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Al-Qaeda since 9/11

DR ALIA BRAHIMI

SECONDS AFTER smiling at her local MP and shaking his hand, Roshonara Choudhry plunged a knife into his stomach. The attack on Stephen Timms in May 2010 was not the most high profile assault inspired by al-Qaeda, nor was it fatal. It did, however, offer a commentary on the changing nature of the terrorist threat since 9/11, al-Qaeda's major impact on international relations as well as its major failure, and the intimate, perhaps inevitable, connection between the two.

Success

Let me begin with al-Qaeda's major impact, which is the spectacular democratisation of Islamic authority.

According to her police interview, Choudhry realised she had an obligation to join in the jihad after viewing a lecture by Abdullah Azzam on YouTube. Roshonara was especially drawn in by his explanation of how jihad becomes obligatory for every Muslim when Muslim lands are attacked. The argument is that if natives are unable to expel their attackers, the obligation spreads in the shape of a circle from the nearest to the next nearest Muslims, until jihad becomes a duty for individual Muslims anywhere and everywhere.

Al-Qaeda's leaders are eager to portray the concept of jihad as a popular uprising by individual Muslims. However, historically, the idea was for Muslim rulers in neighbouring provinces to come to the aid of their co-religionists in other parts of the empire. The assumption was always that all jihads, including defensive ones, would be led by established Muslim leaders within pre-modern states or clearly defined communities.

The architects of global jihad, however, reached out to Muslims as individuals, rather than as members of politically organised communities. In the 1990s, al-Qaeda's leaders called for Muslim individuals to come aboard and, quite literally, join them in the caravan of jihad. Going over the heads of the region's rulers and clerics, who had 'sold out the *umma* for a handful of coins', bin Laden democratised Islamic authority. A layman with no religious training, he formally declared a jihad of self-defence, and called upon his fellow Muslims to come forward individually for training and combat.

This erosion of the state monopoly on violence is an outgrowth of a larger crisis of authority in the Muslim world, which is the product of three main developments.

Firstly, the abolition of the caliphate left the Muslim world without a vestige of centralised leadership, and its absence was especially keenly felt during the era of colonialism, with its perceived onslaught on indigenous cultures and religions.

Secondly, the conservative Islamic religious establishment, the *ulama*, has either been co-opted or marginalised by regimes presiding over Muslim-majority countries. This was possible largely because their sources of independent income were usurped by regimes from Abdurahman's Afghanistan to Qadhafi's Libya.

Thirdly, and as a consequence of the weakening of the ulema, laymen have increasingly taken it upon themselves to interpret the Islamic sources. Indeed, the most influential 'Islamic' texts of the last century were penned by intellectuals, autodidacts. This process was helped along in the 20th century by mass education and broader access to the printed word, and in the 21st century by the Internet.

Bin Laden's abiding claim was that the duty of jihad had been defaulted – indeed, neglected – in a sequence of evasion. While the rulers pandered to the Crusaders, the *ulama* were beholden to the rulers. Proper Islamic authority has vanished. Bin Laden spoke repeatedly of the need 'to fill the vacuum caused by these religiously invalid regimes and their mental deficiency', and presented himself and his circle as the vanguard group willing to bear that burden and protect the Muslims' interests in accordance with a true understanding of Islam. Hence, Sayf al-Adil, an al-Qaeda military leader, identified one of the three objectives of the 9/11 attack as signalling the emergence of a new virtuous leadership dedicated to opposing the Zionist–Anglo-Saxon–Protestant coalition.

Failure

Yet as bin Laden's jihad globalised and authority dispersed, al-Qaeda fell prey to the tyranny of unintended consequences. From Baghdad to Baghlan, Amman to Algiers, al-Qaeda's victims were predominantly Muslim and civilian.

Bin Laden was unwilling, but more likely unable, to control the cycles of misdirected violence perpetrated by self-defined franchises. He spoke out publicly against senseless bloodshed and irrational fanaticism. Intercepted communications showed that he very much disapproved of the sectarian slaughter and beheadings of hostages that took place under the banner of Al-Qaeda in Iraq when it was led by Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi. Atiyeh Abdurahman's entreaty for Zarqawi to stop anathematising the Iraqi population at large and to defer to Osama bin Laden's leadership fell on deaf ears – and some months later Zarqawi fell prey to a US air strike. I should also note that Atiyeh himself reportedly met his end in August 2011, in a Waziristan drone strike.

Bin Laden's own authority was far-reaching, no doubt, but it was simultaneously fragmented. He eroded the authority of the religious establishment and opened up the arena of Islamic interpretation, but he was unable to claim a monopoly over it himself.

The resulting failure was doctrinal.

None of bin Laden's arguments overturning the Islamic principle of civilian immunity retained its force when Muslims were the victims of al-Qaeda's attacks. In particular, the argument used for specifically Muslim casualties has it that civilians are only killed unintentionally in lawful operation conducted against legitimate targets, it's 'accidental manslaughter'. But the Muslim civilian is the direct object of attack because he is the only object of attack.

These deaths were left with no ideological cover – even from within the radical jihadi's moral universe.

The resulting failure was existential, metaphysical even.

By muddying the concept of the enemy, bin Laden's more reckless progeny confused his movement's *raison d'être*. The foundational narrative had been a poetic one of victimhood which conferred the legal duty of a defensive jihad. Al-Qaeda's mandate was clear and cogent: to defend Muslims from a Crusader onslaught. Protecting the *umma* was not only its *casus belli*, but also its existential commitment. The validity of this claim exploded alongside the scores of suicide bombers dispatched to civilian centres with the direct intention of massacring swathes of Muslim civilians.

Most importantly, however, the resulting failure was strategic.

For al-Qaeda's ideologists had always recognised the fundamental strategic importance of 'the people'. In the words of Abu Ubeid al-Qurashi, popular support is 'at the same time, the primary aim and the decisive means'. Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, a strategist of a decidedly Marxist bent, reflected at length on the mainstream aspirations of al-Qaeda's project, arguing that it was 'not possible for tens or hundreds of *mujahidin* here and there, to deter this fierce international attack... *It is absolutely necessary that the resistance transforms into a strategic phenomenon...* after the pattern of the Palestinian *intifada* ... but on a broader scale, eventually comprising the entire Islamic world'. Without popular support, according to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the *mujahidin* would be 'crushed in the shadows'. Indeed, for al-Qurashi, this would render them 'no more than a criminal gang'.

Qurashi also cautioned against 'excess terrorism', recognising that 'if terrorism exceeds the bearable limit, it will result in negative outcomes' and will lead to the uncovering of revolutionary fighters. In Iraq, al-Qaeda's fighters were indeed uncovered by their excess terrorism, by the killing for killing's sake, as tens of thousands of Sunnis formed an 'Awakening' movement which led to the expulsion of hundreds of militants from the west and the north. The crisis this precipitated in al-Qaeda's ranks was described as 'extraordinary' by its leader in Anbar province, who stated that the mass defection of ordinary

Sunnis led to 'the total collapse in the security structure of the organisation'. But the breakdown of al-Qaeda's project in Iraq was not only borne of excessive terrorism, but also of its failures as a self-defined government, offering a miserable, brutal quality of life where they took territory. In referencing a text on guerrilla warfare by Peter Paret and John Shy, Qurashi also noted that 'to make terrorism proper, it must be considered by the people as an effort to establish a long-awaited justice and a means to ease the government's iron fist'. In Iraq, al-Qaeda itself had become that iron fist.

This state of affairs was a far cry from the momentum and broad-based sympathy that al-Qaeda had enjoyed at the height of the US occupation of Iraq. Between 2003 and 2006 in particular, bin Laden's lyrical narrative of resistance resonated even beyond the Muslim world. A German student in my halls at Oxford once returned from a trip home sporting a bin Laden t-shirt. But, as Rik Coolsaet observes in his new volume, 'by the time of his death, al-Qaeda's mastermind no longer represented the Robin Hood icon that once stirred global fascination'.

A backlash had occurred:

- from within the ranks – for example, by al-Qaeda's commander in Northern Iraq, Abu Turab al-Jazairi, who expressed outrage at the Algiers bombing of December 2007 and insisted on the expulsion from the network of those fighters who harmed al-Qaeda's name;
- from other radicals, including bin Laden's mentor who asked him publically, whether his means had become his ends;
- from affiliated groups – as recently as June, a commander of the TTP in Pakistan split from the group declaring that he was opposed to the persistent targeting of Pakistani civilians in mosques and markets;
- from reformed souls, such as Sayyed Imam al-Sharif and Noman Benotman, with the latter noting in an open letter that 'where there was harmony, you brought discord' – a statement tantamount to the charge of sowing '*fitna*'.

It's not inconsequential, indeed it's no coincidence, that much of this criticism simultaneously cast doubt on bin Laden's personal authority to lead a jihad. While al-Odah dismissed bin Laden as a simple man without scholarly credentials, Benotman strongly advised bin Laden to seek the guidance of authentic scholars. He also confirmed that there had been a dispute between Mullah Omar and bin Laden about the decision to attack America, and asked: 'How can you claim to fight for an Islamic state and then so flagrantly disobey the ruler you helped put into place... The question asked by many, even among the closed group was, by what right did al-Qaeda bypass and ignore Mullah Omar?'

And, I might add, based on the central concern recurring in all the criticisms of al-Qaeda, moderate and radical, which invoked the pragmatic/consequentialist strain of the Islamic jihad tradition: for what?

New moon

But what of the way forward for al-Qaeda, ten years on from 9/11?

If the link between democratised authority and promiscuous targeting presented the gravest problem for al-Qaeda, then the further dispersion of authority is also seen as the solution.

Over the last year or so, the call for jihad has altered subtly, but significantly. The democratisation of authority has entered a second stage. A new ideological and strategic current is championing lone-wolf attacks by Muslim individuals living in the west, without prior contact with al-Qaeda networks or consultation with any of its radical jurists.

Lately, al-Qaeda's strategists view the Muslim population in the west as their ace in the hole. As Adam Gadahn argued in a recent video appearance, Muslims in the west are perfectly placed to play an important and decisive role, particularly as America is awash with easily obtainable firearms.

Further, individual operations are much harder to detect and intercept because, as al-Qaeda's *Inspire* magazine points out, nobody else in the world needs to know what these lone operatives are thinking and planning. The global jihad becomes at once universal and highly particularised.

Most importantly, from a strategic perspective, such operations shift al-Qaeda's violence out of the Islamic world and into the western heartland. The aim is to get back to basics. A few successful examples are routinely put forward as models for this re-invented *jihad al-fard* (individual jihad):

- Taimour al-Abdeli, who detonated a car bomb and his own suicide bomb in Stockholm;
- Major Nidal Hassan, the US military psychiatrist who went on a shooting rampage at the Fort Hood army base in Texas;
- and Roshonara Choudhry, who had no contact with any radical recruiters or cells, and plotted her attack on Timms entirely alone.

The emergence of the strain of thought privileging terrorism by individuals coincides with the rise of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), whose English-language publications are vigorously re-imagining the landscapes of jihad.

The glossy pages of *Inspire* magazine increasingly advocate 'individual terrorism'. In a recent letters section, an anonymous Muslim living in the west asks about the best way to reach the jihad frontiers. Stay where you are, he is advised, and focus on planning an operation in the west instead, like attacking an army recruitment centre or a nightclub. A few pages later, the military commander Abu Hureirah calls for an 'operation in their midst' in response to every attack in a Muslim land. The recurring 'Open Source Jihad' section advises on how to outfit a pickup truck with blades so that it can be used to mow down enemies (Issue II) and on how to make a bomb in your mum's kitchen – it's worth noting that this article

was in the possession of Naser Jason Abdo, the US soldier arrested last month in Texas for allegedly planning to replicate the Fort Hood shootings.

Also associated with AQAP is the charismatic preacher Anwar al-Awlaki, whose fluent English, soft intonation and sharp wit were directed conscientiously at Muslims living in the west. A trained cleric, his religious addresses were suffused cleverly with a very articulate brand of anti-imperial politics. Awlaki was in email contact with Nidal Hassan and his sermons were found on Choudhry's computer. Awlaki captured well the extremes of this second stage of democratisation when he stated on 8 November last year that no *fatwa* or prior consultation with Islamic experts was necessary to 'fight and kill Americans'.

Awlaki's father defended him against terrorism charges by observing that, unlike Osama bin Laden, his son was not a fighter but merely a preacher. However, therein lay Awlaki's potency as al-Qaeda's non-conventional combat doctrine enters a new phase. In the era of individual terrorism, the power to inspire is the most significant force multiplier.

The 'western lone wolf' strategy began to take root, in the US in particular, and it was al-Awlaki's face that appeared in al-Qaeda's new moon. Carlos Bledsoe, a Memphis native, shot two people outside an army recruiting office in Arkansas, from a car containing Awlaki literature. Zachary Adam Chesser, who was convicted of encouraging attacks on the creators of South Park, had posted Awlaki's messages on websites. Michael C. Finton, who attempted to bomb the offices of an Congressman, quoted Awlaki on his MySpace page. Others believed to have lionised Awlaki include Abu Khadir Abdul Latif, Faisal Shahzad, Sharif Mobley, Colleen LaRose ('Jihad Jane'), the 2006 Ontario bomb suspects and the Fort Dix attack plotters. As a result, the US's latest counterterrorism strategy is 'the first that focuses on the ability of al-Qaeda and its networks to inspire people in the US to attack us from within', according to Obama's counter-terrorism chief.

Needless to say, Awlaki's death in a drone strike on 30 September 2011 constituted an important setback in al-Qaeda's attempt to radicalise an English-speaking constituency. Samir Khan, a Saudi national who grew up in North Carolina and New York, might have adopted Awlaki's mantle and continued his work in this regard, but he was killed in the same strike. An al-Qaeda statement which confirmed their deaths described them foremost as 'two brothers... who have done an enormous amount of work to spread glad tidings to English-speaking Muslims across the globe'. Awlaki's propaganda is still readily available online and, although he cannot now respond to unfolding events in his characteristically incisive way or build up personal online relationships with would-be bombers, in important respects his message lives on.

At the same time, some potential heirs have presented themselves. On 8 October 2011, for example, the Syrian-American Al-Shabaab spokesman Omar Hammami released an audiotape which clearly aimed to immediately pick up where Awlaki left off. Speaking in his distinctive Alabama drawl and referencing Slim Fast commercials,

Hammami urged westerners leading self-centred, spiritually empty lives to find meaning in jihad, without waiting for the approval of clerics (an affliction he dubs 'the scholar fixation'). Another candidate for the role of western propagandist is the Austrian national, Mohamed Mahmoud. Freshly released from prison, having completed a four-year sentence for running al-Qaeda's German media arm and for making terrorist threats, Mahmoud publically declared his intention to return to spreading al-Qaeda's worldview. We can expect that effort, from Mahmoud, Hammami and others, to carry a marked preoccupation with a western audience.

The intention here is not alarmism about terrorism, but in fact, optimism. Its changing nature aims to play to our weaknesses by regenerating the jihadi threat with a native grasp of language, culture and environment – but in the end it will play to our strengths. In many ways, as conflict shapes opponents, so the law-enforcement paradigm has been thrust upon us by the enemy. And we're good at it. Even the successful operation which killed 9/11's mastermind erred significantly from the inter-state war paradigm – unfolding, as it did, as a covert, surgical, intelligence-led mission carefully conducted by a specialised unit within a US-allied country. Crucially, however, this shift frees us from our own counter-productivity. Most of the 'individual terrorists' I mentioned cited the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as integral to mission and motivation.

Conclusion

Before he died, the *umma* had stolen bin Laden's thunder. The global jihad is still twisting in the breeze of the Arab spring. Moreover, in contrast to the AQAP strategy, communications uncovered at the Abbottabad compound suggest that Zawahiri has been in favour of more localised attacks, in Iraq and in East Africa.

And so, the re-invention by Osama bin Laden of one of the most important Islamic legal ideas, on right authority, has bequeathed more than doctrinal disarray. It has also guaranteed fragmentation, and perhaps fracture, within al-Qaeda's own authority structures – which may well define its future.

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This article is an updated version of Dr Brahimi's remarks for a symposium on '9/11: Ten Years On', hosted by the British Academy on 2 September 2011.

AT AN EVENT held at the British Academy on 11 October 2011, Dr Omar Ashour (University of Exeter) and Professor Charles Tripp (School of Oriental and African Studies) discussed **'The Egyptian Revolution of 2011'**.

Dr Ashour said: 'On 11 February 2011, Mubarak was removed; on 12 February, I tweeted, "First day on Mother Earth without Mubarak controlling Egypt. I'm breathing much better". Most of the revolutionary and political forces in Egypt saw this as a success, especially as the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) had promised from the outset to put an end to authoritarianism and to dictatorship, and to move towards a democratic transition in Egypt. Expectations were high and there was a timeframe of six months for the transition. That was in March 2011. Based on those promises, Egypt should now have an elected government, but it does not, and it is still in the transitional phase, with the SCAF as the ultimate authority.'

Dr Ashour explained: 'The lack of leadership during the resistance campaign in January and February 2011 was a source of strength. No leadership could have been eliminated, because there was none: it was a headless revolution. Now, however, it is increasingly a source of weakness, because the revolution cannot move forward without leadership. It seems evident to the military that they are the more coherent and sophisticated actors. Every time other political forces negotiate with them, it usually comes out with the SCAF being on top.'

Dr Ashour also drew attention to 'the increasing crackdowns in response to protests by different components of Egyptian society', creating 'a situation that is quite volatile'.

An audio recording of the full discussion can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/events/2011/