

**Anatomy of the mind of the Islamic militant, and western perceptions**  
**Xavier Raufer – november 2002**

Since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, we have been subjected to massive amounts of information on Islamic militants, especially Osama ben Laden and his followers and supporters, the salafists or wahhabi.

Is this information flood part of the solution or part of the problem ? I will address this question later on in my discussion.

However, let me begin with my major concern – how the West misunderstands the Islamic militant mindset.

In the last fifteen years or so, from Lebanon to Algeria, from, the Arabian peninsula to Sudan, I've met and held discussions with quite a lot of these Islamic fanatics. But when I compare the picture of these fanatics as painted by Western officials and media, and some academicians, to what I have seen and heard in my discussions with these militants, I do not recognize the picture. There is a major disconnect between how the West perceives militant Islam and the reality of the situation. Some of my French and Arab colleagues who have long conversed with these Islamic militants share my concern.

I want to emphasize that this is a crucial point. If you want to determine what their targets and tactics will be, you must identify and understand the inner logic and mindset of these militants and comprehend the core elements of their motivations and objectives.

Since ancient Greece, « know your ennemy » has been a cardinal rule of warfare.

But to truly understand ben Laden, it is not enough to just collect and process facts about his finances, tactics, communications, and organizational skills. One has to try and understand his vision and worldview. In this way, we might be able to hazard a guess as to what his reactions would be to certain events, developments, or incidents. This vision and worldview comes from the subtle interaction of an individual psychology with a very specific culture. They cannot be easily programmed, or captured and wrapped up in a computer's hard disk.

Three examples :

- Dates ? one year after 9/11, precisely the 11th of september 2002, the western world became hysterical. Commercial flights were empty. Each and every western police force, army, navy or air force was on high alert. Whereas, for a salafi muslim of the arabic peninsula, dates simply don't matter, are meaningless. In the mindset, in the culture of a desert bedoin, anniversaries, birthdays don't exist. You don't celebrate your children's, your mother's birthday. Salafists even consider commemorating the prophet's anniversary a major sin.

Calendar obsession is a westerner's disease. Not so for a fundamentalist desert arab. After 9/11, in ben Laden's propaganda, that day became yom al-moubarak (the Holy Day) and that's it. Which precise calendar day it was, is absolutely devoid of interest. Anyone here, having had an appointment with a desert arab (moreover with a cheikh) will understand what I mean.

What is important is that all the islamic militants I've met are absolute litteralists, obsessed by the Coran's litteral meaning, by the Prophet 's actual deeds. They do something only if it's in the Coran, they act and dress as the prophet did. The prophet used to squat before drinking water ? So they do. The prophet advised a true believer to enter a mosque right foot first ? So they do. And so on.

90% of their exchanges (verbal, internet, telephones : as the major french anti-terrorist judges teach in my research center, I know this as a fact) are about what is licit or illicit, what would the prophet do, if... etc

If it's not in the Coran, if the prophet didn't do it, its worse than haram (unlawful) , it's bida (innovation) the biggest sin for a salafi, deserving swift death penalty.

9/11 has been accepted by ben Laden's shura council because it's in the Coran : what happened that day is a GHAZWAH, a raid. As an emir (military leader), the prophet conducted many raids, for territory conquest, loot or revenge. He even said in the Coran « A raid on the path of God is better than this world and what's in it ». So OK, Ghazwah is Halal (lawful).

- Biological or nuclear terrorism ? This is even more important. Among the serious, proven facts we have on 9/11 (not so many, actually) there is this five-pages document found by the FBI in Mohammad Atta's luggage, in a car left outside Dulles international airport ; also found in several other shahids (martyrs) bags, and finally, in the wreckage of the plane that crashed in Pennsylvania <sup>1</sup>.

Most probably, this hand-written document was in the possession of all the hijackers. It was certainly written by the (unknown) organizer of the attacks. This text is a spiritual guide for the 19 terrorists' last day of life. It's not a technical or practical document, but a religious, even mystical one - it could have been written in the Prophet's times. This document helps the future martyr achieve body and spirit unity, in the last day of his mission. It contains a list of rituals to be performed, starting with « The last night ».

The last paragraph is terrible : « When the moment of truth comes near, and zero hour is upon you, open your chest, welcoming death in the path of God. Always remember to conclude with the prayer, if possible, starting it seconds before the target, or let your last words be : « there is none worthy of worship but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God ». After that, God willing, the meeting is in the highest paradise, in the company of God ».

Among many problems mentioned in this text : why kill, and how to kill, the pilots or resisting passengers ? Here, a word is pointedly chosen DHABAHA (slit, rip something open) and not QATALA (any way of killing).

Dhabaha means slit the jugular vein of an animal or human being. It's what Abraham was about to do to his son : sacrifice him on God's order. It is a ritual slaughter. It is a physically close act, committed with a blade : the blood must actually flow. It's impossible to perform Dhabaha from afar, with any other type of weapon.

Now, let's go back to year 2002 : we've seen Ghazwah is Halal. With explosives, at a close distance and with a lot of blood flowing, shahadat (martyrdom) is acceptable to the Hamas shura council. Spreading poison in a public place should also be Halal: poison is known in the islamic tradition. 10 out of 12 shi'a imams died from poisoning. Saladin ordered the crusader's wells, in their fortresses, to be poisoned.

But biological or nuclear weapons ? You spread a substance, and people die maybe months later from a disease, or radiations ? Experimenting it, at the militant level, why not ? But ben Laden's shura council, some very old and reactionary bigots, having spent their live commenting the only book they know by heart (the Coran), would they accept an attack with such weapons ? I doubt it.

Al-Qaeda ? Since the August 1998 attacks on the two US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es-Salaam, and even more so since 9/11, a vast coalition of US officials and media have pointedly and consistently insisted on the fact that there exists an organization, or at least a network, named al-Qaida, with a chief named Oussama ben Laden.

Of course, there is an entity of some sort, or an islamic nebula, working with ben Laden, and responsible for, among other, the 9/11 attacks. But is there really an al-Qaida organization or even network ?

Using a word creates a representation in the human mind. When you present as a fact that there actually exists an al-Qaida organization – an islamic equivalent of the IRA, or of the Red brigades – you create a common perception of a mechanical structure, as is a motor car, or a clock. You press on a button, and you honk the horn. You touch another button, and the windscreen wiper works. This mechanical model is the West's terrorism model : pyramidal, hierarchical. The « strategic leadership » issues an order, then an attack occurs. Finally, the act is claimed on the organization's letterhead.

But al-Qaida ? Is al-Qaida an islamic Komintern ? Has anyone seen an al-Qaida letterhead ? or any authentic document using the word al-Qaida as a brand, like IRA or RAF ?

Has Oussama ben Laden ever publicly used, on an authentic document, the word al Qaida (again, as a brand) himself ? No.: ben Laden always speaks for himself : he encourages muslims to revolt, he's happy to see infidels punished, etc. Because even if he's not a first class mufti himself, he knows very well what any decent muslim

knows : jihad is an individual act, nothing else. You may act as a model ; you may preach jihad fi sabil'Allah, you can't force any one to join it. You don't give orders.

I've talked with several gentlemen from various special forces unit who rushed into Kaboul Kandahar or Tora Bora, after the Taliban's collapse, to grab as many documents as they could. Will any of these documents be declassified some day, to prove as a fact that al-Qaida exists under the name al-Qaida, as, for example, the Hamas exists, with its own letterhead, logo, internal regulations and even a constitution ?

Asking these questions is not academic finessing. Because what American justice calls al-Qaida may well differ greatly from the West's concept of an organization. Thus, I was very happy to read, in an Asia-Pacific Foundation analysis, an october text on Jemaa Islamiya – Indonesia, quote : « it is important to understand that what is referred to as the « al-Qaida network » is in reality a conglomerate of a number of terror groups and their cells, of varying autonomy but who share a common ideology and who cooperate with each other ».

Another analyst says : « Ben Laden has operated as a venture capitalist : soliciting ideas from below, encouraging creative approaches and « out of the box » thinking, and providing funding to those proposals he thinks promising ».

This looks more like it, when you even remotely know how things work in the fundamentalist-muslim world : local groups of islamic radicals find a terrorist attack idea of their own, and then attempt to find :

. First, religious sanction,

. And then, funding for it.

Funding from whom ? From some « jihadi philanthropy », or « terrorist philanthropy » active in Uzbekistan, Indonesia, Chechnya, Philippines, Bosnia, Kashmir, Algeria, etc. A « philanthropy » in which Oussama Ben Laden plays, of course, a major role.

This is no mechanical model. This is a biological model. These islamic cells appear like mushrooms after rain. They grow on the same ground. Their roots are mingled underground. All mushrooms look more or less the same <sup>2</sup>.

But there is a huge difference with a mechanical model. If a car is damaged, it needs external help to get repaired. A watch or a car are dead. A mechanism is not alive. Of course, a biological entity is alive. When your skin is scratched, it usually cicatrizes alone. Lizards even grow a second tail, if the first one is broken.

Trying to destroy a biological entity – and of course, al-Qaida should be destroyed - while simultaneously thinking it, and describing it, as a mechanical one, looks to me as a rather big intellectual mistake.

Now, finally, the Southasian islamic-terrorist problem. Again, collecting information on a problem, and thoroughly thinking this problem are two different things. Basically, the western intelligence services have been collecting information since 9/11. But doing so without accessing the reality, the essence of the enemy ; without reaching a solid ground and eliminating any initial false or dubious conceptions, leads one to risk drowning in a rising tide of misunderstood facts.

It is a common perception now that the main danger comes from rogue states. Following the 9/11 events, the United States reacted to terrorism by a strong military operation against Afghanistan, as a rogue state. The plan – a state to state issue - was to « find and punish culprit states behind 9/11 ». First of all, with a military reply to the « Taliban regime ».

But if you look at the maps I'm now showing, you clearly see the problem arising from spaces where no nation-state exerts a firm control ; from anarchic areas where the islamic terrorists actually prosper, and from where they launch their attacks. The real danger is not in terrorist states, as in the cold war, but in terribly weak, if not phantom or virtual, states.

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<sup>1</sup> On this point, read « Manual for a raid », Kanan Makiya & Hassan Mneimneh, in « Striking terror », New York Review of Books, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the jihadi are between 25-50, wahhabi, middle-class, well educated, trained in Afghanistan or Pakistan, etc.