

## **AL QAEDA AND THE JIHADIS**

**by Patrick Lang**

By Patrick Lang The Al Qaeda that most Americans imagine does not exist. It is largely a figment of our imaginations and fears, a phantom that never existed in the way that many of us imagine. Al Qaeda is not an "organization" in the Western sense of the word. It is a movement, a historical phenomenon and a set of ideas offered to Muslims across the world. This does not mean that there are not violent and dangerous jihadi terrorists in the world. There are, but they are not members of a sprawling and tightly organized secret "army" of Islamists who operate in obedience to orders from Osama bin Laden. There is no cave in the Pakistan/Afghanistan border country that has a sign in Arabic over the door that reads "Jihadi World Headquarters, Osama bin Laden, Commanding." There is no central command for the jihadis.

### **The True Source of Jihadism**

If this is so, then why do we hear over and over the same questions every time there is a terrorist incident: "Is this group Al Qaeda?" "Was this operation Al Qaeda?" "Was this group a franchise of Al Qaeda?" These questions are posed by journalists, government officials and supposed experts.

Yet such questions betray a basic lack of comprehension of how authentic Islamic activities are conducted. This lack wastes time and effort and distracts from effective operations against the jihadis. After five years of "war" against the jihadi movement, our government leadership and the public support that underlies it remain blind to the widespread fear and resentment toward Western cultural invasion and aggressiveness that is at the root of the appeal of jihadism.

### **A Movement, Not an Organization**

Osama bin Laden is not the "commander" of the jihadi movements, because Islamic groups do not operate on the basis of command-and-control relationships. Islamic groups typically form around the personality and pronouncements of a leader. There are no clergy in Islam. There is no hierarchy. The acceptance by followers of the opinions of a leader is the basis of group identity. Osama bin Laden directly controls a relatively small group of hard-core jihadis who have accepted his views on the nature of Islam and its enmity to the influence of the West.

This group has certain operational characteristics that are well known, including long-term planning, simultaneity of operations and so on. Beyond that

directly controlled group, bin Laden and his Al Qaeda provide inspiration and example to discontented Muslims across the world. He provides seed money to support the growth of the movement. He still provides training when he can, but he does not control the jihadi movement in the way we imagine.

The jihadi groups are not like that. They take what they want from a menu of ideas offered by well-known Islamic teachers, both past and present, and from the operational example of current leaders like bin Laden. The recently discovered British-based plot to destroy airliners is a good example. This jihadi group clearly decided to follow the example of Al Qaeda in its Bojinka plan, which envisioned the nearly simultaneous destruction, by means of liquid explosives, of a large group of airliners over the Pacific. The British jihadi group copied most of the features of this Al Qaeda plan, but there is no evidence that the British jihadi group was in any way directed or pushed by bin Laden's Al Qaeda to attempt a rerun of his plan. In the great majority of jihadi actions and attempted attacks, there is no evidence at all of control by bin Laden or Al Qaeda.

Nevertheless, each incident of jihadi aggression against the West continues to be an occasion for an all-out search for Al Qaeda command of the operation.

### **The Enemy in our Minds**

We apparently want to believe that the jihadi phenomenon is a tightly commanded network. The reasons are clear: We want an enemy who can be decisively defeated by the destruction of the organization, preferably by decapitation. We want an enemy whose ways of thinking mirror our own. An enemy who does not think or organize as we do requires us to learn to think like that enemy, which is difficult. It is much easier to opt out intellectually by saying that the enemies are merely "crazy."

It continues to be true that the principal obstacles to defeating the worldwide jihadi movement are in our own minds. Westerners, particularly Americans, are inclined to believe that Western civilization is the only authentic human civilization and that all others represent either failed experiments in development or mere backwardness, which will disappear through education that exposes non-Western people to the global culture.

We Americans must learn to accept the fact that non-Western peoples want our technology. They want our income, but they do not want to be like us. They do not want to be us. Most of them like their own way of life. They do not want ours. The great majority believe that democracy is a code word, not for elections but for abandonment of their ancestral ways. They do not want to abandon their ancestral ways. It should be obvious by now that a great many of them will fight to remain as they are and have been.

We must learn to stop projecting our own attitudes onto Muslims. We must learn to stop assuming that our way is the right way. And we must learn to believe our own statements when we tell the Muslims that we want them to live a life that is acceptable to them rather than to us.

If we do that, jihadism will simply wither away.

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