

By Jason Burke

AL QAEDA

The mere mention of al Qaeda conjures images of an efficient terrorist network guided by a powerful criminal mastermind. Yet al Qaeda is more lethal as an ideology than as an organization. “Al Qaedaism” will continue to attract supporters in the years to come—whether Osama bin Laden is around to lead them or not.

“Al Qaeda Is a Global Terrorist Organization”

No. It is less an organization than an ideology. The Arabic word *qaeda* can be translated as a “base of operation” or “foundation,” or alternatively as a “precept” or “method.” Islamic militants always understood the term in the latter sense. In 1987, Abdullah Azzam, the leading ideologue for modern Sunni Muslim radical activists, called for *al-qaeda al-sulbah* (a vanguard of the strong). He envisaged men who, acting independently, would set an example for the rest of the Islamic world and thus galvanize the *umma* (global community of believers) against its oppressors. It was the FBI—during its investigation of the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in East Africa—which dubbed the loosely linked group of activists that Osama bin Laden and his aides had formed as “al Qaeda.” This decision was partly due to institutional conservatism and partly because the FBI had to apply conventional antiterrorism laws to an adversary that was in no sense a traditional terrorist or criminal organization.

Jason Burke is chief reporter for Britain’s Observer and author of Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003).

Although bin Laden and his partners were able to create a structure in Afghanistan that attracted new recruits and forged links among preexisting Islamic militant groups, they never created a coherent terrorist network in the way commonly conceived. Instead, al Qaeda functioned like a venture capital firm—providing funding, contacts, and expert advice to many different militant groups and individuals from all over the Islamic world.

Today, the structure that was built in Afghanistan has been destroyed, and bin Laden and his associates have scattered or been arrested or killed. There is no longer a central hub for Islamic militancy. But the al Qaeda worldview, or “al Qaedaism,” is growing stronger every day. This radical internationalist ideology—sustained by anti-Western, anti-Zionist, and anti-Semitic rhetoric—has adherents among many individuals and groups, few of whom are currently linked in any substantial way to bin Laden or those around him. They merely follow his precepts, models, and methods. They act in the style of al Qaeda, but they are only part of al Qaeda in the very loosest sense. That’s why Israeli intelligence services now prefer the term “jihadi international” instead of “al Qaeda.”

“Capturing or Killing Bin Laden Will Deal a Severe Blow to Al Qaeda”

Wrong. Even for militants with identifiable ties to bin Laden, the death of the “sheik” will make little difference in their ability to recruit people. U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld recently acknowledged as much when he questioned in an internal Pentagon memo whether it was possible to kill militants faster than radical clerics and religious schools could create them. In practical terms, bin Laden now has only a very limited ability to commission acts of terror, and his involvement is restricted to the broad strategic direction of largely autonomous cells and groups. Most intelligence analysts now consider him largely peripheral.

This turn of events should surprise no one. Islamic militancy predates bin Laden’s activities. He was barely involved in the Islamic violence of the early 1990s in Algeria, Egypt, Bosnia, and Kashmir. His links to the 1993 World Trade Center attack were tangential. There were no al Qaeda training camps during the early 1990s, although camps run by other groups churned out thousands of highly trained fanatics. Even when bin Laden was based in

Afghanistan in the late 1990s, it was often Islamic groups and individuals who sought him out for help in finding resources for preconceived attacks, not vice versa. These days, Islamic groups can go to other individuals, such as Jordanian activist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who set up his al Tauhid group in competition with bin Laden (rather than, as is frequently claimed, in alliance with him) to obtain funds, expertise, or other logistical assistance.

Bin Laden still plays a significant role in the movement as a propagandist who effectively exploits modern mass communications. It is likely that the United States will eventually apprehend bin Laden and that this demonstration of U.S. power will demoralize many militants. However, much depends on the manner in which he is captured or killed. If, like deposed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, he surrenders without a fight, which is very unlikely, many followers will be deeply disillusioned. If he achieves martyrdom in a way that his cohorts can spin as heroic, he will be an inspiration for generations to come. Either way, bin Laden’s removal from the scene will not stop Islamic militancy.

“The Militants Seek to Destroy the West so They Can Impose a Global Islamic State”

False. Islamic militants’ main objective is not conquest, but to beat back what they perceive as an aggressive West that is supposedly trying to complete the project begun during the Crusades and colonial periods of denigrating, dividing, and humiliating Islam. The militants’ secondary goal is the establishment of the caliphate, or single Islamic state, in the lands roughly corresponding to the furthest extent of the Islamic empire of the late first and early second centuries. Today, this state would encompass the Middle East, the Maghreb (North Africa bordering the Mediterranean), Andalusia in southern Spain, Central Asia, parts of the Balkans, and possibly some Islamic territories in the Far East.

Precisely how this utopian caliphate would function is vague. The militants believe that if all Muslims act according to a literal interpretation of the Islamic holy texts, an almost mystical transformation to a just and perfect society will follow.

The radical Islamists seek to weaken the United States and the West because they are both impediments to this end. During the 1990s, militants in countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria began turning their attention abroad as they grew frustrated by their failure to change the status quo at home. The militants felt that striking at the Arab regimes’ Western sponsors (the “far enemy” as opposed to the “near enemy”) would be the best

means to improve local conditions. This strategy, which bin Laden and those around him aggressively advocate, remains contentious among Islamic radicals, especially in Egypt. Yet, as the March 11, 2004, terrorist bombings in Madrid revealed,

attacks on the “far enemy” can still be employed with great effect. By striking Spain just before its elections, the militants sent a message to Western governments that their presence in the Middle East would exact a heavy political and human toll.

“The Militants Reject Modern Ideas in Favor of Traditional Muslim Theology”

No. Although Islamic hard-liners long to return to an idealized seventh-century existence, they have little compunction about embracing the tools that modernity provides. Their purported medievalism has not deterred militants from effectively using the Internet and videocassettes to mobilize the faithful.

At the ideological level, prominent thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb and Abu Ala Maududi have borrowed heavily from the organizational tactics of secular leftist and anarchist revolutionaries. Their concept of the vanguard is influenced by Leninist theory. Qutb’s most important work, *Ma’alim fi’l-tariq* (*Milestones*), reads in part like an Islamicized *Communist Manifesto*. A commonly used Arabic word in the names of militant groups is Hizb (as in Lebanon’s Hizb Allah, or Hezbollah), which means “party”—another modern concept.

In fact, the militants often couch their grievances in Third-Worldist terms familiar to any contemporary antiglobalization activist. One recent document purporting to come from bin Laden berates the United

States for failing to ratify the Kyoto agreement on climate change. Egyptian militant leader Ayman al-Zawahiri has decried multinational companies as a major evil. Mohammed Atta, one of the September 11 hijackers, once told a friend how angered he was by a world economic system that meant Egyptian farmers grew cash crops such as strawberries for the West while the country’s own people could barely afford bread. In all these cases, the militants are framing modern political concerns, including social justice, within a mythic and religious narrative. They do not reject modernization per se, but they resent their failure to benefit from that modernization.

Also, within the context of Islamic observance, these new Sunni militants are not considered traditionalists, but radical reformers, because they reject the authority of the established clergy and demand the right to interpret doctrine themselves, despite a general lack of academic credentials on the part of leading figures such as bin Laden or Zawahiri.

“Since the Rise of Al Qaeda, Islamic Moderates Have Been Marginalized”

Incorrect. Al Qaeda represents the lunatic fringe of political thought in the Islamic world. While al Qaedaism has made significant inroads in recent years, only a tiny minority of the world’s 1.3 billion Muslims adhere to its doctrine. Many sympathize with bin Laden and take satisfaction at his ability to strike the United States, but that does not mean they genuinely want to live in a unified Islamic state governed along strict Koranic lines. Nor does anti-Western sentiment translate into a

rejection of Western values. Surveys of public opinion in the Arab world, conducted by organizations such as Zogby International and the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, reveal strong support for elected government, personal liberty, educational opportunity, and economic choice.

Even those who believe “Islam is the solution” disagree over precisely what that solution might be and how it might be achieved. Radical militants such as bin Laden want to destroy the state and replace it

with something based on a literal reading of the Koran. However, some political Islamists want to appropriate the structures of the state and, in varying degrees, Islamicize them, usually with a view toward promoting greater social justice and outflanking undemocratic and powerful regimes. An example of the latter would be the Pakistani Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) movement, currently led by veteran activist Qazi Hussein Ahmed. JI represents a signif-

icant swath of Pakistani popular opinion, and although it is tainted by appalling levels of anti-Semitism, it has taken a stance against bin Laden and the Taliban when politically feasible. Often, as in Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey, such groups are relatively moderate and can serve as useful interlocutors for the West. They should not be rejected out of hand as “Islamists”; refusing to engage them only allows the extremists to dominate the political discourse.

“The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Is Central to the Militants’ Cause”

Wrong. Televised images of Israeli troops violently repressing Palestinian protesters in the occupied territories certainly reinforce the militants’ key message that the lands of Islam are under attack and that all Muslims must rise up and fight. However, although a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would help alleviate political tensions in the region, it would not end the threat of militant Islam.

The roots of contemporary Sunni Islamic militancy cannot be reduced to any single, albeit thorny, problem. Militants feel the *umma* is under attack. In their view, Israel is merely the West’s most obvious outpost—as it was when it became a Crusader kingdom in the 12th century. If the Jewish state disappeared, the Islamists would still fight in Chechnya, Kashmir, Egypt, Uzbekistan, Indonesia, and Algeria. Their agenda is typically determined by local grievances, often with lengthy histories. For instance,

although bin Laden was already calling for a boycott of U.S. goods to protest support for Israel in the late 1980s, he had never been involved in an attack on an Israeli target until recently. His primary focus has always been to topple the regime in his homeland of Saudi Arabia. Likewise, Zawahiri’s lengthy 2002 book, *Knights Under the Prophet’s Banner*—part autobiography, part militant manifesto, which first appeared in serial form in 2001—focuses almost exclusively on the author’s native Egypt.

Moreover, considerable support for the Islamic cause stems from Muslims’ sense of humiliation. A two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which would still leave the “Zionist entity” intact, would therefore offer little succor to the wounded pride of any committed militant or, more crucial, to the pride of those in the wider community who support and legitimize extremism and violence.

“Sort Out Saudi Arabia and the Whole Problem Will Disappear”

No. Saudi Arabia has contributed significantly to the spread of radicalism through the government-subsidized export of its Wahhabist strand of hard-line Islam. This policy arose from the turmoil of the late 1970s, when outrage over government corruption and the royal family’s decadence prompted hundreds of Islamic radicals to occupy the Grand Mosque in Mecca. The 1978-79 Shiite

revolution in Iran threatened Saudi leadership in the Muslim world and offered a cautionary tale of the fate that could await the House of Saud. In an effort to appeal to religious conservatives and counter the Iranian regime, the royal family gave the Wahhabi clerics more influence at home and a mandate to expand their ideology abroad.

Since then, Saudi money disbursed through quasi-

governmental organizations such as the Muslim World League has built hundreds of mosques throughout the world. The Saudis provide hard-line clerics with stipends and offer financial incentives to those who forsake previous patterns of worship. In Pakistan, money from the Persian Gulf has funded the massive expansion of *madrasas* (Islamic schools) that indoctrinate young students with virulent, anti-Western dogma. This Saudi-funded proselytism has enormously damaged long-standing tolerant and pluralist traditions of Islamic observance in East and West Africa, the Far East, and Central Asia. Wahhabism was virtually unknown in northern Iraq until a massive push by Gulf-based missionaries in the early 1990s. And many of the mosques known for radical activity in Germany, the United Kingdom, and Canada were built with donations from private and state sources in Saudi Arabia.

The inequities of the Saudi system—in which most people are very poor and ruled by a super-rich clique—continues to create a sense of disenfranchisement that allows extremism to flourish. Many of the most militant preachers (and some of the Saudi hijackers who perpetrated the September 11 terrorist attacks) come from marginalized tribes and provinces. A more inclusive style of government and a more just redistribution of resources would undercut the legitimacy of local militants and deny radicals new recruits. Yet, while such reforms might slow the spread of Wahhabism and associated strands outside Saudi Arabia, in much of the world the damage has already been done. As with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Saudi Arabia is one of the many causes of modern Islamic militancy, but it has no monopoly on blame.

“It Is Only a Matter of Time Before Islamic Militants Use Weapons of Mass Destruction”

Calm down. Although Islamic militants (including bin Laden) have attempted to develop a basic chemical or biological arsenal, those efforts have been largely unsuccessful due to the technical difficulty of creating, let alone weaponizing, such materials. As one of the first journalists to enter the research facilities at the Darunta camp in eastern Afghanistan in 2001, I was struck by how crude they were. The Ansar al-Islam terrorist group’s alleged chemical weapons factory in northern Iraq, which I inspected the day after its capture in 2003, was even more rudimentary. Alleged attempts by a British group to develop ricin poison, but for the apparent seriousness of the intent, could be dismissed as farcical.

Nor is there any compelling evidence that militants have come close to creating a “dirty bomb” (a conventional explosive packaged with radioactive material). The claim that Jose Padilla, an alleged al Qaeda operative arrested in the United States in 2002, had intended to deploy a dirty bomb has been largely discounted—it was an aspiration rather than a practical plan. Constructing a dirty bomb is more difficult than most imagine. Although the International Atomic Energy Agency warns that more than 100 countries have inade-

quate control of radioactive material, only a small percentage of that material is lethal enough to cause serious harm. It also requires considerable technical sophistication to build a device that can effectively disperse radioactive material. Some have also voiced the fear that militants might obtain a “prepackaged” working nuclear warhead from Pakistan. However, that would only be a plausible scenario if an Islamic regime came to power, or if high-ranking elements of the Pakistani military developed greater sympathy for the Islamists than currently exists.

The 1995 Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attack in Japan highlights the difficulties terrorist groups face in deploying weapons of mass destruction. Despite possessing sophisticated research facilities funded by an estimated \$1 billion in assets, the group failed nine times to launch a successful attack prior to the incident in the Tokyo subway system. (Even then, the fatalities were mercifully limited to a dozen people.) Confronted with such constraints, Islamic militants are far more likely to use conventional bombs or employ conventional devices in imaginative ways—as was the case with the September 11, 2001, attacks in the United States and the March 11, 2004, train bombings in Spain.

“The West Is Winning the War on Terror”

Unfortunately, no. The military component of the war on terrorism has had some significant success. A high proportion of those who associated with bin Laden between 1996 and 2001 are now either dead or in prison. Bin Laden’s own ability to commission and instigate terror attacks has been severely curtailed. Enhanced cooperation between intelligence organizations around the world and increased security budgets have made it much harder for terrorists to move their funds across borders or to successfully organize and execute attacks.

However, if countries are to win the war on terror, they must eradicate enemies without creating new ones. They also need to deny those militants with whom negotiation is impossible the support of local populations. Such support assists and, in the minds of the militants, morally legitimizes their actions. If Western countries are to succeed, they must marry the hard component of military force to the soft com-

ponent of cultural appeal. There is nothing weak about this approach. As any senior military officer with experience in counterinsurgency warfare will tell you, it makes good sense. The invasion of Iraq, though entirely justifiable from a humanitarian perspective, has made this task more pressing.

Bin Laden is a propagandist, directing his efforts at attracting those Muslims who have hitherto shunned his extremist message. He knows that only through mass participation in his project will he have any chance of success. His worldview is receiving immeasurably more support around the globe than it was two years ago, let alone 15 years ago when he began serious campaigning. The objective of Western countries is to eliminate the threat of terror, or at least to manage it in a way that does not seriously impinge on the daily lives of its citizens. Bin Laden’s aim is to radicalize and mobilize. He is closer to achieving his goals than the West is to deterring him. **FP**

[Want to Know More?]

Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), by Gilles Kepel and translated by Anthony F. Roberts, is a perceptive and comprehensive account of recent developments in Islamic militancy and political activism. Malise Ruthven’s *A Fury for God: The Islamic Attack on America* (New York: Granta, 2002) offers acute insights into the mindset of Islamic militants, as does Mark Juergensmeyer’s *Terror in the Mind of God: the Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Montasserr al-Zayyat’s *The Road to al-Qaeda: the Story of Bin Laden’s Right-hand Man* (Sterling: Pluto Press, 2004) provides an interesting perspective from an avowed militant. Husain Haqqani explores the role of *madrasas* (Islamic schools) in disseminating militant ideology in “Islam’s Medieval Outposts” (FOREIGN POLICY, November/December 2002). Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon’s *The Age of Sacred Terror* (New York: Random House, 2002) is an authoritative and illuminating account of policymaking in the United States as the Clinton administration confronted al Qaeda. M.J. Akbar’s *The Shade of Swords: Jihad and the Conflict Between Islam and Christianity* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2002) is an eminently readable investigation of the concept of jihad that, as one might expect from an Indian author, is particularly strong on the recent history of Islam in the subcontinent.

For perspectives on how to deal with the underlying causes of Islamic militancy in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, readers should consult Kumar Ramakrishna’s essay “Countering the New Terrorism of al-Qaeda Without Generating Civilizational Conflict,” appearing in a collection of articles he edited with Andrew Tan titled *The New Terrorism: Anatomy, Trends, and Counterstrategies* (Singapore: Eastern Universities Press, 2002).

» For links to relevant Web sites, access to the *FP* Archive, and a comprehensive index of related FOREIGN POLICY articles, go to www.foreignpolicy.com.

Copyright of Foreign Policy is the property of Foreign Policy and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.