

The Future of Political Islam and the 'War on Terror'



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By the end of 2001, an e-book by Dr Ayman al-Zawahiri, the famous Egyptian MD and the paramount ideologue of Al Qaeda, entitled *Knights under the Prophet's Banner*, was circulated online. It explained the rationale for 9/11: a substitute for the radical Islamists' failure to mobilise the masses in the guerrilla Jihads in Egypt, in Algeria, in Bosnia, in Cashmere, and in Chechnya in the 1990s, where they had tried to duplicate the Afghan Jihad of the 1980s. That failure induced Al Qaeda to change strategy, to focus on the 'faraway enemy' and not the near enemy. The latter was impersonated by the so-called Apostate rulers, the lackeys of the West, the 'Pharaohs', the Mubaraks of this world. It had proved difficult to mobilise the masses against them, since their "apostasy" was not obvious – on the surface they still looked like Muslims, bore Muslim names, and had scores of religious scholars to legitimise them. Mobilising against the impious Americans looked far clearer from an ideological point of view, particularly if they were likened to the Israelis with whom they were allied: striking at the United States was a means to fight a "legitimate" and crystal-clear Jihad, and to expose America as a giant with clay feet. Hitting New York and Washington was also a means of reviving by proxy Islamist confidence in their struggle against their apostate rulers at home.

Tactically, suicide operations — a relatively new mode of action in the region — became the key to carrying out this reorientated Jihad. In 1980, after Saddam Hussein had attacked Iran, the young Islamic Republic resisted the Iraqi offensive by sending a huge number of brainwashed young men into the Iraqi minefields to 'clear a path' for the regular troops. These *bassidji* were sent to their death with a headband on their forehead that read 'there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His prophet' and they would be treated as martyrs.

This tactic of martyrdom through suicide was transported into the Arab world by the Lebanese Shiite movement Hezbollah, in the form of explosive belts which they detonated against the Israeli, French and American troops that were deployed in Lebanon after 1982, forcing the French and the Americans to pull out and the Israelis to retreat to a smaller portion of the territory in the far south of Lebanon. This success was all the more impressive since up to that point Arabs had never achieved a military victory against Israel. Suddenly there were means that proved efficient against the terrible might of the Israel Defence Forces, and the tactic began to spread in the early 1990s, leading to “martyrdom operations” — or suicide attacks, as they were seen from the other side — inside Israel itself. The first significant waves of such operations took place in 1996 in retaliation for the machine-gunning of Muslim worshippers in a Hebron mosque by an Israeli settler.

The operations sparked fierce debate among Sunni clerics. Was this new tactic martyrdom or suicide? If it was martyrdom it could be labelled as jihad, and its perpetrators would go to paradise; if it was suicide they would roast in hell. The majority of Saudi-Wahhabi

scholars ruled it was suicide, because they feared it constituted a very dangerous precedent that threatened Saudi dominance as the main ideologues of conservative Sunni Islamism worldwide, and gave credit to radical tactics they could not control. On the other side was Sheikh Qaradawi, a prominent Qatar-based Egyptian member of the Muslim Brotherhood, and a popular figure on the Al Jazeera TV talk-show ‘Shari’a and Life’. Qaradawi explained that under conditions of particular duress — such as Israeli occupation — such attacks were martyrdom operations, reinforcing his argument on the basis that because every Israeli including women did military service they were all combatants, even though they were temporarily in civilian clothes, and so suicide attacks against Israeli civilians were a legitimate means of Jihad in the path of Allah.

1996 was not only the year of the first set of Sunni suicide operations, it was also the year when Al Jazeera went on air. Without Al Jazeera there could be no Al Qaeda, because such operations could only become instruments for mobilisation if they were broadcasted favourably by a non-Western satellite TV channel. 1996 was also the year of Osama Bin Laden’s first declaration of

Jihad against the Americans that occupied the Land of the two Holy Places (i.e. Saudi Arabia). So 1996 was a watershed year, because radical Islamist movements would start to abandon failing guerrilla Jihad against the nearby enemy — using in its stead martyrdom tactics against the faraway enemy — be it first Israeli and later American.



Sheik Qaradawi was influential in justifying the use of martyrdom operations.

Martyrdom operations became the tremendously popular signature of the second Intifada, prompting telethons in Saudi Arabia and other countries to raise money for the martyrs' families — sidelining the ulema's cautious rulings . This 'grand narrative' of Jihad through martyrdom was claimed by Islamist radicals as their core strategy to mobilize the masses. It would lead to 9/11, but it did not succeed in galvanising broader

Muslim opinion and the copycat operations from Bali to Tunis, from Casablanca to Madrid, and ultimately to London with the 7/7 bombings did not lead to a mass Muslim mobilisation under Bin Laden's banner. The Iraq invasion of 2003, though, was regarded by Al Qaeda as a golden opportunity because, just like in Afghanistan in the 1980s, impious crusader armies had invaded the abode of Islam. Zawahiri therefore portrayed Jihad to defend that sacred territory as a compulsory defensive Jihad for all Muslims worldwide. They expected to reap the fruits of that call and establish an 'Islamic emirate' in Iraq, from where they would conquer the Middle East and the world. But the Afghan Jihad had been financed, trained and equipped by the United States through the CIA, and the Gulf countries, whereas this Jihad, although in receipt of some private Gulf money, lacked comparable means. As a result, Al Qaeda had only minimal success in recruiting foreigners to go to fight Jihad in Iraq and moreover, when fighters from Birmingham, Bradford, Leeds, Karachi, Cairo or Algiers came to Baghdad to fight, their martyrdom was hijacked by local Sunnis for their own vested interest. Instead of killing Americans, they were sent to kill other Muslims, the Shiites who were deemed to be the stooges and beneficiaries of US occupation. As a result, the average Muslim worldwide

who was not concerned with sectarian strife between Sunnis and Shiites finally turned against Al Qaeda: instead of being the embodiment of global Jihad, the Iraqi mass slaughter exemplified Fitna - the internal strife that brings havoc into Muslim society and makes it an easy prey for its enemies. That brought to an end the grand narrative of Jihad through martyrdom's tentative appeal on the Muslim masses.

On the other hand, right after 9/11, George W. Bush and his neoconservative advisors produced a parallel grand narrative, that of the war of terror, which used the opportunity of 9/11 to push their own agenda: to remake the Middle East. The invasion of Iraq — unrelated as a matter of fact to 9/11 and justified by the 'sexed-up' fable of Saddam's WMDs — was aimed at bringing about a friendly, pro-Western, Iraq, that would undermine Arab opposition to the West and to the Jewish state. It could also pump some non-OPEC Iraqi oil on the market and undermine the swing producer position that the Saudi kingdom had attained. This had the useful corollary effect of punishing the real culprit for 9/11: 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudis and had been brainwashed by the wahhabi curriculum. Moreover, the

invasion would promote democracy in the whole region, which was all the more important as terrorism surged, so the analysis of the neocons went, because there existed no outlet for pluralism in a Middle East dominated by authoritarian regimes, and so people were forced to resort to arms if they wanted to express their dissidence.

"both grand narratives failed in one place, Iraq"

But the premise on which this democracy narrative would be based happened to be Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, two symbols of arbitrary confinement and torture that ran counter to the rule of law so cherished by the American people. Muslim civil society, which was the original target of the democracy narrative, soon turned its back on it, as did European public opinion, even in such countries as Spain and Britain (both hit by suicide attacks) where governments had sent troops to Iraq. Finally US electors followed suit, voting out the Republicans in 2006 and 2008 and electing Barack Obama, an early opponent to the war in Iraq, whose first decision was to close down Guantanamo (even though implementing that policy was a more difficult matter).

So both grand narratives failed in one place, Iraq. Ironically, as their exponents were destroying each other, their common nemesis, Iran, a terrorist state for Washington and a heretic Shiite state for Sunni radicals and conservatives alike, became kingmaker — both in Iraq and in the region.

Obama's priority was an orderly pullout from Iraq, and that meant an agreement of some kind with Tehran, whose influence on Iraqi Shiite militias was to be taken in consideration. That was the rationale for the new American president's open hand policy towards Iran, together with politics of appeasement with the Muslim world, as exemplified by his Cairo university speech. His second priority was to refocus the war against the core terrorists, away from Iraq and onto the "AfPak" region, where Bin Laden and his last jihadists were probably located and hidden, courtesy of the local Taleban. Finally, Obama exerted some level of rhetorical pressure on Israel to stop the extension of settlements in the West bank.

None of those three initiatives met with the success the White House had expected. The re-election of president Ahmadinejad meant that the Iranian regime was not in the mood

to seek any compromise with the West — on such issues as its nuclear program or its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon — even though the election showed some amount of popular opposition to the regime, and, more important, a fault line within the regime itself between the clergy and the Pasdaran, or Revolutionary Guards. The war in Afghanistan proved more and more unpopular in NATO countries, as the number of dead increased, while the difficulties of Karzai's re-election, which came with accusations of fraud and corruption against his administration, didn't help. The war against Al Qaeda had to be waged first and foremost against the Taleban, a grassroots movement in the Pashtun regions, which proved very difficult to fight and led to a number of unpopular civilian casualties. Finally, there was no progress on the Arab-Israeli peace process, quite the contrary. The IDF assault on the Gaza strip and the uncompromising stance of the Israeli coalition government — depending on the Israel Baytuna Party headed by Avigdor Lieberman — prevented meaningful progress, as did the fragmentation of Palestinian representation between the Hamas controlled Gaza strip and the Fatah controlled West Bank.