

# Lectures on the Present, Lessons from the Past:

## *al-Qa`ida as the New Pan-Islam*

Forum >

General

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Martin van Bruinessen has recently found himself chairing two forums on the al-Qa`ida-S11 nexus. The first was the IAS annual lecture, given in Amsterdam on 14 June 2002 by a specialist on terrorism, Rohan Gunaratna of St Andrew's University, Edinburgh. The second was given on in Leiden 25 June by the established commentator on Islamist discourse and director of Georgetown University's Centre for Muslim-Christian Understanding, Yvonne Haddad.

By Michael Laffan

Gunaratna presented a well-oiled narrative of the rise, proliferation, and continuing threat of al-Qa`ida, whilst Haddad detailed the position of Muslims in the United States before and after al-Qa`ida's deadliest action. Each lecture was presented in widely divergent circumstances. Gunaratna was placed upon a dais at DeBalie, where he was metamorphosized by ghastly red lighting that gave his presentation a mood of inherent peril. Two weeks later, an understated Haddad stood in an unremarkable classroom of Leiden University's LAK complex and put forward the straight-forward case of a community that was now frightened and vulnerable, leaving little room to anticipate any hope for the future.

Both spoke with ease and conviction.

In the case of Gunaratna, conclusions of clear and present danger left policy-experts and diplomats nodding and some academic specialists of Islam, and particularly those working on Indonesia, shaking their heads and considering the merits of interjection. Certainly, reliable evidence for an al-Qa`ida connection with the spate of bombings in Jakarta in December 2000 is yet to be made publicly available. And even when the recent events on Bali are thrown into the confused mix of information and lies, Gunaratna's simplistic black and white narrative is all the more attractive to those who make the news. Nonetheless, a grey area for some present at his lecture in June was the lack of discussion of the underlying ideology of al-Qa`ida, for it is in this area that Osama bin Laden and his followers differ on many levels with apparently like-mind-

ed Islamists – be they Jihadist Salafis or the Muslim Brothers. On the whole though, Gunaratna seemed to leave little doubt (or at least have none of that worrying feeling) that al-Qa`ida stood behind a large proportion of discontent and direct action in the entire Asian-Pacific region, which is an explanation that will sit easily with some policy-making quarters, and which so easily captivates segments of the media (see for example: [www.theage.com.au](http://www.theage.com.au), 13 October 2002; CNN broadcast, Maria Ressa, 13 October 2002).

By comparison, Haddad – who has had longer experience in researching Islamist ideology – needed no props to convince her smaller audience of the worrying turns taken by the US administration at home as a part of the 'War' on terror. She pointed out that, concomitant with their desire for security,

Americans are increasingly willing to sacrifice some of their freedoms (but not, of course, their right to bear arms). This has meant that whilst Muslims of all persuasions had felt free to speak in the past, or that they even had some influence in political circles, they are now effectively carrying out self-censorship or dissimulation. Meanwhile the administration seeks to foster the right sort of 'moderate' Muslim to assume the leadership of America's least understood religious minority. According to Haddad, this is done by sampling the literature of mosque and madrasa, and by trying to domesticate the imams in the US by recognizing them as a sort of clergy. The whole enterprise, she suggests, is sold to the public as a mission to rescue women from a medieval faith.

Taken together, we can see that the US administration perceives, and is thus prosecuting a physical war on, a network that is omnipresent and, in some respects, equal to its most sophisticated techniques of information-gathering and security. At least that is the view we are not discouraged from hold-

ing. Both at home and abroad this translates into a dual policy of vigorous intervention and sharper surveillance combined with an attempt to steer Muslims towards the privatization of religion – which is ironic coming from what is perhaps the most consciously religious nation-state in the world.

For the observer of colonial history there are remarkable parallels with current US policy and that of the late colonial state in the Netherlands Indies. From the 1870s, when the Netherlands was starting to finalize the borders of what would one day become Indonesia, officials were conscious that their own economic interests were under threat from a seemingly all-pervasive Islamic network. Most palpably Islamic resistance was manifested by the people of Aceh in a struggle that would drag on for thirty years. Seeing tentacles of Islamism everywhere, the Dutch believed that there had to be a head. Their version of al-Qa`ida then was the octopus of pan-Islam, plotted in Istanbul and Mecca, and carried eastward by Arab traders and mystics, Turkish envoys, and returning pilgrims.

By way of response measures were taken to gain an eye into the process. The Netherlands consulate in Jeddah took greater interest in the souls passing through its courtyard. The future doyen of Islamic studies and colonial policy, C. Snouck Hurgronje, was even dispatched to the Hijaz in 1884-85 to assess the reality of the threat.

Back in Java in 1882, the administration had already sought to subsume the local Islamic courts by creating their own misnamed 'Priestly Courts'. Overseen by the local Dutch official, its scholars were now the salaried officials of a Christian state. Of course such measure did not go far enough, and they were already misconceived in many cases. Repeated proposals to limit the pilgrimage, for example, were regularly shelved, and some teachers continued to shun the entire system and its puppet courts. Still, in looking for statist pan-Islamism, officials and their agents became to an extent aware of the nature of a more real and effective spiritual current in Islam, which in some cases promoted an increased emphasis on the outward forms of orthodoxy.

A new approach was required, and following for a time the advice of Snouck and his fellow-travellers, the Dutch attempted to enact what he termed the policy of Association in order to create an Islam that was personalized. Through their exposure to what Snouck called the 'torch of civilization', an enlightened elite would lead their people in an enduring partnership with the Netherlands. Indies Muslims were to be 'emancipated' from the 'medieval rubbish they had carried in their wake for far too long' (Snouck Hurgronje 1915: 79). They were, furthermore, to be stripped of their political aspirations, and especially the idea that armed struggle could be a tool to this end. Still, Snouck's policies were ultimately made redundant by the course of the Indonesian struggle for independence. Many of the emancipees created by modern education often saw the hollowness of what was on offer from the Netherlands, and in some cases turned back to their faith as a source of difference and empowerment.

But to return to the present. The idea that Islam might be personalized through education and an exposure to 'Western' modernity resembles the developmentalist approach still employed by the United States. Yet this has already had its failures which have contributed in part to today's discourse of discontent. By exposing Muslims from the once left-leaning Middle East to the fruits of Western democracy, many different bodies were created. These include those who have, in America, accepted the benefits of openness and democracy denied to them at home – whether by ancestral houses or military regimes – and found, as professor Haddad pointed out, an opportunity to practice doctrinal tolerance. On the other hand, a well-trained and disaffected twin-body was also created. Many of its members have been skilled engineers and doctors who have seen the Western system of prosperity shored up by poverty elsewhere. According to Haddad, this sense was often brought home to them by the encounter with new refugees from Bosnia or Afghanistan. In order to

actively combat this injustice, they too have used the freedoms available to them in the West and have turned their skills to the new proliferation of Islamic propagation on the Internet. But in today's climate, it is these people – regardless of the intensity of their feeling or their particular ideological commitment – who have the most to fear in the United States; just as they would in Egypt or Kuwait. Nasr Abu Zaid – who was present at Haddad's lecture and is himself the target of Islamist threats in Egypt – is right to worry a world in which people are not allowed to say what they want, no matter how stupid it may seem.

Of course, in the case of the Netherlands and its former colony, it was a threat 'over there' that impacted upon the Dutch economically more than as a daily threat to personal safety and a continued way of life. The United States and its allies must take action to protect their citizens, but not without considering the fundamental causes of SII. On the whole though, international and domestic voices for moderation will continue to be implicitly rejected by the

fateful division of the world into for and against. Washington will most likely stay hamstrung by its choice of international protégés, and an inability to tackle the roots of Muslim (and indeed global) discontent: namely social injustice. This is not to say that it is all America's fault. The rhetoric of the evil of capitalism is as simplistic as that of the evil of Islamism. Nonetheless, until the question of social justice is honestly addressed, no amount of surveillance, military intervention or sympathetic education can ward off the threat of terrorism. ◀

– Snouck Hurgronje, C., *Nederland en de Islâm* (2e vermeerderde druk), Leiden: Brill (1915).

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