before the thick clouds of smoke and debris settled, one man had simultaneously become the world’s most hunted individual and America’s number one enemy. In the aftermath of the attacks, Osama Bin Laden (OBL) became the first enemy of the U.S. to successfully attack the continental territory of the country since the War of 1812. This single success captured the imaginations of jihadists the world over, and in one day, OBL went from a byword amongst policy professionals to the charismatic terrorist leader of the twenty-first century.

What do we mean by “charisma”? News media and the public at large have used the term “charisma” so indiscriminately so as to render the concept qualitatively useless. Often, charisma is used to describe politicians that can inspire others. Other times, charisma is used to laud actors, artists, or athletes who capture our imagination. Sadly, none of the definitions seize the purest sense of the term “charisma.” Charisma addresses individuals who possess abilities, traits, or powers that an audience deems are otherworldly in nature. These powers form the basis of the leader’s authority, and it is upon this quasi-divine endowment of capacity that he or she leads. Charismatic authority must act independently of institutionalized forms of authority and power. A leader cannot be charismatic if he or she leads upon an established legal or traditional framework.

In completing this project I have two goals: First, that I may establish the groundwork for further research regarding how charisma affects terrorism, and second, to test the method by applying it to OBL and Ayman Zawahiri. This project will
particularly address whether or not OBL was ever a charismatic individual because of his largely accepted status as the charismatic terrorist leader of the twenty-first century. Understanding how charismatic individuals operate will open doors to better predicting and preventing terrorist organizations from attaining the same level of power and authority as al-Qaeda. Fundamentally, if the academic community cannot fully understand the leadership of terrorist organizations, there will always be a large gap in the literature and findings of terrorism studies.

Using the methods proposed in this paper confirms that OBL was charismatic, and that such a variable can be reliably measured and analyzed through an interpretation of speeches and other documents. Subsequently, this study will proceed with a thorough exploration of charisma, a literature review, a brief methodological explanation, the analysis of firsthand accounts and of OBL’s discourses, a thought experiment on Ayman Zawahiri, and a summary of the findings.

Charisma: The Ugly Step-Sister of the Ugly Step-Sister of Social Science

The academic community knows that terrorism studies are fraught by the complexities of secrecy, questionable information, and incomplete knowledge of events, evidence, and individuals (Drakos and Gofas 2006). Notwithstanding, the study of terrorism continues because of the disproportionate amount of disruption that terrorists can cause economically, politically, and socially (Findley and Young 2011). One of the most interesting questions in terrorism studies concerns the recruitment and radicalization efforts of online jihadists such as Anwar Al-Awlaki. Leadership within terrorist organizations seemingly exudes charismatic influence, yet little has been done to understand the workings of charisma within a terrorist framework.

Recent research has investigated the importance of charisma within terrorist organizations, particularly when looking at the amount of violence perpetrated by the organization, but also in how long each terrorist organization managed to survive. Through very basic measurements, it was found that charisma might have an effect on the two dependent variables of violence and longevity of the organization (Harris 2011). At the heart of this rudimentary measurement is the inherent difficulty of measuring charisma. Harris opted for a basic indicator measurement of whether the terrorist organizations in question had leadership mentioned by name on a government database (Harris 2011). This measurement was based upon the premise that if a government wanted to know about the leader, chances were he was charismatic, or the head of a particularly charismatic organization. While this measurement usefully gave a glimpse into the importance of this research area, its weaknesses restrict future contributions to the scientific community through this subject. The biggest weakness of the primary Harris measurement is that there is a strong case for reversed causality. Is it the charismatic leader that inspires his followers to cause violence, or is it the success of violent acts that wins followers and makes a terrorist leader charismatic?
Defining Charisma

In other words, this reversed causality leads many individuals to mistake power or influence—some of the symptoms of charisma—for charisma. Exploring the limits of charisma requires understanding its purest sense. Conceptually, the foundation of pure charisma lies in Max Weber’s definition. I have chosen to utilize and apply the Weberian understanding of charisma, because he was the first one to recognize its importance and, in my opinion, understands it the best. Weber states that charisma is a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These as such are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader (Weber 1947, 358).

This differs from the legal/rational and traditional framework for political authority, in that the legal/rational and the traditional framework’s authority stems from the status quo arrangement. This means the legal rational authority comes from a constitution or other legal document that gives the leadership power through a commonly accepted belief that they have the power to govern, because the people decreed it as such. The traditional framework suited to patriarchal organization, such as kings, establishes that the king can rule, because it has always been as such, from father to son, and that his or her authority stems from the tradition of power within the ruling family.

Charisma is different from the status quo arrangements by nature; it is a departure from the norm. Charismatic authority is based upon one’s ability to operate independently of the traditional or the legal/rational frameworks. As Weber states, it is upon the basis of the divine abilities or characteristics of the individual that his or her authority is based, usually in breaking with the political or social norms of the time. Thus, a prophet is a leader, because he reportedly can accurately prophesy, or a warrior is a leader because of his quasi-divine ability in combat. The warrior and the prophet are not leaders by grace of tradition or legal documents; it is their ability to shape the system according to their image that makes him or her charismatic.

In understanding charisma, it is helpful to look at what charisma is not. Any leader that operates within a political system according to the status quo cannot be purely charismatic. By definition he or she would be operating under the legal/rational or traditional authority. If that individual would then, by virtue of their abilities try to recreate the political system in which he or she operates, he or she would leave the realms of legal/rational and traditional authority and enter into the realm of charismatic authority. This illustration also shows that between the three general bases of authority is a very fluid nature to the character of authority, one may have charisma for a period of time, lose it, and gain it again, or vice versa. Charisma is by no means a permanent quality.
The legitimacy of the charismatic leader is inherently unstable because of his need to maintain a state of change, and most importantly, successes during those changes in order to retain his authority. Crisis management is an important component of charismatic leadership regardless of whether it is prophetic, warrior, or revolutionary charisma—the three examples of charismatic authority given by Weber (1947). Prophetic charisma is dependent upon revelations, healings, and visions, etc. Warrior charisma, the most akin to the terrorist, is dependent upon heroic victories or struggles against an enemy, and revolutionary charisma depends upon the ability of the leader to cause change through various means (Weber 1947). If the leader does not do so, his authority will be lost unless he can institutionalize it. The institutionalization of charismatic authority is the basis of modern governments. Weber would no longer consider the leader of an institutionalized organization charismatic; rather, the formerly charismatic leader will have fallen into the patriarchal school of leadership, though an individual can possess both genres of authority throughout his or her career. Weber included in his writings of charisma an “office charisma;” this occurs when an office or a title within the organization becomes charismatic. Within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Joseph Smith is considered charismatic (Weber did as well), and in part because of the martyrdom of Smith and the beliefs of the LDS community, whoever holds the office of “President of the Church” or the title of “Prophet” is considered charismatic through the office, regardless of his lack, or possession of, charisma.

Ansell and Fish argue that Weber missed a very important fourth dimension to leadership authority, namely the noncharismatic personalist party (1999). I would argue, however, that Ansell and Fish essentially describe the correct essence of traditional/clan charisma. Oftentimes a personal loyalty to the family of the charismatic leadership gives authority to the individual who succeeds the charismatic prophet, warrior, or revolutionary. For example, with the death of the Prophet Muhammad, the succession crisis between the lead follower of Muhammad and that of his son represented a difference in “office charisma” and “clan charisma.” Ansell and Fish’s contributions to understanding the importance of personalism within charismatic individuals is helpful to understanding a followers desire to support a charismatic leader. Though certain elements of charisma can be incorrectly classified, the title of no-charismatic personalist party applies to the clan charisma or the traditional authority of power.

Misconceptions of Charisma in Modern Leadership

As mentioned above, there may be instances of individuals within terrorist organizations who do not possess charisma. Often the misattribution falls into three main sub-characteristics of charisma: populism, personalism, or technologically projected charisma (TPC). Pure charisma is not populism, personalism, or TPC.
While each one of these contains certain aspects of charisma, they in themselves do not make for a charismatic individual. Populism is often seen in the discourse of a leader. He or she will invoke Manichean motions of political principles with one side being good and the other evil (Hawkins 2009). Thus, a charismatic individual may be populist in his discourse as long as he or she does not operate within a status-quo arrangement of authority. According to this definition, Hugo Chávez was populist but not charismatic because of his acceptance of the established political system.

Personalism is a driving sense of loyalty from which a leader is able to maintain allegiance from followers based on the personal connection (Ansell and Fish 1999). His or her followers love the personalist charismatic individual. Charismatic leaders can have personalistic attributes about them, however, charisma is based purely on his abilities to deliver his followers the change that he or she has promised according to his or her genre of charisma be it the warrior, the prophet, or the revolutionary. Thus, an individual may be charismatic regardless of the presence or absence of personalism.

Technologically projected charisma (TPC) is the use of modern technological capabilities that create false illusions of charisma (Braun 2009, Tucker 1968). The clearest example of this is North Korea, where the leadership is worshiped as quasi-divine individuals who have and will continue to deliver change. North Korea beautifully stages mass rallies, a hallmark of TPC described in further detail below, with shows of emotion that may or may not be true. However, the use of the media to portray these events to the outside world signals an effort to show the world the “charisma” of the North Korean leadership.

As shown above, charisma is a concept that is unique unto itself. It can clearly be identified with a little effort and thus can be studied. This new conceptual understanding of charisma will serve as the theoretical foundation for the methods developed below, as well as for future studies in this area. In order to develop a more meaningful model, I consulted Robert Tucker.

**Can the Quasi-Divine be Studied?**

Robert Tucker wanted to use charisma as a tool in explaining some of the puzzles history has presented to the academic community (Tucker 1968). Opponents to Tucker would argue that because of the quasi-divine nature of charisma, this is a realm that would at best stay in the study of religious movements and individuals. However, I side with Tucker in his assessment of the usefulness of charisma in the social sciences in general. In order to objectively point toward an individual’s possession of charisma, there must be equally objective underlying assumptions that separate the supernatural from the science. Tucker, in his work the *Theory of Charismatic Leadership*, established several unique observable implications to be used when assessing the charisma of an individual.
First, in order for an individual to be considered charismatic, his audience must simply perceive that the individual possesses charisma, independently of whether he or she actually does. When studying charisma, one can avoid metaphysical explanations, because the study of charisma does not concern itself with the actuality of one's ability to hold quasi-divine power. He or she must simply maintain a following of individuals who believe the leader in question has the abilities to deliver them from the crisis of their movement's main issue.

Second, charisma by nature is based upon a revolutionary spirit, wherein the charismatic individual departs from the established norms of society. Weber touches upon this principle in his definition of a leader's authority. A leader may have authority from three broad families enumerated by Weber, the legal/rational, traditional, or the charismatic (Weber 1947). Charisma establishes the departure from the traditional and legal modes of authority. Weber states,

Whatever the particular social setting (religion, politics, and so forth), charismatic leadership rejects old rules and issues a demand for change. It preaches or creates new obligations. It addresses itself to followers or potential followers in the spirit of saying: "it is written . . . , but I say unto you . . . ." In contrast and opposition to Bureaucratic authority, which respects rational rules, and to traditional authority, which is bound to precedents handed down from the past, charismatic authority, within the sphere of its claims, "repudiates the past, and is in this sense a specifically revolutionary force" (Quoted by Tucker 1968, 737).

Therefore, in measuring one's charisma, the charismatic leader will call for a rupture from what was and for the establishment of new ideals, conditions, and rules etc. This brings about the impetus for a movement.

Third, while an individual may be a great leader and organizer, without a cause for which the leader may advocate, there is no charisma, for, "[t]he charismatic leader is not idolized, nor is he freely followed for his extraordinary leadership qualities, but [he is] one who demonstrates such qualities in the process of summoning people to join in a movement for change, and in leading such a movement" (Tucker 1968, 737).

Fourth, movements require a clear set of goals and a clear vision established and or championed by the charismatic leader. Consequently, a charismatic leader must clearly enumerate the goals of his or her organization, as well as indicate why this is the case and how this will be accomplished (Tucker 1968). This instills within the followers of the charismatic leader a sense of mission and a belief in the movement.

Fifth, the strong convictions held by the followers of a charismatic individual usually come from a sense of crisis for the community of the charismatic leader. The sense of crisis, and ultimately the charismatic individual's quasi-divine authority, gives a charismatic individual a messianic status in the eyes of his or her followers,
allowing a charismatic terrorist leader to attract a core group of supporters to his or her movement (the sixth observable implication) (Tucker 1968).

Seventh, because of the nature of the individuals that social scientists would usually like to study, often the only sources of information available are the writings of the individual and secondhand accounts of the individual (Tucker 1968). Tucker recommends that the best way to study these sources is to consult accounts of those who opposed the individual. Those sources will help to counter any conscious or sub-conscious positive bias of the individual in question by his or her supporters. Also, it is important to look at the individual from the beginning of his or her career. Studying a "charismatic" individual at the apogee of his or her power or infamy is not reliable because of capacities of states to create false images of widespread adoration of the individual that may appear as charisma but in reality are not. In other words, Tucker states,

There has been a certain tendency both to search for examples of charismatic leadership among leaders in power . . . [w]hen we concentrate attention upon that stage, however, we run greater risk of error in identifying a given leader as charismatic; for power is a source of phenomena that resemble the effects of charisma without actually being such . . . it brings prestige, and especially in the modern technological conditions, possibilities of artificial inducement or simulation of mass adulation of a leader. . . . The pre-power stage of the case is of critical significance (Tucker 1968, 740).

Measuring according to outward signals of success would present a researcher with a glimpse of TPC. Ideally, a charismatic individual would have been charismatic from the beginning, with his or her small nexus of followers present from the beginning of his or her movement.

Eighth, for this study, a charismatic leader would just as easily inspire hatred as he or she does adulation. This is because a charismatic individual advocates for the termination of a status quo that was invariably the means, traditions, and mores of other individuals. So while the individual in question will be finding supporters among those who perceive the current circumstance as a crisis for the cause, he will also very clearly be establishing enemies.

The observable implications established by Tucker will be used as criteria for evaluating OBL in the following section, and are summarized in the following table.

**OBL’s Charisma Explained**

Keeping in mind that there are no perfect measurements for charisma, there were two aspects used to successfully complete this project. First, discourse analysis of firsthand accounts of OBL and, second, an analysis of his declarations combined together establish OBL’s charismatic standing.
Observable Implications of a Charismatic Leader: Osama Bin Laden

1. Perception by sympathizers that the leader possesses quasi-divine qualities or attributes. 
   
2. The agenda of the charismatic individual is focused on a rupture accomplished outside a legal-rational or traditional framework that changes the status quo. 

3. The charismatic individual is the leader, founder, or standard bearer of a revolutionary movement. 

4. The agenda of the charismatic individual clearly indicates the goals of his or her movement along with why and how those goals are to be accomplished. 

5. The society from which the charismatic individual draws support must be in a perceived state of crisis. 

6. The charismatic individual, regardless of the success of his or her movement, will maintain a core group of dedicated, die-hard supporters. 

7. The charismatic individual attracted a small group of individuals before he or she started to have success. 

8. Opposition by members of the established political, economic, cultural, and or social order. 

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<tr>
<th>The Charismatic Individual is the Leader, Founder, or Standard Bearer of a Revolutionary Movement (3 on the chart)</th>
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OBL can safely satisfy this requirement, because he was the leader, founder, and standard bearer of al Qaeda. Some report that OBL was heavily influenced by Zawahiri in terms of ideological direction and motivation (Riedel 2008). Yet, it cannot be denied that OBL’s immense wealth allowed him to play a qualitatively different role than Zawahiri. OBL could finance, recruit, and act as the spokesperson for al-Qaeda because of his credentials. A follower details, 

He not only gave us his money, but he also gave himself. He came down from his palace to live with the Afghan peasants and the Arab fighters. He cooked with them, ate with them, dug trenches with them. This is Bin Laden’s way. His credentials include fighting in the famous battles of the whole Afghan war. In these battles the mujahidin came out victorious convincing them how the Soviet’s huge military machine could be defeated by unconventional methods (Gunaratna 2005, 9). 

OBL’s money allowed him to maintain a voice in the organization of al-Qaeda and mujahedeen resistance. However his actions allowed him to take the mantle not only of financier and founder but as al-Qaeda leader. This can be seen through his
fatwas wherein he succinctly and clearly described the goals of al Qaeda, the organization he founded, led, and financed.

The Agenda of the Charismatic Individual is Focused on a Rupture Accomplished Outside a Legal-Rational or Traditional Framework that Changes the Status Quo (2 on the chart) and The Society from which the Charismatic Individual Draws Support Must be in a Perceived State of Crisis (5 on the chart)

One of OBL’s biggest heartaches came from what he saw to be the spiritual crisis of Wahhabi Islam. When the U.S. was asked to defend Saudi Arabia from Iraq, OBL and many others, saw what they perceived as traitorous behavior toward Islam. OBL Laden felt betrayed, because while Saddam was viewed as a secularist, the Americans were seen as the infidels, a greater evil than Iraq. OBL subsequently wrote a letter to the chief mufti of the Saudi Kingdom, a cleric named Bin Baz, wherein he listed several complaints against the kingdom (Riedel 2008, 53). The list included inviting infidels into the holy land but also the Saudi support of the Oslo peace accords. In the mind of OBL, working to establish peace with Israel was betraying all of the fellow Palestinians who had died and suffered at the hands of the Israelis. Riedel argues that the “letter appeared to be written more in sorrow than in anger. The tone is that of a man severely disappointed in his own government and especially the clerical establishment of Wahhabi Islam” (Riedel 2008, 53).

The aspects of Saudi society that OBL insisted should change departed radically from the position of a critic and drifted toward that of an avowed terrorist. OBL wanted to have U.S. troops removed from the Arabian soil, as well as all other Muslim kingdoms in which they were stationed. He also wanted to overthrow “crusaders [Americans], Jews, and tyrants [The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, etc.]” (Riedel 2008, 52–53). This would lead to an overthrow of the corrupt leadership of Saudi Arabia as well as a cleansing of Islam within the eyes of God. Thus, OBL agitated for extra-legal change that would have worked outside of the normal political avenues of change in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The Agenda of the Charismatic Individual Clearly Indicates the Goals of His or Her Movement Along with Why and How Those Goals are to be Accomplished (4 on the chart)

OBL issued two fatwas wherein he declared war on the U.S. and the Zionist-Crusader alliance. In the 1996 fatwa, OBL clearly said the goal of al-Qaeda is to “correct what had happened to the Islamic world in general, and the land of the two holy places in particular” (Bin Laden 1996). OBL is speaking to the apostate Arab tyrants who lorded over the Muslim peoples with the support of the United States. Historically, Hosni Mubarak was an excellent example of a secular Arab whose government was heavily supported by the United States.

In order to enact these changes in the Islamic world, we know he wanted to overthrow the Saudi royal family because the Saudi regime suspended Islamic Shari‘ah
law and allowed the “enemy of the Ummah—the American crusader forces—to occupy the land . . . “ (Bin Laden 1996). This was an affront to the holiest land in Islam. The proclamation of war through two fatwas declared that it was the duty of every Muslim, wherever they can, to kill Americans. OBL had planned on conducting a large enough terrorist attack that would draw the U.S. into major wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, so as to bleed the nation to death, just as he had done with the Soviets. Even with clearly enumerated goals, methods of accomplishments, and the reasons behind them, OBL faced enormous amounts of pressure from his fellow Muslims within the established order.

Opposition by Members of the Established Political, Economic, Cultural, and or Social Order (8 on the chart)

Because of his family’s influence within Saudi Arabia, Bin Laden was given incredible access to leadership within the kingdom. As mentioned above, he was one of the first to volunteer to raise an army to help defend the kingdom against the armies of Iraq. Upon his open declaration of the apostasy of the family of Saudi, the kingdom revoked his citizenship, his passport, and Saudi Arabia mustered large amounts of manpower to seeking out and destroying al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. During this time, access to OBL was notoriously difficult for Western journalists. One man, Abdel Bari Atwan, met with Osama in 1996 and interviewed him extensively. Atwan’s first encounter with Bin Laden proves telling.

The Charismatic Individual, Regardless of the Success of His or Her Movement, will Maintain a Core Group of Dedicated, Die-Hard Supporters (6 on the chart) and

The Charismatic Individual Attracted a Small Group of Individuals before He or She Started to Have Success (7 on the chart)

Atwan met with OBL before the notoriety of the September 11 attacks, a point that is crucial in correctly judging his charisma. Meeting with OBL before the apogee of his charismatic influence and organizational success provides an insight into the power of the man without any mass popular support. Atwan writes that even before OBL was at the peak of his influence, his notoriety played into a mystical aura surrounding him,

I met Osama Bin Laden just before midnight on 23 November. He was sitting cross-legged on the carpet, a Kalashnikov in his lap. There were several others present, but I was transfixed by him. It is always strange to meet someone in the flesh whose image you have become familiar with in the press, even more so when you know they are wanted by the world’s intelligence agencies . . . (Atwan 2008, 27).

This implies that it would be helpful to look back to a moment of relative obscurity within the life of OBL. Relative is an important term, because OBL by simple virtue of his birth was destined to run in influential circles. However, if we look at the period of
OBL’s life after his successful jihad against the Soviets, we learn he recruited his own group of warriors (Riedel 2008, 44). This group formed the base of al-Qaeda that later traveled to Sudan and then Afghanistan as OBL lost political friends and shelter. Atwan relates that those around OBL were his die-hard followers. He said that,

Bin Laden did not behave in an authoritarian or even commanding manner—far from it. Yet the respect and esteem in which the mujahedin held their leader was immediately apparent. They hung on his every word and always addressed him with the honorific “Sheikh.” All of them told me they would gladly give their lives to defend him. I remember Faisal, the envoy who came to me in Peshawar, telling me that he would be prepared to take bullets in his own chest to shield and protect “the Sheikh” . . . (Atwan 2008, 35).

It is apparent that those who followed OBL were willing to do anything for him. An essential aspect of al-Qaeda circled around an oath members would make to OBL. This oath symbolized a desire to die for and serve OBL. Yet even those who did not agree with OBL, like Atwan, . . . “[were] put . . . at ease, and he somehow seemed very familiar to [him]—perhaps the essence of charisma . . .” (Atwan 2008, 28).

Perception by Sympathizers that the Leader Possesses Quasi-Divine Qualities or Attributes (1 on the chart)

Some of the only firsthand accounts we have of OBL detail his uncanny ability to lead those around him in time of ferocious combat. We have heard that during the original jihad against the Soviet Union, OBL was notorious for his bravery while under fire. Atwan writes that OBL’s courage under fire is legendary, stating:

Bin Laden’s reputation as a warrior amongst those alongside whom he has fought is marked by deep admiration for his courage and for the fact that he displays no fear of death, he has frequently expressed regret that he has not yet been “martyred” like so many of his comrades in Afghanistan. During the Afghan jihad he came under heavy bombardment more than forty times. On at least three of these occasions, witnesses say, gruesome carnage ensued, with flesh and body parts flying in the air, but no trace of fear was visible in Bin Laden. One of the mujahedin who fought in Afghanistan told me that once a Scud missile exploded less than twenty yards from Bin laden, who didn’t flinch. He was hospitalized several times after being wounded in battle. Once he was nearly killed by poison gas from a chemical weapons attack, and still suffers throat pain as a result (Atwan 2008, 56–57).

OBL’s frantic search for death and martyrdom inspired within his followers a sense of quasi-divine control and bravery. This quote details the exceptional bravery of OBL and illustrates his exceptional qualities of leadership while in battle. OBL did not show fear and led his troops in such a way so as to earn their respect. Another
colleague of his from the jihad against the Soviets asserts that he was inspirational in that he could show his fellow mujahedeen that he was one of them, a financier who got his hands dirty in the name of Allah. Reportedly, the incredible military victory of the mujahedeen surrounded OBL with a charisma that convinced his followers.

The victory [ought to be] interpreted by al-Qaeda ideologues as the will of men being singlehandedly defeated by the will of god. The internalization of the victory brought about a feeling of power derived from the belief that their effort had received divine legitimacy and a clear indication that the path they had taken was guided (Gunaratna 2005, 9).

We see that OBL might not have been a divinely empowered warrior, for bravery does not count as the only quality of quasi-divine power or authority. Rather, OBL’s divine power came from the sense of his followers that some divine power had allowed them overcome a vastly superior force. The will of men was subjected to the will of god, led by one appointed by Allah himself. OBL thus received a mantle of divine investiture. He was given the power and authority from a higher power to work in the name of god on earth.

The subsequent successful and audacious attacks engineered by OBL helped to maintain and enhance his authority. The embassy bombings, the attack on the USS Cole, and the September 11 attacks continued to solidify in the minds of his followers that OBL had a divine mission to overcome the gross wickedness of Western powers that lorded over the Middle East and the Holy Land. His success led to large amounts of press coverage though few Western journalists were allowed access or interviews with OBL.

**So What Does This Mean for the U.S.?**

The lack of access OBL gave to journalists helped his charisma by generating a sense of mystery. Ironically, the message he sent was very clear to all who paid close attention. OBL would do what he said other Muslim leaders were not doing enough of: strictly sticking to Wahhabi Islam. In the end, OBL was charismatic; he created an organization that has long outlived the normal lifespan of a terrorist organization. His vision, goals, and enthusiasm allowed him to create, within the framework established by Tucker, an aura of invincibility that when mixed with religious connotations, allowed him to become a pseudo warrior-savior in the eyes of his followers.

Presently, the organization is meandering through a transition period of office charisma, where the strength of OBL’s charisma has carried on with his successor Zawahiri. Most analysts would argue that Zawahiri is not as big of a threat, because he does not possess the same measure of charisma as OBL. However, I would argue that the intelligence community would be amiss to write off his strength as a leader.
Zawahiri: A Thought Experiment

Many analysts have stated that Zawahiri is not as charismatic as OBL. I submit they do so in error, using the simple media definition of charisma to inform their analyses. Zawahiri satisfies a majority of the conditions established by this project and does so in a way that uniquely highlights some of the oddities of charisma.

Zawahiri by all accounts was the thinker behind al-Qaeda, and his teachings are what most likely led to OBL's embrace of radical jihadi doctrine (Riedel 2008). Zawahiri comes from a distinguished pedigree of contributors to Islamic society. His father founded King Saud University in Saudi Arabia, and, like OBL, he was born into an aristocratic family. He maintained a small jihadi movement called al Gamaa, which participated in the assassination of Anwar Sadat and the subsequent efforts to overthrow the Mubarak government. The activities of his organization caused the Mubarak government to crack down especially hard on al Gamaa, because of Zawahiri's refusal to sign a truce with the Egyptian government (Riedel 2008). The Egyptian authority's response led to his eventual voyage to Afghanistan and his eventual interactions with OBL.

Zawahiri has clearly articulated goals of re-establishing a caliphate similar to that of the Ottoman Empire (Riedel 2008). Riedel states that the imagery Zawahiri uses is incredibly clear:

The picture Zawahiri paints is one of an unprecedented assault on the Islamic world by its enemies: Crusaders, Zionists, and Hindus. But Zawahiri has devised a plan for repelling the attack, defending the ummah, and recreating the caliphate. Its key element is jihad, just as Ibn Taymiyya foresaw. Thus, every Muslim is duty-bound to fight the enemies of Islam, including the unbeliever and the corrupt followers who ally themselves with the enemy (Riedel 2008, 31).

This shows that Zawahiri was interested in breaking with the establishment outside of the norms of legal processes or peaceful dissent. He wants to overthrow the corrupt Arab dictatorships that have betrayed his people.

Yet, Zawahiri does not have an inner circle comparable to that of OBL. I argue that he has maintained OBL as the single, dedicated individual at the core of his movement. As the ideological brains of al-Qaeda, he provided the inspiration and influence on OBL that helped to establish al-Qaeda. While we do not know which individual had the most influence over the other, it is clear that both joined together to create a vision of Islam, creating a potential co-charismatic influence on the other that helped maintain their charisma to others. Regardless of the relative small group of die-hard followers, Zawahiri targets the same audience that OBL did, or those dissatisfied with current state of Islam in the world. These are the people who view Islam in a state of crisis.

However, Zawahiri did not have the same kind of success that would attract those followers to him, nor allow him to claim that he had divine qualities or attributes. He
is most known for the massacre of Western tourists at the Luxor hotel. In the eyes of most Egyptians, his target audience, this was seen as a barbaric and cruel act of violence (Riedel 2008).

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<th>Observable Implications of a Charismatic Leader: Ayman al Zawahiri</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Perception by sympathizers that the leader possesses quasi-divine qualities or attributes.</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The agenda of the charismatic individual is focused on a rupture accomplished outside a legal-rational or traditional framework that changes the status quo.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The charismatic individual is the leader, founder, or standard bearer of a revolutionary movement.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The agenda of the charismatic individual clearly indicates the goals of his or her movement along with why and how those goals are to be accomplished.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The society from which the charismatic individual draws support must be in a perceived state of crisis.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The charismatic individual, regardless of the success of his or her movement, will maintain a core group of dedicated, die-hard supporters.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The charismatic individual attracted a small group of individuals before he or she started to have success.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Opposition by members of the established political, economic, cultural, and or social order.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We see that while Zawahiri has yet to achieve a spectacular attack on the U.S., he is still strongly charismatic in his own way. I would go so far as to say that if he was successful in attacking the U.S. on a scale similar to that of September 11, Zawahiri will have fully inherited the charismatic mantle of OBL, which would undoubtedly keep al-Qaeda alive for many years to come. If he does not, I predict one of two things to happen: first, a gradual disenchantment and further splintering of al-Qaeda as the organization seeks another individual worthy to lead the Islamic revolution, or second, al-Qaeda limps along until it is absorbed back into the mainstream of the status quo by becoming more politically focused like the ETA.

**The End or Is It?**

After the death of OBL, many debated what would happen to al-Qaeda as an organization. Several analysts have since declared that al-Qaeda as an operating organization has degenerated to small franchises that operate independently one from another (Merriam 2011, Farrall 2011). Those analysts argue this happened in part
because of the decentralized nature of the organization that was controlled by OBL. With the discernible infighting that occurred within al-Qaeda, it became clear that succession was an issue because of a lack of a natural charismatic leader amongst the elite of al-Qaeda (Merriam, 2011).

Those vocal in their theories are not in accord upon the significance of this development. Leah Farrall largely believes that fragmentation is a sign of strength within the organization (Farrall 2011). Essentially, the organization’s strength does not come from the number of soldiers within its ranks, or the technology that it has, but from the fear generated from its name. Farrall argues that a single dramatically successful attack from the al-Qaeda organization could easily resurrect the organization and imbue it with new energy. However, Farrall does not take into account some of the difficulties that come from decentralization.

Fragmentation of terrorist groups loosens control over operations and overall strategy. Losing control of an operations strategy weakens the overall appeal of a brand (Merriam 2011). In the process, the weakening of a brand results in the group losing donors and appeal to potential terrorists and donors. In this case, Lisa Merriam argues that decentralizing the al-Qaeda brand will lead to an eventual death of the organization because of some of the botched attempts that have now come to be associated with al-Qaeda. Merriam states, Since 2003, al-Qaeda’s product has been pathetic, consisting of botched attacks. Embarrassing schemes like exploding underwear have undermined the brand’s virility. The Times Square bomb fizzle has shown the brand to be downright impotent. The difference between the fall of the Twin Towers to a printer cartridge bomb is enormous. The al-Qaeda “product” is now one of small ambitions and failure after failure (Merriam 2011).

Merriam argues that consistency is a requirement for the strength of a brand and the survivability of the organization. As a consequence, there is no uniting figure with the same star appeal as OBL, and the organization will eventually die or so goes the argument.

Terrorist organizations are uniquely dependent upon their leadership, as is the case with al-Qaeda to provide centralized direction, Merriam’s argument, or deliver a spectacular attack orchestrated by a new charismatic leader, Farrall’s argument. If neither of these events materializes, al-Qaeda as an effective organization will slowly cease to exist. Centralization, though vulnerable, is the only way to maintain the focus of the brand or organization and ensure its continued life (Merriam, 2011). Centralized organization in the face of the American security machine requires some particularly charismatic individuals such as OBL, and the possible replacements for OBL do not appear to have the same charisma as the former leader.

The U.S. and academics should not, however, let down their guard, because we see that while he has yet to spectacularly succeed in an attack on the U.S., Zawahiri is still charismatic. Certainly, his form of charisma does not match with the commonly
held definition, but this does not lessen the threat he poses to the United States. Zawahiri will continue to represent an important threat to the interests of the U.S., until he starts to move al-Qaeda in another direction. Until this time, however, we can rest assured that because OBL was so successful in attacking the U.S. he not only changed the world but the future of his organization. OBL was so successful that he may have created a barrier to authority that can only be surmounted by Zawahiri through an attack greater than or equal to that of September 11. Thankfully, such an attack will also be much more difficult for the organization to carry out, because of the changes resulting from that fateful day in September.

REFERENCES
APPENDIX A

Authority in Weberian it forms an evolutionary process:

- Charismatic
- Office Charisma
- Legal/Rational
- Clan Charisma
- Traditional
- Charismatic