

# The Psyche of Al-Qaeda

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**A**l-Qaeda appeared on the world consciousness after the bombing of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. In his speech on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001, American President George W. Bush stated:

*Americans are asking who attacked our country. The evidence we have gathered all points to a collection of loosely affiliated terrorist organizations known as Al Qaeda... This group and its leaders... a person named Osama bin Ladin... are linked to many other organizations in different countries, including Egyptian Islamic Jihad and the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan. There are thousands of these terrorists in more than 60 countries... And tonight, the United States of America makes the following demands on the Taliban... Deliver to United States authorities all the leaders of Al-Qaeda who hide in your land... The Taliban must act, and act immediately. They will hand over the terrorists, or they will share in their fate.<sup>1</sup>*

We are all aware how America reacted and what happened to the Al-Qaeda centers in Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda was conceived in August 1988 when Dr. Ayman Zawahiri and Dr. Syed Imam al Sharif (Dr. Fadl), members of Al Jihad from Egypt, met with their Muslim friend Abdullah Azzam and his disciple Osama bin Laden from Saudi Arabia in Afghanistan. All of them shared a dream of world-wide Islamic revolution. Zawahiri and Fadl wanted to focus on Egypt, Az-

zam on Palestine and Osama sought to create a worldwide Islamic army. After the USSR withdrew its troops from Afghanistan, those leaders re-organized themselves and created an organization named Al-Qaeda.

When we study the leaders and followers of the Al-Qaeda movement we become aware that they belong to the militant Muslim fundamentalist movement. For the last twenty years, they have been fighting a guerrilla war not only against America and the Western world but also against secular governments of their own Muslim countries. They have declared their guerrilla war, a holy war, a jihad. The political and violent jihad of this minority of Muslims, in which they kill not only American soldiers and secular politicians but also innocent civilians, is different from the peaceful jihad of the majority of Muslims. The latter practise a liberal and spiritual Islam and like to live peacefully with followers of other sects and religions. They try their best to become caring and compassionate human beings by creating a peaceful rather than a violent world for their children and grandchildren.

To have a better understanding of the psyche of Al-Qaeda we need to understand the ideology, personality and political strategy of the organization's leaders as well as the followers. They have:

- A. adopted a religious ideology of political Islam
- B. developed a fundamentalist personality
- C. learnt guerrilla warfare techniques

When we listen to the speeches of Osama bin Laden and read the interviews of Ayman al Zawahiri, we realize that they were influ-

enced by Muslim scholars like Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949), founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, who was assassinated at the age of 43; Syed Qutb (1906-1966), who was executed by Jamal Nasser's government; and Abul Ala Maududi (1903-1979) leader of Jamaat-e-Islami of Pakistan. These men dreamt of creating theocratic states, where sharia law would prevail under an unadulterated Islam. Their vision of Islam was not limited to a few countries—it was to be implemented across the whole world according to God's wish expressed in the Quran, and they were determined to make that wish a reality. They dreamed of world domination. Leaders of Al-Qaeda, to fulfill their Islamic dream, declared a holy war, a jihad, first against godless Russian communism and now they are fighting the same jihad against American capitalism. The Islamic dream of world domination is stated in Maududi's statement about the jihad in these words:

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*Islam wishes to destroy all States and Governments anywhere on the face of the earth which are opposed to the ideology and program of Islam regardless of the country or the Nation which rules it. The purpose of Islam is to set up a State on the basis of its own ideology and program, regardless of which Nation assumes the role of the standard bearer of Islam or the rule of which nation is undermined in the process of the establishment of an ideological Islamic State. It must be evident to you from this discussion that the objective of Islamic 'Jihad' is to eliminate the rule of an un-Islamic system and establish in its stead an Islamic system of State rule. Islam does not intend to confine its revolution to a single State or a few countries; the*

*aim is to bring about a universal revolution.*<sup>2</sup>

Maududi's interpretation of Islam was no different than Syed Qutb's who stated, "It is the nature of Islam to dominate, not to be dominated, to impose its law on all nations, and to extend its power to the entire planet."<sup>3</sup>

Many leaders and followers of Al-Qaeda belong to the Salafi sect of Islam, which dreams of implementing an Islam that was practised by their forefathers (aslaaf) in Saudi Arabia nearly 1500 years ago. That movement was revived by Muslim scholars like Ibn Taimiya (1263-1328) and Abdul Wahab (1703-1792) who believed that Muslims have lost centre stage in the world because they have forgotten the teachings of the Quran and if

they reverted back to the Islamic law they could regain their dominance in the world.

Al-Qaeda leaders who formerly were leaders of political and religious parties like Al Jihad and Ikhwan-ul-Muslemeen (Muslim Brotherhood) were also disillusioned by corrupt secular political leaders. They believed that secularism was a major barrier to the progress of Muslim nations and that the dictators, monarchs and generals who governed them could not stay in power were they not supported by America and other Western countries.

Many Al-Qaeda leaders have a fundamentalist personality and believe they have the truth, the absolute truth, based on the literal interpretation of scriptures. They do not see that their truth can be just a truth and that there are other interpretations of the holy scriptures which are metaphorical rather than literal, and that, furthermore, there are other spiritual, sec-

ular and humanistic traditions that many Muslims prefer to follow.

Many Muslims are also followers of Abu Hamid Ghazzali (1058-1111) who had suggested hundreds of years ago that in any conflict between the Quran and modern science, holy scriptures and philosophy, Muslims should follow the Quran and the holy scriptures and discard modern science, mathematics, psychology and philosophy. No wonder we have not seen leading Muslim scholars and scientists on the world stage in the last few centuries the way we had seen in the past, such as Avicenna, Farabi and Ibn Rushd whose books were a great inspiration for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Al-Qaeda has also adopted guerrilla warfare techniques. Guerrilla war might have existed in different shapes and forms in different parts of the world in the past but in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was introduced by Vladimir Lenin in Russia to overthrow the corrupt government of the Tsar. Lenin's legacy of guerrilla war was further developed by Mao Tse Tung in China, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro in Cuba, Menachem Begin in Israel, Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam and Nelson Mandela in South Africa. Lenin could never have imagined that the guerrilla warfare he started in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would be used by militant Muslim fundamentalist leader Osama bin Laden, supported by America's CIA, to defeat the army of the communist USSR at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Communists were using guerrilla war to create a godless socialist world while in the contemporary world right wing religious fundamentalists are using it to create an ideal Islamic world.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Al Qaeda is at a

crossroads. The followers of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri, motivated by anger, resentment and bitterness against America, Western governments and the secular governments of Muslim countries, support suicide bombings, while the majority of Muslims seek a peaceful world based on secular values and humanistic traditions. They are opposed to Al-Qaeda-style violence that kills innocent men, women and children. Pakistan and Afghanistan are the battleground where in the next decade war between violent political Islam, peaceful spiritual Islam and Secular Humanism will be fought. Either the world will see the bloodbath of a civil war or peaceful,

secular and conscientious Muslims, realizing that peaceful co-existence has been the essence of all humanistic religious, spiritual and secular traditions, will rise above the bloodshed and create a peaceful world.

Let us hope that the peaceful majority gains more power than the violent minority. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century Muslims all over the world are sandwiched between religious fundamentalism on one side and Western imperialism and neo-colonialism on the other. They need to rise above both to create a peaceful world.

#### References

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