

Detective Report or Academic Book?

Review >
General

Less than one year after the World Trade Center and Pentagon were attacked by terrorists hijacking American jetliners on 11 September, dozens of books examining the issues around Osama bin Laden and his international terrorist network al-Qaeda have been published all over the world. Still only a few seek to offer a comprehensive analysis about how Osama bin Laden expanded his network to various parts of the world and established a kind of 'terrorist empire'. Rohan Gunaratna's *Inside Al Qaeda, Global Network of Terror* is one such book. Written by a scholar with a longstanding interest in the issues of terrorism, particularly Tamil Elam in his native Sri Lanka, this book seeks to provide a comprehensive assessment about the historical developments, organization, ideology, strategy, and network of al-Qaeda.



By Noorhaidi Hasan

During his five-year intensive research, Rohan Gunaratna claims to have succeeded in observing important bases of al-Qaeda scattered in various countries around the world. He also claims to have interviewed over 200 members of this network, as well as people associated with it, in various Muslim diasporas in Europe and the United States; diasporas that have become the targets of al-Qaeda's expansion.

The first part of this book presents a story about the origins of al-Qaeda. Gunaratna points out that al-Qaeda originated from the Maktab al-Khidmat li al-Mujahidin al-Arab (MAK, Afghan Service Bureau Front), set up by Abdullah Azzam as a network of recruiting jihad volunteers from Arab countries to fight side-by-side with Afghan *mujahidin* against the Soviet Union. Joining this organization, Osama bin Laden, the son of millionaire Muhammad bin Laden, began his jihad adventure in the 1980s and soon became one of the most important deputies of Abdullah Azzam. Having later taken over the leadership of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden vowed to expel the US troops from Saudi Ara-

bia and later proclaimed a war against the 'Jews-cum-Crusaders conspiracy'.

The second part of this book analyses the structure, ideology, and strategy of al-Qaeda. According to Gunaratna, al-Qaeda is an organization consisting of secret cells, various Islamist political parties, and independent terrorist groups, with its core base in Afghanistan. It is run via a vertical leadership structure that provides strategic direction and tactical support (p. 54). Its members adhere strictly to their cell structure, maintain strict discipline, promote self-sacrifice, and act under the guidance of an action programme. They are imbued with an ideology of holy war against the West, which is inspired by the militant ideas of Sayyid Qutb and Abu al-A'la al-Mawdudi, two prominent Islamist ideologues. Gunaratna even claims that al-Qaeda is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, or more precisely the most radical, uncompromising tendency in the Muslim Brotherhood (p. 92) and reveals that besides spreading terrorism the main strategy of al-Qaeda is to radicalize Muslims all over the world.

In the next two parts of this book, which constitute the most problem-

atic parts, Gunaratna seeks to expose the worldwide network, defined as 'a network of cells, associate terrorist and guerrilla and other affiliated organizations', in which members share expertise, transfer resources, discuss strategy, and even conduct joint operations (p. 95). According to Gunaratna, the tactic of decentralization, cooperating with local militant groups, is one of al-Qaeda's keys to success in extending its reach of action. Through this kind of cooperation, al-Qaeda exists in well over a hundred states, stretching from North America to Southeast Asia. This part of the book also explains the financial infrastructure of al-Qaeda and the way its members are trained before running their jihad missions, ranging from guerrilla war to terrorist attacks and quasi-conventional campaigns.

The main problem that readers might face is that the author fails to clarify several basic concepts used in this book, including organization and network. The author, for instance, seems to have obscured the definition of organization. Apart from his explanation about al-Qaeda as a real organization, he suggests that al-Qaeda is a virtual organization, a shadowy body that exists more at the level of imagination (p. 3). If this is the case, al-Qaeda is apparently not much different from Benedict Anderson's imagined community, in which members and affiliated groups are bound by a kind of feeling, in this case an uncompromising hostility against the West and its related interests. Due to his ambiguous definition of al-Qaeda organization, the author easily claims a variety of groups to be necessarily connected with al-Qaeda and being part of the network of this organization. He does this, without properly understanding the anatomy of these groups. This major deficiency is aggravated by his ignorance of Islamist ideology. When following his explanation of al-Qaeda ideology, I fear that one might easily come to associate a quarter of the Muslims in the world with al-Qaeda. For a start, the books by Sayyid Qutb and Abu al-A'la al-Mawdudi have become best-sellers in a dozen Muslim countries. In addition to the above, Gunaratna fails to explain clearly the position of Wahhabism and the Deobandi school of thought in the worldview of al-Qaeda followers, which other scholars have generally highlighted.

Several questions in relation to the methodology and the reliability of data used by the author in constructing his analysis also need to be addressed. Much information of this book refers to intelligence sources, or magazines and newspapers that have sensationalized 'news' about al-Qaeda. Obviously, the reliability of such data for a work that claims to be

scientific and that is launched for an academic community cannot be assured. In addition to that, the author claims to have interviewed hundreds of al-Qaeda members and visited a dozen of its secret cells in various countries, throughout which Arabic serves as the lingua franca. As clarified by the author himself, who does not speak Arabic, trust usually constitutes one of the most important aspects of secret cells even amongst the members of the cells themselves. There is no doubt that it is not easy for outsiders to enter secret cells, let alone stay with their members without there being any suspicion.

Compared to other books discussing Islamic militancy in different parts of the Muslim world, this book lacks any understanding of the internal political contexts where militant groups come to the fore. This, incidentally, is one of the most important variables of the rise of militant Islamic groups in the Muslim world, and the proliferation of such groups has often been a form of protest against the existing ruling regimes that marginalize them. Another nuisance is provided by the numerous errors in the spelling for the names of individuals and organizations.

Last and worst of all, this book seems to have been written in order to legitimize the American campaigns against terrorism, purporting that

there is a kind of global network named al-Qaeda that is highly dangerous and prepared to threaten all Western interests due to its organizational, strategic, and financial resources, and which is imbued with militant ideology. Mimicking a White House spokesman, Gunaratna ultimately warns the international community of the graveness of the threat posed by al-Qaeda. In the last part of the book he describes al-Qaeda as 'the only real threat for the world in the twenty-first century' and calls for an anti-terrorist coalition to defeat this monstrous threat. While this book serves to transform the readers' vague conceptions about the threat of the al-Qaeda terrorist network into something more tangible, it undoubtedly adds to many people's fears with respect to security. Nevertheless, there is one important reason to read this book, namely to understand how Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' is legitimized. <

– Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda, Global Network of Terror*, London: Hurst & Company (2002), xiii + 272 pp., ISBN 1-85065-671-1.

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