Forum

Al-Qaeda: A Nontraditional Movement

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The outrages carried out in recent years in diverse places of the world bear something that can only be called the "mark of al-Qaeda." The planes that crashed into the Twin Towers, the bombs that exploded in Madrid, or the attack against American naval ships in Yemen were attributed to an international network led by Osama bin Laden, located somewhere in Afghanistan. Although the existence of this "network" is not clear and its structure remains part of the unknown, it differs from the political parties and movements known until now in two particular ways: It has demonstrated its willingness to attack anywhere in the world, and there do not seem to be too many requirements for joining it.

In order to determine if this "network of networks" called al-Qaeda exists, we must first understand the rise and subsequent fall of the earlier Islamic movements that evolved out of the fervor of Iran's Islamic revolution of 1979. Second, we must realize the significance of adhering to a movement that has no partisan structure or links based on a strict ideological affinity, given that many political parties exclude all who do not agree with their own definite ideological set of rules.[1]

The Radicalization of Islam

For the first time in the twentieth century, the revolution led by Imam Khomeini enabled a mass political movement rising aloft the political banner of Islam to assume political and state power by means of revolution. In

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the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire's collapse, Europe's colonial occupation of most of the Arab world and subsequent coronation of imposed monarchs in the wake of its departure, the failure of Arab nationalism to govern and its later quasi-disappearance, the Arab opening toward the United States initiated by Anwar Sadat and the consolidation of an Arab elite totally dependent upon the West, the Iranian revolution inaugurated a period of political radicalization in the Arab and Islamic worlds with its clear anti-imperialist ideology.

As a result, movements brandishing the banner of Islam in their political operations developed with extraordinary speed and strength in the main Arab urban centers and began to compete with traditional political parties for the population's support. Without going into the details of what happened in each Arab country,[2] analyzing particular cases will enable us to understand this development. This is important, especially for the insertion of the masses in countries that have no accountability to a long theological-political tradition, as in the case of Egypt's Muslim Brothers, who inherited a movement born in the 1920s.

Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) converted itself into a real alternative to the historical National Liberation Front (FLN) and defeated it in the nation's first free national elections, even though soon afterwards a state-inspired coup prevented it from ruling. The Lebanese Party of God (Hizbullah) replaced the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in its struggle against Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon, shortly after the PLO administration was driven out and resettled in Tunisia in 1983. After achieving legitimacy,[3] Hizbullah extended its political strength to the heart of the country and converted itself into a legal party that participates in the electoral process. Furthermore, its armed wing caused Israel to leave the occupied south in 2000, after 18 years of uninterrupted occupation.

Hizbullah's success inspired a sector of the Palestinians in their struggle against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), since its appearance in 1987 as the leader of the Intifada, has become an inescapable political factor inside the territories administered by the Palestinian Authority. In less than 20 years it undermined the PLO's leadership, once unquestionable for the reconstruction of a Palestinian identity due to its struggle against Israel.

What characterizes these movements (and the large majority of Islamic movements) is their intention to lead the country's masses in order to acquire political power within what is considered to be their country/territory, without any intention of extending their sphere of influence beyond what they

identify as a national/state identity, even though, in theory, Islam rejects nationalism.[4] The armed struggle initiated by the FIS soon after it was stripped of its electoral triumph; the outrages attributed to Hizbullah against American, French, and Israeli troops; or the violent attacks of Hamas in Israeli territory reaffirm this conception. All of this implies that the struggle is against foreign occupation within the framework of an ongoing conflict.[5] Beyond the anti-imperialist or specifically anti-American rhetoric, none of these movements has ever been involved in armed actions against the United States *per se*. In fact, they always denied their participation in acts of violence that occurred outside their natural territory.

The 1990s

Iraq's invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990 and the later American intervention in the Gulf at the head of a large coalition, which included most of the Arab countries, marked a change in the regional and global political situation. Saddan Hussein's attempts to justify his annexation of Kuwait, as well as the ensuing war, accelerated the erosion of the bases of Arab nationalism. Although Iraq was the last Arab state with the capacity to demonstrate important economic gains, its was extremely fragile in political terms and had lost its legitimacy by invading Iran in 1980.

The expulsion of the Iraqi army from Kuwait in 1991 and the Soviet Union's disintegration that same year allowed the United States to design a new strategy: acquiring a strong military presence in the Arab world, one that would be even greater than the one obtained after the first Gulf war. So, under the pretext of a possible Iraqi invasion of Saudi Arabia, the Saudi monarchy allowed American troops to be stationed in the land in which Islam and Prophet Muhammad were born, and in which is located the Muslims' most important sanctuary (the Ka`bah), the place of pilgrimage for millions of believers each year. The new international situation allowed Washington to elaborate a strategy of dual containment directed at Iran and Iraq[6] in order to simultaneously isolate the two countries that had been the main opponents of the American presence in the Middle East and of Israel, although such opposition was no more than verbal.

At roughly the same time, several other important events took place. For example:

- The Islamic revolution in Iran, which had had such a positive impact throughout the Islamic world and which had helped develop a mili-

tant current, began to lose the revolutionary strength of its first years. As Olivier Roy indicated, even if its influence is important, one cannot perceive a direct Iranian influence on the majority of contemporary Islamic movements.[7]

Iran's image of radical confrontation with the United States (and support for Cuba and Nicaragua) decayed, among other reasons, because it failed to spread its revolution to other countries or to provide any concrete aid (beyond rhetoric) to the Afghanis fighting the Soviet occupation of their country. In addition, most Islamic movements (generally Sunni) distanced themselves from the Iranian leadership due to the revolution's strong Iranian–Shi`ah stamp.

- In a complete turnabout, Israel recognized the PLO, which then agreed to convert itself into a partner of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in order to sign the Oslo Peace Accords. According to the PLO's interpretation, this accord had to conclude with the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza.
- The civil war among Afghanistan's various political and ethnic groups ended in the Taliban taking of power in one part of the country, including Kabul. The Taliban, who were totally rejected by the immense majority of the Islamic political and theological currents due to their particular interpretation of Islam, were nevertheless broadly perceived to be a continuation of the resistance and expulsion of the Soviets.
- The blockade of Iraq and the suffering of the Iraqi population provoked a general discontent in the Arab-Islamic world and feelings of solidarity with Iraq. However, this emotional solidarity did not translate into support for the regime. This was clearly demonstrated during the Gulf war when Saddam Hussein, facing the American-led military offensive, sought to rebuild his leadership in three ways: appealing to Arab nationalism, already in open decline; attacking Israel in order to involve it in the war, fully aware of the Arabs' general rejection of Israel; and later appealing (in vain) to religious rhetoric. The well-known phrase uttered by Madeline Albright, then serving as the American secretary of state, in an attempt to justify the blockade that had caused the death of more than 500,000 Iraqi children[8] and the destruction of one of the region's richest countries as well as the cradle of civilization, incited the Arabs and Muslims to rebel and increased their dissatisfaction with the Arab regimes that did nothing to get the sanctions lifted.

The Afghanis

The 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which occurred shortly after the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran, produced what was probably the high mark of the nascent revolution's anti-imperialistic rhetoric and its inflamed discourse against both Washington and Moscow. Both events drove thousands of young Arabs and Muslims to join the resistance movement that – arms in hand – fought the communist regime and the Soviet military presence. Even if the participation of these "international brigades" was little more than symbolic, it established the generation of "the Afghanis." Recognized and admired for their active role in the "jihad" against the Soviets, they were reincorporated into their respective political movements after they returned to their respective countries.

Beyond the participation of foreigners in guerrilla warfare and battles, Afghanistan's complicated ethnic-tribal-religious texture was exploited by the Saudi regime, which supported diverse sectors as part of its intent to prevent the influence of revolutionary Iran's political-religious postulates from spreading. But this political and financial support to drive out the Soviets was eclipsed as soon as the Soviet troops withdrew and the Americans intervened in the Gulf. The decision of many Islamic groups to distance themselves from the Saudi monarchy began the moment the "infidel" American troops were allowed to install themselves in Saudi Arabia to protect the holy places. This was perceived as an affront to Islam. Roy points out that already in 1992, "the masses of the Islamists have shifted over to the opposition to Saudi Arabia."[9] Saudi Arabia, moreover, supported the Taliban regime, which had taken power in 1995. In fact, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Pakistan were the only countries that had official diplomatic relations with the Taliban. However, negotiators from various business enterprises were talking with the Taliban, among them American businessmen during the presidency of Bill Clinton.

The Development of al-Qaeda

In the mid-1990s, the former Soviet Union could no longer serve as a counterbalance to American hegemony. Arab nationalism was a vague memory,[10] Iran was not a beacon of revolutionary inspiration, various Islamic movements had been repressed to the point of disintegration, and the PLO was negotiating with Israel. In addition, the United States was not only blockading Iraq but was finally realizing a long-held goal: establishing a concrete military presence in Saudi Arabia at the invitation of the Saudi royal fam-

ily. This is the context in which al-Qaeda developed as the sole visible factor of global opposition to the United States.

An analysis of Bin Laden's discourse, based upon the interviews he has granted to diverse Islamic and non-Islamic media outlets, reveals that he centers his attacks within the Arab and Islamic worlds as a popular and deeply felt revindication. From condemning the American military presence in Saudi Arabia (a central point of his discourse) and Israel's occupation of Palestine and the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, he goes on to mention the massacre of Muslims in Chechnya and Bosnia as well as the American blockade against Iraq, which by then had caused the death of more than 500,000 Iraqi children.

The hatred toward the United States and Israel is real, and Bin Laden only "gave expression to" that which the immense majority of Muslims "feel." Anyone could perceive this in any given cafe in Cairo, Tehran, or Karachi. His discourse is candid, bordering on the simplistic, and contains no grand theoretical speculations. In November 1996, he declared:

> [T]he evidence shows that America and Israel kill the weakest men, women, and children in the Muslim world and in all places. Some examples of this can be seen in the recent massacre of Qana in Lebanon; the death of more than 600,000 Iraqi children due to the lack of food and medicines because of the boycott and the sanctions against the Muslim Iraqi people; and preventing the arrival of arms for the Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina, thereby abandoning these unarmed people to the hands of the Serbian Christians, who violated and massacred them in a manner that contemporary history had not seen.[11]

From an Islamic perspective, the Palestinian question always appears surrounded by a generalized consensus concerning its liberation struggle. In his book *Jihad in Islam: How to Understand and Practice It,* Muhammad Sa`id R. al-Buti, professor of theology at the University of Damascus, devotes an entire chapter to Palestine's salvation.[12] Even though the author intends to explain jihad's various peaceful aspects, in the above-mentioned chapter he states clearly that "Palestine, in terms of Islamic law, belongs to the Islamic environment, no matter how the Jews have settled in its land … all Muslims have to practice jihad in order to regain Palestine."[13]

Al-Buti is not Bin Laden, but he also reflects the general feeling. The difference between them is that al-Buti embodies the theological-theoretical discourse, whereas Bin Laden embodies the theological-practical discourse, which includes concrete action. Bin Laden always emphasizes that his

actions are a "response" and that the Americans, Jews, and Christians have to feel the suffering that all Muslims have felt for many years. Referring to the attack on the American embassy in Nairobi, Bin Laden stated:

> Thanks to God, the attack was successful and grandiose. They deserved it. The attack made them feel what we have felt with the massacres of Sabra, Shatilla, Dier Yassin, Qana, Hebron, and in all other parts.[14]

Organizing deeply rooted social movements that can challenge the existing power structures could take many years, regardless of whether they are Islamic, Marxist, or of some other ideological orientation. They have to acquire a profound practical and ideological penetration and fight in the terms of an established state (or to question its bases). History has demonstrated that many mass parties or movements have disappeared after having acquired wide popular support. Beyond the significance of violence (which this essay does not pretend to judge), it is "easier" to recruit groups of activists ready to carry out terrorist acts than to develop a mass movement with long-term objectives, not to mention the difficulties that Muslims face when they engage in clandestine activities. However, the concept of *taqiyah* allows them to adapt to their surroundings and recruit activists into a very intimate circle.[15]

The outrages at the Twin Towers or those at Madrid clearly do not represent any intention to convince the local population to fight against the government or the owners of financial capital. In fact, when Bin Laden returned to Afghanistan after his expulsion from Saudi Arabia and Sudan, he found a country governed by the Taliban, with whom he identified and found refuge. Except for the beginning of the 1990s, when he expressed his rejection of the American military presence, neither in Sudan nor in Afghanistan did he work to build a social movement that could respond to the challenges or oppose the government. This did not happen in Afghanistan against the Soviets, because at that time the objective was to fight foreign occupation.

It is not by chance that Bin Laden found support among the widely rejected Taliban and that none of the Arab world's powerful Islamic movements (e.g., the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hizbullah, or FIS) have joined his network. Despite this, however, he has managed to create an ambivalent discourse concerning all of the major outrages. He praises them as if they were part of his network or if the planning came out of his network, but then denies any relation to them and praises only those who carried them out. Gilles Kepel, in his *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*

(Belknap Press: 2003), asserts that Bin Laden, on more than one occasion, expressed his happiness regarding the outrages, but shortly afterward claimed responsibility only indirectly or denied any supervisory role at all.[16]

The emphasis on Bin Laden as a symbol leads many analysts to understand the phenomenon of Bin Laden from a strategy tied together with terrorism *per se*, instead of with social movements. However, given that this phenomenon is fed back by Bin Laden himself, it is not clear how and why al-Qaeda was born or if it really exists. Some analysts, among them Richard Shultz and Ruth Margolies Beitler, even believe that it is more of a non-conventional war and counterintelligence between al-Qaeda and the United States.[17] For Roy, jihad's significance is related to the fact that it does not recognize a political space or state.[18] Given this, he asserts that modern war does not have a space of its own or a space that is neither geographical nor social.[19] In his opinion, since a jihad does not have to obtain a result, the attacks have only some characteristics of a demonstration of power. In other words, they are almost exhibitionist actions.[20]

However, Jonathan Spyer (an advisor to various Israeli governments) and other analysts write that al-Qaeda (the "base") formed itself mainly to maintain the bonds between the veteran "Afghanis," so that at a later date they could convert themselves into an organization dedicated to fighting the American military presence in Saudi Arabia. In addition, after this they could weave the "network of networks," which would include Islamic movements throughout the world.[21] But it is not easy to make this network clear, because it is hard to believe that Bin Laden, still thought to be in the mountains of Afghanistan, could maintain a centralized and hierarchical structure that determines which actions are to be carried out, as well as where and when. No element allows us to believe in such a degree of centralization, for it is impossible that the necessary decisions could come from a country watched over by America's most sophisticated technology. In addition, there are no political elements that really indicate or prove the existence of such a centralized office.

Bin Laden plays with the ambivalence of his declarations, a technique that allows us to believe that he is behind every outrage, regardless of its location. Yet he often suggests that he has no relation to some of them and only praises those who have carried them out. This "laxity" allows the mass media and the intelligence community to quickly attribute any outrage to al-Qaeda and to conclude that any group could form part of this immaterial and inorganic network.

Given the lack of a "traditional" partisan structure with a recognized political leadership, anyone could be al-Qaeda or identified as one of its members. It seems to be very simple. For example, anyone could pick up the telephone, make a threat, and state that he/she or the group is a member of al-Qaeda, for there is no centralized office to deny such a claim. Thus, it is impossible to attribute any terrorist act to al-Qaeda – even if its perpetrator claims responsibility. Bin Laden's ambivalent discourse has converted him – or he has been converted by the mass media – into a respected and feared symbol. However, Milton Bearden, a CIA employee for 30 years who was stationed in Afghanistan and Sudan, maintains that "tying Bin Laden to every terrorist act that has happened during the last decade is an insult to the majority of Americans."[22]

It is very easy to place within this network any active movement whose objective is "global jihad," such as the insurgents in Mindanao (the Philippines), Bangladesh-Myanmar, Yemen, Somalia, Chechnya, Georgia, as well as the unknown Jemmah Islamiya (Southeast Asia), al-Ittihad al-Islami (the Horn of Africa), al-Ansar Mujahidin (the Caucusus), as Spyer maintains as part of his conspiracy theory.[23] What is very clear is that this network does not attract the large Islamic movements (mainly Arab) with a political tradition. On the other hand, why would the Muslim Brotherhood, FIS, Hamas, or similar groups need to obtain military training in order to hijack airplanes or place bombs in boats?

Conclusion

In a little over 10 years of its public presence, it remains quite difficult to define al-Qaeda exactly and to determine whether it represents a new type of movement in general, and an Islamic one in particular. In this sense, we agree with Lamin Benallou, who maintains that "as a pyramidal, structured, and operative organization, al-Qaeda has never existed," for "it is more a 'current' influenced by Bin Laden."[24] This vision also would reaffirm Kepel's belief that al-Qaeda emerged only as a database, from whence it acquired its name (al-Qaeda literally means the "base" of data). Benallou also asserts that the thesis of an organized, transnational, and global al-Qaeda leads us to agree with the thesis of a global threat, a world danger. Thus, there must be a global response. If Bin Laden and al-Qaeda are everywhere, American soldiers must be stationed everywhere.[25] This vision undoubtedly provides the pretext for American intervention in the Middle East.

The general changes that have occurred in the world recently, the changes of discourse and contradictory claims, and the outrages in the United States and Spain allow us to think in the following terms: The original al-Qada, which sprang up in Afghanistan while fighting the Soviets, appears to have evolved into a "network of networks" that allows any Muslim who wants to fight, primarily against the United States, to announce that he/she belongs to it. In this puzzle, the only missing part is whether this makes al-Qaeda a terrorist group or a new type of Islamic movement.

Endnotes

1. We have expounded upon this point in Pedro Brieger; *¿Guerra Santa o lucha política? Entrevistas y debate sobre el islam* (Buenos Aires: Ed. Biblos, 1996), 23-53.
2. Ibid.
3. See Kristian Alexander, "Mobilizations of the Shiite Community in Lebanon: A Multidimensional Analysis" (paper presented at the Middle East and Central Asia Conference, University of Utah, 17-18 October 2003).
4. See Ali Muhammad Naqavi, *Islam y nacionalismo* (Buenos Aires: Ed. Alborada, 1987).
5. After the outrage against a hotel in Taba (Egypt) that killed and wounded tens of Israelis in October 2004, Mushir al-Masri, the spokesman for Hamas, stated: "Hamas did not do this (...) Our strategy is clear. We fight for independence and the end of the [Israeli] occupation, but only inside the Palestinian territories." www.elpais.es (9 October 2004).
6. See Leonardo Balmaceda, Pedro Brieger, and Carmen Sfrégola, "Los Estados Unidos y la contención dual" (paper presented at the "Third Seminar of the Middle East" conference, La Plata, Argentina, 9-10 November 2000).
7. For more on this, see Olivier Roy, "Sous le turban, la couronne: la politique exterieure" in *Thermidor en Iran*, eds. Fariba Adelkhah, Jean Francois Bayart, and Olivier Roy (Brussels: Ed. Complexe, 1993).
8. Lesley Stahl on the American sanctions against Iraq: "We have heard that a half million children have died. I mean, that's more children than died in Hiroshima. And, you know, is the price worth it?" Secretary of State Madeleine Albright: "I think this is a very hard choice, but the price is worth it" ("60 Minutes," 12 May 1996).
9. Olivier Roy, *L´echec de l´Islam politique* (France: Ed. Seuil, 1992), 155.
10. Sri Lanka's Thalif Deen maintains that al-Jazeera has converted itself into a new symbol of Arab nationalism. See his "Is Al-Jazeera the New Symbol of Arab Nationalism?" www.antiwar.com (13 October 2004).
11. Interview published in *Nida´ul Islam* (www.islam.org.au), October-November 1996.

12. Muhammad Sa`id R. al-Buti, "Palestine and the Only Way To Save It," *Jihad in Islam: How to Understand and Practice It* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1995), 167-88.
13. Ibid., 181-82.
14. See www.terrorism.com/terrorism/BinLadinTranscript.shtml.
15. The concept of *taqiyah* refers to dissimulation concerning one's religion, especially during times of persecution and danger. See Ian Richard Netton, *A Popular Dictionary of Islam* (London: Curzon Press, 1992), 245.
16. Gilles Kepel, *La Yihad, expansión y declive del islamismo* (Barcelona: Ed. Península, 2001), 499-513.
17. See Richard Shultz and Ruth Margolies Beitler, "Tactical Deception and Strategic Surprise in Al-Qai'da's Operations," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* (MERIA) 8, no. 2 (June 2004). http://meria.idc.ac.il.
18. Roy, *L´echec de l´Islam politique,* 193.
19. Ibid., 187.
20. Ibid., 197.
21. Jonathan Spyer, "The al-Qa'ida Network and Weapons of Mass Destruction," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* (MERIA) 8, no. 3 (September 2004). http://meria.idc.ac.il.
22. See www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/interviews/bearden.html.
23. Spyer, "The al-Qa'ida Network."
24. Lamin Benallou, "Mitos y realidades," *El Pais* (Spain), 11 April 2004.
25. Ibid.