

COMMENTARY

Jihadi studies

The obstacles to understanding radical Islam and the opportunities to know it better

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We were all frightened by the destruction caused on 9/11. Yet most of us, regardless of political orientation, assumed that there would be people in the intelligence services or in academia who possessed detailed knowledge about the jihadists. It might take time, and we might disagree on the methods, but the experts would eventually bring the perpetrators to justice. How wrong we were. Of course, the CIA knew the basics about al-Qaeda, such as the location of the Afghan training camps and the approximate whereabouts of the top leadership. But as Osama bin Laden slipped out of Tora Bora one foggy morning in early December 2001, al-Qaeda left the realm of tactical intelligence and became the complex organization-cum-movement which, six years later, we are still struggling to understand. For a few years, the commanders of the so-called War on Terror enjoyed the benefit of the doubt. After all, we did not know what they knew. However, it has become increasingly clear how little was known about al-Qaeda back in 2001, and how long it will take for us thoroughly to understand the dynamics of global jihadism.

From a historical perspective, this ignorance about the enemy makes the war on terror unique. Rarely have so many resources been deployed on the basis of such a vague understanding about who the enemy is and how it functions. We should perhaps not be surprised that al-Qaeda's top two leaders are still at large, that new jihadist organizations proliferate, and that anti-Americanism in the Muslim world is at a record level. Of course, there have been successes, and many of the criticisms of the war on terror are unfair. For example, those who point to the post-9/11 increase in terrorist attacks as evidence of the failure underestimate the role of the training camps in Afghanistan. By mid-2001, the number of people trained and indoctrinated in the camps was so large that a wave of anti-Western terrorism in the ensuing years was almost inevitable. Moreover, many of the current ills were caused by the invasion of Iraq, which was launched for entirely different reasons and was opposed by many counter-terrorism experts. Finally, the proliferation of jihadist entities is strongly fuelled by the internet, the evolution of which was difficult to predict in 2001.

Yet the lack of understanding about the enemy has led to serious inefficiencies and excesses which are starting to become publicly known. An astronomical sum of money has been spent on counter-terrorism and homeland security, much of which has gone to private American consultancies with questionable expertise. Then there is the human cost of the search for enemies. The Kafkaesque conversations between detainees and their accusers at Guantánamo Bay reveal a US military with a chronic lack of account-

ability and a poor understanding about the Middle East and Islamic activism. The security establishment was not alone in its ignorance about jihadism. Middle East scholars on both sides of the Atlantic had long shunned the study of Islamist militancy for fear of promoting Islamophobia and of being associated with a pro-Israeli political agenda. In these communities, there was a tendency to rely on simple grievance-based explanations of terrorism and to ignore the role of entrepreneurial individuals and organizations in the generation of violence. This is part of the reason why the main contributions to the literature on al-Qaeda in the first few years after 9/11 came from investigative journalists, not academics.

Afghanistan? Did he really attend Arsenal matches in London and sex orgies in Morocco in the 1990s? The investigative journalist Peter L. Bergen met Bin Laden in 1997 and has been following him ever since; few outside al-Qaeda know more about the man than him. His 2006 book, *The Osama bin Laden I Know*, contained personal testimonies from over fifty people who knew Bin Laden, and Bergen let the sources speak for themselves. This was a bold choice by the editor and the author, who could have gone for the safer – and probably more financially rewarding – option of a straight biography. Rich in detail and anecdotes, Bergen's book presented the most nuanced portrait of Bin Laden available. More importantly, it shed new light on the history of al-Qaeda and militant Islamism.

fied minutes from the founding meetings of al-Qaeda in 1988, as well as testimonies from the early 1990s, confirming the organization's existence. Particularly valuable is his collection of testimonies from recruits who attended al-Qaeda training camps in the late 1990s. These document the evolution of the camp infrastructure from a very slow start in 1996 to a streamlined training and indoctrination centre for anti-Western jihadists. Bergen has also shed light on the thinking behind the 9/11 attacks. Bin Laden's intention was to provoke a US invasion of Afghanistan, whereupon the US would get stuck, like the Soviet Union had done in the 1980s, and eventually collapse from the economic burden of the war. It is ironic that the US would later choose to place itself in the situation envisaged by Bin Laden, not in Afghanistan, but in Iraq.

For the record, Bin Laden was never a playboy in Beirut; he was a shy and pious young man. He attended no Arsenal matches or sex orgies, although he did accompany his brother Salem on a business trip to Sweden in 1970.

Those who wonder why it has taken so long to establish a reliable account of Bin Laden's deeds will be even more surprised to learn how long it took simply to report his words. Since the early 1990s, Bin Laden has been screaming for attention, always declaring his intentions before putting them into practice. Yet it was not until 2005 that these declarations were made available to a broader Western public with the publication of *Messages to the World*, a reader of Bin Laden's texts edited by Bruce Lawrence, a professor of religious studies at Duke University. This collection of annotated and edited translations of twenty-four of Bin Laden's most important statements between 1994 and 2004 is a far better resource than the translations circulating on the internet. Bin Laden's proclamations are, of course, hate speech, calling for the mass murder of civilians; but those who expect religious ranting will be surprised. There are no complex theological arguments, for the simple reason that Bin Laden's intended audience, the Muslim masses, are not versed in the technicalities of Islamic jurisprudence. Bin Laden's discourse is profoundly political and elegant in its simplicity. It is populism at its most effective and most frightening.

Osama bin Laden's central theme is the suffering and humiliation of the Muslim nation (the *umma*) at the hands of non-Muslims. He conveys a pan-Islamic nationalist world view according to which the *umma* is facing an existential threat from outside forces led by the US. Bin Laden's principal rhetorical device is the enumeration of symbols of suffering – examples of situations where Muslims have been humiliated or oppressed by non-Muslims, such as in Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir and, above all, his homeland, Saudi Arabia, where the US



"Bearded Orientals: Making the Empire Cross" (2007) by Priscilla Bracks

Fortunately, our understanding of jihadism has improved considerably in the past few years, because academia has started to take the topic more seriously, and because crucial new primary sources have become available. The final report of the 9/11 Commission may have been filed in 2004, but the process of understanding al-Qaeda has only just begun. A first step in this process is to establish the basic facts about the history of al-Qaeda. This is more difficult than it seems, for 9/11 unleashed a deluge of writing in which truth was mixed with factoids and conspiracy theories. Was Bin Laden really a playboy in 1970s Beirut, and a CIA stooge in 1980s

Bergen debunks the widespread conspiracy theory that Bin Laden collaborated with the CIA in the 1980s. He quotes al-Qaeda insiders who ridicule the suggestion, and Western aid workers who came into contact with Arabs in 1980s Afghanistan and say they were met with extreme hostility. He also settles the debate over al-Qaeda's pre-1996 existence. Jason Burke and others (including myself) had questioned the view of al-Qaeda as a coherent and self-aware organization founded in the late 1980s, pointing to the near-absence of pre-9/11 textual sources containing the name "al-Qaeda". Bergen, however, unearthed recently declassi-

military "occupies" the holy places of Islam. The only way to defend against this onslaught, he argues, is to confront America militarily.

In the first half of the 1990s, Bin Laden was primarily concerned with criticizing the Saudi regime and its religious establishment for its subservience to the US. Realizing that political advocacy was futile, he declared war on US forces in Saudi Arabia in August 1996. As his call for jihad went unheeded in the kingdom, he decided to declare total war on America. In February 1998, he articulated the doctrine of global jihad, stating that "killing the Americans and their allies – civilians and military – is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it, in any country in which it is possible to do it". Since then, all of Bin Laden's statements have been aimed at convincing Muslims of the need to fight America and her allies.

Although his discourse has evolved, there are some constants, one of which is Palestine. For some curious reason, there has emerged a perception – particularly in the US – that Bin Laden did not care about the Palestinian cause until after 9/11, when he found it politically opportune to mention it. This is incorrect. As Bergen has made clear, Bin Laden's first public speeches in the late 1980s were about Palestine and the need to boycott American goods because of the US support for Israel. In Lawrence's book, Palestine is mentioned in seven of the eight major pre-9/11 declarations, and thirteen of

the sixteen post-9/11 texts. Palestine is the ultimate symbol of Muslim suffering and Bin Laden's message would be weaker without it. The belief that Palestine is irrelevant for the war on terrorism is arguably the greatest delusion of the post-9/11 era.

Jihadism, of course, cannot be understood only from the viewpoint of its leaders; it must also be studied from below, from the perspective of the footsoldiers. Omar Nasiri (a pseudonym) is a Belgian-Moroccan former Islamist who was recruited by French and British intelligence to spy on jihadists in Europe and Afghanistan in the 1990s. Having been abandoned by his handlers before 9/11, Nasiri wrote a memoir (*Inside Jihad*, 2006) expressing his disillusionment with both the jihadists and the intelligence services. His account was of the jihadist scene at a crucial transition period in which al-Qaeda was not yet a major player and anti-Western terrorism was not on the agenda. His story was so remarkable that one is bound to wonder about its authenticity. However, the account is too detailed and too consistent with other evidence to be a forgery.

Omar Nasiri's tale starts in 1994, when he is drawn into a network of Algerian Islamists in Brussels through his older and more pious brother. His relations with the radicals are strained after he steals money from them, and he decides to work for French intelligence in exchange for protection. After their safe house is raided and his comrades are arrested in March 1995, Nasiri goes to Afghanistan

for jihad training. He spends almost a year in the legendary training camps of Khalden and Derunta together with aspiring jihadists from all over the world. In 1996, he moves to Britain, where he becomes part of the vibrant Islamist scene of "Londonistan", while reporting to French and British intelligence. In 1998, the past catches up with him; one of the people he betrayed in Brussels comes to London and Nasiri has to flee. He is abandoned by his French handlers and ends up in Germany, where he eventually leaves the spying business.

One of the most striking aspects of Nasiri's story is the importance of mundane and non-ideological factors in individual recruitment to jihadist activism. For Nasiri and many of those around him, adventurism and camaraderie seem more important than ideology. This is consistent with the findings of Marc Sageman, a scholar at the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia, who has shown that radicalization is above all a social, not an ideological, process. Most people drift into activism through friendship and kinship and radicalize in small groups through bidding games. Ideology, argues Sageman, comes in later.

Another important lesson to be learned from Nasiri is that radical Islamism is a politically heterogeneous phenomenon. Jihad essentially means different things to different people. Three distinct political agendas feature in his book: the "socio-revolutionary" agenda of Nasiri's friends in Brussels, who

fight the Algerian regime; the "classical jihadist" agenda of Nasiri himself, who wants to wage conventional warfare in Bosnia; and the "global jihadist" agenda of al-Qaeda. Nasiri is extremely critical of the terrorist tactics of the socio-revolutionaries and the global jihadists, but he still considers himself a *mujahid*, or holy warrior. He comes across as a very difficult person, fickle and easily insulted, prone to blaming others for his misfortunes. As such, he is very reminiscent of Aukai Collins, another jihadist informant who turned against his handlers and wrote a book about his experiences (*My Jihad*, 2002). Both fit the description of "the radical loser" drawn up by Hans Magnus Enzensberger in 2006: in a short and highly readable monograph (*Globalization and the Radical Loser*), Enzensberger reflected on the psychological processes and deeper causes behind terrorist atrocities.

His thesis is that terrorism is committed by marginalized and humiliated men who have found comfort and empowerment in collectivities that take the form of militant groups. However, most militant groups from the 1960s and 70s have either disappeared or adopted a very local agenda since the end of Communism reduced their global appeal. Today, only one movement is able to wage war on a global scale, namely Islamism. This movement owes its strength to its decentralized character and its ability to exploit religious, political and social grievances. It is an essentially modern phenomenon which uses

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terrorist tactics and sophisticated media.

The deeper cause of the growth of Islamism, Enzensberger argues, is the intellectual sclerosis of the Arab and Muslim world, as documented by the Arab Human Development Report. The hostility of medieval Islamic scholars to secular knowledge prevented progress and sent the Muslim world into a state of near-permanent civilizational backwardness. This economic and scientific inferiority has created a sense of humiliation which is particularly painful because it clashes with the age-old Arab sense of superiority towards other peoples. The result is a collective hypersensitivity to outside criticism and a tolerance for violence against others. This in turn creates a beneficial environment for Islamism and terrorism.

It is unclear, however, exactly which phenomenon Enzensberger is trying to explain. He fails properly to distinguish between Islamist terrorism in the West, violence committed by Muslims more generally, and simple Islamism as such. More importantly, his macro-explanation – which suggests a four-step causal chain from medieval hostility towards secular knowledge to low human development to Islamism, then to terrorism – is little more than speculation. If the Muslim world has been retarded for a thousand years, why does the violent reaction come now? Why does the level and type of violence vary so much across the Muslim world? Why do some Muslims become violent losers and not others? And is the level of anti-Western Islamist violence really so high as to be indicative of a civilizational crisis?

Enzensberger's deliberately subjective and qualitative method is the polar opposite of the dry and quantitative approach of Robert Pape, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago. In 2005, Pape produced a book, *Dying To Win*, which attempted to understand the phenomenon of suicide bombings, the ultimate symbol of jihadist terrorism, using a comprehensive database on 315 suicide attacks between 1980 and 2001. This is one of several works in recent years devoted to suicide terrorism. While most of the others focus on individual recruitment to suicide terrorism, Pape asked in which context and for what purpose militant groups employ suicide attacks.

Suicide bombing seems to presuppose a strong religious conviction. Surely, only a firm belief in an afterlife – supplemented in the jihadist case by the reward of seventy-two virgins – would make humans carry out this kind of violence. Not so, argues Pape; a majority of attacks in his dataset have in fact been carried out by secular groups, in particular the Sri Lankan LTTE. The common denominator between groups that use suicide terrorism is not their religiosity, but the territorial nature of their struggle. The main perpetrators of suicide attacks between 1980 and 2001 – such as the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, Hezbollah in South Lebanon, Hamas in Israel, the PKK in Turkey – were all fighting for territory against a democratic opponent. Pape thus concludes that the root cause of suicide terrorism is not religion, but foreign occupation.

Suicide terrorism also seems to be particularly effective against democracies with their free press and shifting public opinions. This is what he calls the "strategic logic of suicide terrorism". Pape has come under heavy criti-

cism from other academics on a number of counts, the most important being his alleged failure to account for al-Qaeda's suicide attacks. Many are unconvinced by his argument that al-Qaeda is fighting a perceived US occupation of the Arabian Peninsula. Some of the most deadly attacks, such as the Madrid and London bombings, have been carried out in places where there is no discernible occupation and by people who are not victims of occupation by any stretch of the imagination. Moreover, in Iraq, most suicide attacks are not directed against the occupiers, but against Shia civilians. The problem is that the patterns of suicide terrorism have changed considerably in the past five years. For a start, the number of attacks has rocketed, primarily as a result of the Iraq conflict; another reliable dataset suggests that over 80 per cent of all suicide attacks in history have taken place since 2001. Moreover, after about 2003, suicide tactics were employed by anti-regime militants in Pakistan and in North Africa, which had not used suicide bombings in the past.

The weaknesses and inaccuracies of Pape's work do not invalidate his main point, which is that a group's propensity for suicide tactics varies according to the type of struggle waged. Pape is too categorical in his claims and puts too much emphasis on occupation in the literal sense. It is probably not occupation, but nationalism, that generates suicide terrorism. Nationalist type groups are territorially focused, but they are not necessarily living under occupation. The recent developments in Pakistan and Algeria are exceptions that confirm the rule. The overall tendency is very clear: nationalist groups have carried out many more suicide bombings than revolutionary groups. Until 2003, the Egyptian al-Gamaa al-Islamiyya and the Algerian GIA, both of which fought their local regimes, practically never used suicide bombings. It would thus seem that nationalism has more mobilizing power than revolutionary utopias. Put differently, people will die for their people, but not necessarily for a state system.

As for al-Qaeda, one might argue that it represents a form of religious nationalism centred on the imagined community of the *umma* and emphasizing the defence of Muslim territory worldwide. The 2005 London bombers may not have been personal victims of occupation, but they had come to see themselves as part of an oppressed and humiliated Muslim body. In his "martyrdom" tape released after the bombing, Muhammad Siddique Khan said he was acting to avenge his Muslim brothers in Iraq and Palestine. He thus killed fellow British citizens to avenge brothers in faith he had never met. Such is the power of pan-Islamic nationalism.

More than six years after 9/11, the study of jihadism is still in its infancy. Why has it taken so long to develop? One reason, of course, is that we started almost from scratch. Another factor is that it takes time for primary sources to emerge. But the most important reason is no doubt that the emotional outrage at al-Qaeda's violence has prevented us from seeing clearly. Societies touched by terrorism are always the least well placed to understand their enemies. It is only when we see the jihadists not as agents of evil or as religious fanatics, but as humans, that we stand a chance of understanding them.

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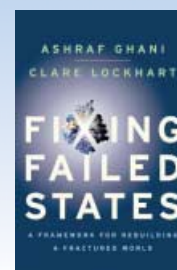
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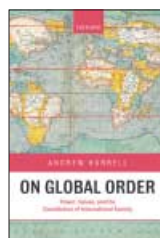
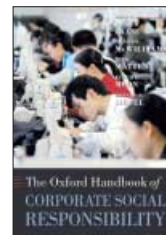
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