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Al-Qaeda: the misunderstood Wahhabi connection and the ideology of violence



Maha Azzam

Bewildering descriptions of a shadowy network, undercover terrorist cells, imminent dangers, new arrests, create alarm but not much clarity. Speculation about the extent and strength of Al-Qaeda reach no satisfactory conclusions. A more pertinent line of inquiry would be to focus instead on questions about the nature and appeal of Al-Qaeda: those related to ideology. Can we speak of an ideology behind Bin Laden's and Al-Qaeda's politics of violence? Is theirs a coherent dogma or a fragmented and ill-thought-out understanding of Islam? Do its leaders and members share a common tradition? What lies behind the espousal of Islam, anti-Americanism and the resort to terror?

The answers to these questions may help shed light on the connection between the different elements that make up the network and their use of Islamic tradition and dogma for the justification of violence. They will also help clarify the political and religious parameters, so often blurred by the rhetoric of both Bin Laden and his opponents, which in turn is critical in defining policy *vis-à-vis* regional states such as Saudi Arabia and Iran and increasingly towards Islamism in Turkey, as well as distinguishing between those Islamist groups which espouse violence and those which do not.

Influences and sources of ideology: what are the defining elements?

Much is made of the influence of Wahhabism on the make-up of Bin Laden and the extremism of his followers and supporters. The teachings of Muhammed 'Abdel Wahhab (the founder of what later came to be referred to as Wahhabism) are a very particular response to Arabian society during the eighteenth century that emphasized the singularity of God in the face of a growing appeal of saint adulation and excessive visitations to shrines and an unembellished and strict adherence to the Quran. The alliance of this man of religion and his teachings with the al-Saud family helped forge the Saudi state and remains the source of its religious legitimacy. The strict and 'puritanical' nature of this interpretation of Islam not only characterized the state but found adherents world-wide even though they did not share the political agenda of the ruling family. However, there is no evidence that Bin Laden or his followers would describe themselves as Wahhabi, although they may be inspired by the spirit and tradition espoused by Muhammed 'Abdel Wahhab. A number of Islamists claim that Bin Laden has no connection with Wahhabism and also point to his Yemeni background, which is typically non-Wahhabi.

A confusion may arise because many Islamists see themselves as Salafi (a generally more puritanical interpretation of Islam founded on adhering to the interpretation of the early followers of Islam).¹ Wahhabism is a form of Salafi interpretation. On the other hand, the centre for orthodox tolerant Sunni Islam, the al-Azhar university, would argue that all good Muslims are Salafi by definition. Therefore, in trying to understand the ideology of Bin Laden, it is not particularly rewarding to pursue the 'Wahhabi' connection. It is true that the teachings of the sheikhs in Saudi-funded schools in Pakistan gave rise to the radicalism of the Taliban, but it is equally true that Wahhabi sheikhs in Saudi Arabia have unequivocally stated that suicide bombings are un-Islamic.

Bin Laden himself started off as a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is not a Wahhabi-oriented organization.² He joined forces with Abdullah Azzam (a legendary Arab fighter against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan who was also a member of the Brotherhood). The Muslim Brotherhood broke off its links with Bin Laden in the mid-1980s when he set up Al-Qaeda, not because of religious disagreement, but because politically he had gone his own way. Abdullah Azzam, on the other hand, remained part of the Brotherhood. Although he had opted to emphasize *jihad*, he remained within the fold.

An essential component in the recruitment and training of members of Al-Qaeda and new arrivals in Afghanistan has been 'Ilm al-Sharia' (Knowledge of Islamic Law). Recruits had to attend lectures given by Osama Bin Laden and Ayyman al-Zawahri. These lectures may give a better indication of the ideological influences on the Al-Qaeda movement. One of the main textual sources used was the work of a twelfth-century Muslim scholar, Ibn Taymiyya, who wrote at the time of the Mogul occupation and who professed the necessity for Muslims to oppose tyrannical rule by force.³ Ibn Taymiyya has long been a favourite with many in the Islamist movement, especially in Egypt, partly because they find in his writings a response to what they see as closer parallels to the modern political situation in the Muslim countries, and partly because, unlike many of the theological works favoured by the mainstream, those of Ibn Taymiyya seem to encourage direct action. What is not clear is whether Ibn Taymiyya was the ideological starting point for Bin Laden, or whether Bin Laden adopted his writings because of an influx of Egyptian Islamist recruits.

The nature of the recruits also offers few clues as to ideology. Those who joined Bin Laden were from an array of nationalities: some came as committed Muslims while others needed basic instruction in Islamic dogma and practice.

It seems, therefore, that the connection between Bin Laden, the Taliban and Mullah Omar was one of a collusion of interests and defiance in the face of a common enemy, rather than a confederation of 'Wahhabi'-influenced Islamists.

Is Al-Qaeda just a terrorist organization or does it possess the characteristics of a movement?

The idea behind Al-Qaeda was the establishment of a 'base' which would bring together the different Islamist groups and coordinate their activities. Many of

those who were attracted to Al-Qaeda were non-Arab. The aim was for the different Islamist groups to remain independent while receiving funding from Bin Laden. However, at its inception, the new organization failed to attract the mainstream of the radical Islamist movement in Arab countries. In a meeting in 1988 in Afghanistan, two of the main Arab Islamist groups, the Egyptian Jihad and the Jama'a al-Islamiyya, refused to join Al-Qaeda. This refusal seemed to be based on two objections. First, they had no wish to relinquish leadership to Bin Laden, who at the time had no particular claim to fame among Islamists. Secondly, and probably of greater significance, there was a key disagreement about the scope of Islamist action. With few exceptions (notably the Hizb al-Tahrir with its pan-Islamist emphasis), most Islamist groups took the view that revolutionary Islamist action should be confined within each group's nation-state and that they should not interfere in one another's territory beyond providing moral support. It seems, however, that some of the key Islamist figures started to change their outlook to that of a more internationalist revolutionary movement. Crucially for Al-Qaeda, Ayyman al-Zawahri, the leader of the Jihad movement, seems to have undergone such a conversion. In fact, his conviction was such that when he failed to carry his group with him, he was willing to give up his leadership of the Jihad while remaining its real mentor, in order to join Al-Qaeda. The shift made by al-Zawahri lay in the premise that the Islamist groups within each state were hemmed in and that although the enemy lay within, there was nevertheless also a common external enemy that represented an obstacle to any radical change on the domestic front.

Thus the new movement brought together Islamists who had proved their revolutionary credentials in several ways: by having joined the Afghan Jihad, by having employed the tactics of terror against their own regimes and by espousing strong religious sentiment (even though this was recognized by many as misdirected). This band succeeded in capturing the imagination of many who saw in their actions a much-needed act of defiance against 'the enemy' – that enemy being the amorphous mass accused of being the source of all the ills affecting the Muslim world, especially the US because of its support of Israel and the corrupt dictatorships of the Middle East. Such sympathizers may not have joined the minority who make up Al-Qaeda but they would find justification for its actions.

The politics behind the ideology

As indicated above, the key to the ideology of Bin Laden lies not in Wahhabism or the Salafi practice of

Islam, but rather in a political view of the Middle East situation. It is also becoming clearer that Bin Laden provided the front and the finance but that the political theory of Al-Qaeda was developed by al-Zawahri.⁴ The original strands for that political theory can be found in a treatise which al-Zawahri published while still the leader of the Jihad movement after the bombing of the Egyptian Embassy in Islamabad in 1996, entitled *Shifa' Sudur al-Mu'minin* [The Cure for Believers' Hearts].⁵

In essence it is a justification for the attack following what clearly rankled as severe media criticism from Egypt, and it contains all the components that would later develop into the politics and methodology of Al-Qaeda.

First, and clearly most important, al-Zawahri ranks the main issues facing the Islamist movement in order of priority. At the very top of this list is the issue of Palestine. The view expressed is that all Arab and Islamic regimes, including the PLO, had sold out by the mere fact that they accepted the authority of the United Nations and the very idea that any Jew might remain in any part of Palestine. One should remember that al-Zawahri is very much part of the Nasser generation, and this rejectionism echoes the rejectionist front of the 1960s.

This main issue of Palestine, then, defines the way in which al-Zawahri views the various governments and regimes with which he comes into contact. For example, he sees the Saudi regime as traitorous because of its ties with the US government which supports Israel. Hitherto, the assumption has been that the Islamists rank the application of Islamic law (Sharia) top of their list of priorities, but by invoking the Palestine issue, al-Zawahri can justify declaring the Saudis, who apply Sharia law, to be outside the fold of Islam. Furthermore, he sees Saudi and US support for the Mujahideen movement in Afghanistan as a ploy to distract the Arab Mujahideen from their real goal of change in the Muslim world. He then boldly declares that the Mujahideen saw clearly through this ploy and established Al-Qaeda as the base of their operations in Afghanistan, from where they could undertake their worldwide struggle. This is one of the earliest references to the term Al-Qaeda, and it comes from al-Zawahri's book in 1996, when he was still leader of the Jihad movement.

Subordinate to the first point is the struggle against the oppressive regimes that fight the Muslims (i.e. Islamists) through physical and intellectual means. It is secondary because al-Zawahri sees these regimes as clients of the infidels, Christians and Jews – something which is clearly prohibited in Islamic law (a view he recently reiterated in another treatise serialized in the *al-Quds* newspaper in London), and which therefore places them outside the fold of Islam.

Secondly, al-Zawahri expounds his views of personal responsibility in Islamic law. In essence, he argues that the rank and file of these regimes cannot take refuge in their claim that they were merely following orders but must accept personal responsibility. Up to this point, he is not being controversial, but he then expands the idea further. He includes not only members of the security apparatus but all supporters of the government, including the media. However, the crucial point is that in discussing the victims of the bombing in Islamabad, he dismisses their description in the Egyptian media as innocent civilians by saying that the fact that they worked for the Egyptian government makes them party to the crimes of that government and therefore a legitimate target. He then goes further, expounding the view that there is a contradiction between being a Muslim and serving in such a regime in any capacity (a view reiterated in the treatise published in *al-Quds*). In essence, he is reviving the extreme ideology of the al-Takfir wal Hijra group of the 1970s in Egypt, though in a less crude fashion.

This point is crucial because as al-Zawahri became the theorist for the new Al-Qaeda movement he translated that concept of personal liability to the group's view of Western governments. Logically, this theory could be presented as follows. Civilians in the West elect and pay for their governments. They are therefore responsible for the actions of these governments – in essence, they are the decision-makers – and thus they negate their status under Islamic law as innocent non-combatants and become legitimate targets.

Thirdly, al-Zawahri propounds the twin ideas of the greater good and the need to react to exceptional circumstances. Ideologically, he is grappling with two major problems. The first is the clear and absolute prohibition of suicide under Islamic law. As this is one of the strongest taboos in Islam, he cannot find any theological backing except for the idea of martyrdom in the Christian sense. The cases he uses are instances in early Islam when some Muslims were captured by the 'idolaters'. They were asked to recant on pain of death. Despite this threat, they refused. He views their refusal as an act of suicide for the glory of God. Since these early martyrs were not condemned for their actions by the early Muslims and great theologians, he argues that an Islamist can commit suicide for the greater good. That provides the movement with the legitimacy for suicide attacks, which 1,500 years of Islamic theology would view as heretical (note that the Mufti of Saudi Arabia condemned the suicide attacks in Israel for this same reason). The second problem is that he needs to justify collateral damage. Having dismissed the innocence of civilians, he is left with Muslims and children who might be unintentional victims of these attacks. Again, he is struggling against the main corpus

of Islamic theology which is clear in its rejection of such collateral damage. To counter this he claims that Muslims are facing exceptional circumstances, with an overpowering enemy and weak resources, and that these exceptional circumstances allow for a more lax interpretation of the law.

It was this political theory that formed the basis and justification for the attacks on the World Trade Center. The US supports Israel and is therefore the enemy. No US civilian can be deemed innocent because they elect and pay for their government, and while killing children and Muslims is normally not acceptable, the exceptional circumstance of the current situation where the Muslims (i.e. Islamists) are fighting superior forces allow for an exception to these rules. Finally, because these attacks are for the greater good of Islam, there can be premeditated suicides, which would otherwise be deemed to be heretical.

The implication of this political theory is a complete separation between the Islamists and the 'enemy', which now includes all Muslims who are in any way connected to non-Islamist regimes in the Muslim world, as well as all citizens of Western countries that recognize the state of Israel, even if at times they support Muslim causes in Afghanistan or Bosnia. The 'other' then becomes a perfectly legitimate target in the war for the glory of Islam.⁶

It is important to note that this is a completely new departure for the Islamist movement. This theory is based neither on the main schools of Islamic theology (including Wahhabism) nor on the often misunderstood Ibn Taymiyya. Although intellectually weak, al-Zawahri has nevertheless provided Al-Qaeda specifically and those Islamists who wish to follow them with a theoretical legitimization for ruthless political action.

Popularity and the rejection of the mainstream

The reaction on the Muslim street clearly shows that this new ruthless form of confrontation has found fertile ground for general support. In many ways, this is not surprising. Al-Qaeda is merely echoing the rejectionist views of Nasser which were very popular in the 1960s and the 1970s. Palestine remains the *cause célèbre* in the Muslim world, with support for the Palestinians heightened by blanket coverage in the Muslim media of the *Intifada* and the subsequent suicide bombings in Israel. At the same time, the undemocratic and oppressive nature of the Arab regimes in particular feeds a general antipathy among their populations.

Ideologically, the ground had been prepared over the last three decades with the rejection by the Islamist opposition of mainstream Islamic theological thought on political issues as expounded by the main clerics. The pronouncements of these clerics are considered to be suspect because they are viewed by Islamists as tools of the regimes. Thus, by definition, theological opposition to, for example, suicide attacks as a legitimate political weapon is dismissed by the Islamists (and by many on the Muslim street) as acquiescing in government pressure.

That is not to say that the mainstream on the Muslim street accepts all aspects of this new ideology. What we have is a small movement of dedicated revolutionaries with a clear exclusive political theory that exploits a greater feeling of disaffection.

In this, Al-Qaeda has been greatly helped by the reaction of the US. The US has made it clear that it viewed the twin towers attack as a major blow against its security. In other words, the attack was seen as a successful blow. For the Muslim street which suffers from oppressive regimes and still feels bitter about the defeat of 1967, blaming the success of Israel squarely on the support of the US, Al-Qaeda is seen as the only movement that scored a successful blow against the combined enemy. Nothing succeeds like success, and the Western and Arab media have portrayed the twin towers attack as a success.

It is equally clear that Al-Qaeda is engendering copycat sympathy, as seen, for example, in the attacks in Kuwait on US civilians or the bombing of the nightclub in Bali. However, the question remains

whether Al-Qaeda has the capability to exploit this popularity and translate it into political power. So far, this looks far-fetched, mainly because Al-Qaeda has no real base in any major Arab country, especially among the armed forces.

For the time being, Al-Qaeda remains a revolutionary group with an ideology that diverges greatly from the mainstream, but whose actions find general popularity by feeding on long-standing feelings of despair and impotence in the Muslim street. Because Al-Qaeda has presented itself as the champion of anti-imperialism (in the Arab 1960s understanding of the term), it will inevitably benefit in terms of popularity from any copycat attacks and more crucially from all suicide attacks in Israel.

The next move that Al-Qaeda is trying to make is to expound its political theory in a wider arena; hence the various videotapes sent to the al-Jazeera satellite station and the serialization of al-Zawahri's most recent book in *al-Quds*. Al-Zawahri is clearly trying to win over converts to his political theory from the mainstream, hoping that the Muslim Umma will be galvanized into rising against the regimes as a prelude to a renewed attempt to liberate Palestine. Once again, al-Zawahri is translating the ideology formed by the Jihad in Egypt to a wider Muslim arena. It is worth noting that twenty years of Islamist activity in Egypt, though resulting in a general move away from a secular to a religious world-view, still failed to lead to a revolution. However, an increasingly angry mood in Muslim societies may open the door to a greater acceptance of extremist politics.

Endnotes

¹ For an authoritative reading of Wahhabism see J.L. Esposito, *Unholy War; Terror in the Name of Islam*, OUP, 2002, pp. 105–17.

² For an alternative view that emphasizes the Wahhabi connection of Al-Qaeda, see Stephen Schwartz, *The Two Faces of Islam: The House of Saud from Tradition to Terror*, Doubleday, 2002.

³ Rudolph Peters, *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*, Markus Wiener Publishers, 1996, pp. 43–55.

⁴ The financial network is discussed in Roland Jacquard, *In the Name of Osama Bin Laden*, Duke University Press, 2002, pp. 126–35.

⁵ The full title is *Shifa' Sudur al-Mu'minin: Risala 'an ba'd ma'ani al-jihad fi 'amaliyyat Islam Abad [The Cure for Believers' Hearts: a treatise regarding some of the meanings of jihad in the operation of Islamabad]*. Published as No. 11 in the series of publications of al-Mujahideen in Egypt, March 1996.

⁶ *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, London, 20 January 2002, p. 13.

Dr Maha Azzam has an Oxford PhD on the Muslim Brotherhood, is a former Fellow at Royal United Services Institute, and a contemporary expert on Islamist movements.

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THE ROYAL INSTITUTE OF
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Chatham House 10 St James's Square London SW1Y 4LE
Tel 020 7957 5700 E-mail contact@riia.org
Fax 020 7957 5710 Website www.riia.org

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