

Reading al Qaeda

The jihadists export their rage to book pages and Web pages.

By Peter Bergen

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Al Qaeda, which means "the base" in Arabic, lost its physical base in Afghanistan after Sept. 11, 2001, so now its ideological base can be found not in the training camps of the Hindu Kush but on the Internet and in the books that leaders of the movement serialize in Arabic newspapers. These Web sites and publications are aimed at reaching a wide audience in the Muslim world. For instance, the London-based Al-Sharq al-Awsat is arguably the most influential newspaper in the Arabic-speaking world, while Abu Musab al Suri's 1,600-page history of jihad, *The International Islamic Resistance Call*, was posted to a jihadist Web site in Dec. 2004. Once it was posted, the book could then be copied to thousands of other such sites. It turns out that the first truly virtual books are being published not only by Silicon Valley whiz kids but also by jihadists.

All of the publications under discussion here deserve a wide audience in the West -- simply because if we are interested in understanding our enemies, the best intelligence about what they are thinking can often be found in what they're saying publicly. That was true when Osama bin Laden first publicly declared war on the United States in an interview with al Quds al Arabi newspaper in 1996, and it's true today.

Squabbling Extremists

Perhaps because we constantly hear that Islamist terrorists are bound together by their common dislike of the United States, we tend to assume that they must also be united by common tactics, strategies and ideology. In fact, those militants often resent one another as much as they do the Bush administration; the global jihadist movement is riven by squabbles over personnel and grand strategy that make the disputes on "The Jerry Springer Show" seem tame.

Nothing better illustrates this than the career of al Qaeda's No. 2, the Egyptian terrorist Ayman Zawahiri. A self-serving version of Zawahiri's story can be found in his own book, *Knights Under the Banner of the Prophet*, extracts of which were published in Dec. 2001 by Al-Sharq al-Awsat newspaper. A good deal of Zawahiri's *apologia pro vita sua* is an attack on those in Egypt's militant movement who have laid down their weapons and made an accommodation with the hated Egyptian government. Zawahiri's fury is particularly directed at one Egyptian lawyer, Montasser al-Zayyat, a recovering revolutionary who has made a career of defending jihadists on trial in Egypt. Zawahiri writes derisively, "Al-Zayyat has for a long time promoted the idea of halting jihad action against the government and its U.S. and Jewish allies inside and outside Egypt." In 2002, like rival rappers dissing each other on dueling mix tapes, Zayyat released his own riposte to Zawahiri's book in his novella-length *The Road to Al-Qaeda: The Story of Bin Laden's Right-Hand Man* (Pluto; paperback, \$19), published last year in an excellent English translation by Ahmed Fekry.

One key theme that emerges from all of these publications is how fissured and split the jihadist movement has been historically -- and how those fissures became more pronounced after Sept. 11. (Unfortunately, the U.S. occupation of Iraq has papered over many of those rifts). Emblematic of those fractures are the paths taken by the feuding Egyptian Islamists, Zawahiri and Zayyat. On one side are the former militants like Zayyat, who in 1997 entered into a ceasefire agreement with the Egyptian government after years of jihadist violence that killed more than a thousand Egyptians; on the other side are hardliners like Zawahiri, who has firmly rejected any thought of truce with the infidel Mubarak regime.

Al Qaeda's Egyptian Roots

All of this would be a purely local Egyptian concern had Zawahiri not increasingly embedded the terrorist group he founded, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, within al Qaeda over the past decade. Indeed, to a large degree, al Qaeda is an Egyptian construct. Its ideology derives from the writings of the radical Egyptian thinker Sayyid Qutb, who laid out the key religio-political justifications for offensive wars against the "enemies of Islam" from his cell in an Egyptian prison in the 1960s -- particularly in *Milestones*

(Bilal; paperback, \$7.95), the ur-text of the jihadist movement. The successive military commanders of al Qaeda -- Abu Ubaidah al Banshiri, Muhammad Atef and Saif al-Adel -- are former Egyptian police and army officers. Al Qaeda also adopted Egyptian Islamic Jihad's emphasis on attacking high-value targets and its secretive cell structure. But Zayyat points out -- correctly -- that the relationship between Zawahiri and al Qaeda has been a two-way street. "Osama bin Laden also had an appreciable impact on Zawahiri, although the conventional wisdom holds the opposite to be the case," Zayyat writes. "For example, bin Laden advised Zawahiri to stop armed operations in Egypt and to ally with him against their common enemies: the United States and Israel. His advice to Zawahiri came upon their return to Afghanistan [in 1996], when bin Laden ensured the safety of Zawahiri and the [Egyptian] Islamic Jihad members under the banner of the Taliban."

Which Way to Victory?

The most serious quarrel between Zawahiri and Zayyat revolves not around Zayyat's support for the 1997 ceasefire with the Egyptian government but around what is, to date, the crowning glory of al Qaeda's jihad, Sept. 11. Zayyat argues that the attacks had a disastrous boomerang effect on Islamists that will ultimately weaken the movement. "The point of disagreement . . . between Zawahiri and me, is how best to deal with the world's superpower," he writes. "Bin Laden's desire to take revenge [with the Sept. 11 attacks] . . . has given the Americans and other governments the power to destroy the Islamists before our eyes."

Of course, Zawahiri disagrees, counseling that the war with the United States is only in its early stages. Indeed, he thinks that time is on his side; the lessons of history, as Zawahiri sees them, suggest that a prolonged jihad holds the key to ending American influence and power in the Middle East. "The Crusaders in Palestine and Syria [in the Middle Ages] left after two centuries of continued jihad," he notes.

But Zayyat is not the only Islamist who is critical of al Qaeda's leaders. Abu Walid al Misri is an Egyptian who used to edit an Arabic magazine for the Taliban. After Sept. 11, he wrote *The Story of the Arab Afghans from the Time of Arrival in Afghanistan Until Their Departure with the Taliban*, a book serialized in the pages of Al-Sharq al-Awsat in Dec. 2004. The book mounts a blistering attack on bin Laden for destroying the Taliban. "Bin Laden's extremism reached the point where he believed that the United States was much weaker than some of those around him thought," Misri writes. "[A]s evidence he referred to what happened to the United States in Beirut when the bombing of the Marines headquarters led them to flee from Lebanon [in 1983]. Some young Saudi followers confirmed to bin Laden his delusions from the gist of the experiences they had gained from their visits to the United States, namely, that the country was falling and could bear only few strikes. . . . The last months in the life of al Qaeda were a tragic example of an Islamic movement managed in a significantly terrible way."

Implicit support for Misri's view also comes from an unlikely source, Abu Musab al Suri, a longtime associate of bin Laden's. In his massive *The International Islamic Resistance Call*, al Suri writes: "[After] September 11th, America destroyed the [Taliban] Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan, which became the refuge for the mujahideen.

. . . The Jihad movement rose to glory in the '60s and continued through the '70s and '80s . . . but was destroyed after 9/11."

As we have learned to our cost in recent years, much "secret" information is simply wrong, while information that is public -- for instance, bin Laden's repeated calls for attacks against the United States in the years before 2001 -- is too often discounted. One of the lessons of Sept. 11 is that we should pay careful attention to what the jihadists are actually saying. And what they are saying about Sept. 11, as we mark its fourth anniversary, is that the attacks may have been a tactical victory, but they were a strategic disaster because of the loss of Afghanistan as a base and the U.S.-led campaign to detain members of jihadist movements around the world. That's why so many jihadists are so happy that the Bush administration invaded Iraq. Without the Iraq war, their movement -- under assault from without and riven from within -- would have imploded a year or so after Sept. 11. ·

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