

Al Qaeda Now: Understanding Today's Terrorists

Karen J. Greenberg (Editor), Cambridge University Press, 2005, 282 pp.

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This book is based on a 2004 conference organized jointly by the New America Foundation and the Center on Law and Security at New York University Law School, and it makes available the views of the 24 experts on al-Qaeda and terrorism – drawn from the worlds of academia, journalism, think tanks and the intelligence community – who met over one day to discuss al-Qaeda: what it is, how it is changed, and what policies can best deal with the threat emanating from it.

Yet this is hardly an open-ended examination. With token exceptions, only one point-of-view is represented – the liberal/left establishment. As a result, key issues are taken as read rather than made subjects of debate. Axioms are endlessly repeated but not properly established through investigation.

The key assumption made by the organisers is that al-Qaeda is a resistance movement against injustices meted out by the United States. Terrorism and fundamentalism are in effect redefined as liberationism. Al-Qaeda is treated as having little substance of its own – it is negatively defined as being against something rather than for anything. Although there are valuable chapters on al-Qaeda in Europe and on the continuing influence of al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, the real subject matter of the conference was actually US foreign policy: the war in Iraq, the US relationship with the regimes of the Middle East, and attempts to bring democracy to the Middle East.

Resistance

The consensus view that al-Qaeda is a resistance movement brackets the question of what the words 'resistance movement' actually mean. Do resistance movements only have a negative existence? Are nationalist movements not also xenophobic or socialist? Are religious movements not at times intolerant, ecumenical, puritanical or fundamentalist? Ironically, for those who wish to really explore these issues, the book provides material contradicting the dominant assumptions of the conference organisers. The editors include a series of speeches by Osama bin Laden, though

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these were not part of the official conference proceedings. It is very useful to remind ourselves of Bin Laden's positive and animating beliefs:

... in all its different forms and guises, the Jews have taken control of your (US) economy, through which they have taken control of your media, and now control all aspects of your life making you their servants and achieving their aims at your expense....

So we kill their innocents, and I say that it is permissible in law and intellectually, because those who spoke on this matter spoke from a juridical perspective.

There is no need to interpret these statements; they speak for themselves. How do the experts square such eliminationist anti-Semitism with the notion that al-Qaeda is a 'resistance movement?' Bracketing such questions, many of the contributors settle down to a series of ritual denunciations of US policy. With regard to Iraq, the US invasion is viewed as stirring up a resistance movement which has strengthened al-Qaeda. However, the complexities of Iraq are not addressed. The 'resistance' is insufficiently distinguished from the Sunni/Shia sectarian conflict, al-Qaeda, large mainstream fundamentalist organisations, and so on.

Democracy Promotion

Democracy-promotion involves a genuine dilemma: helping to remove an authoritarian regime may open the door to a fascistic opposition. The US is often damned if it supports the regime and damned if it supports the opposition. However, in this book the US frequently gets blamed for being impaled on both of the horns (though some speakers insist the problem is not democracy promotion per se, but democracy as an American export).

The token defender of the US position, Reuel Gerecht, is Resident Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, contributing editor for the *Weekly Standard*, and former Middle East Case Officer for the CIA. The US has got it right, he argues. After many years of post-Vietnam passivity, the US is now prepared to use force, and this has helped to combat al-Qaeda, 'which is falling into its component parts.' The US was correct, he argues, in its actions in Afghanistan and Iraq. There is a connection between tyranny and terrorism and Bush has sought to sever this connection by supporting democracy in the region. He cites in this context the

work of a number of leading scholars, Bernard Lewis among them, who argue that democracy is not alien to the Middle East. Democracy, says Gerecht, is currently being debated, in the Arab media and elsewhere: 'If you look at al Jazeera, if you look at the Arab press, it is striking to see the conversation about democracy now in the Middle East. It has penetrated into the blood system. Now we are going to have the great debate.' Through this process of democratization, he continues, fundamentalists will become involved in the political process. There is a risk in this; the fundamentalists may subvert the political process, but the risk is necessary. This is the best way to deal with al-Qaeda. It will be defeated through the participation of the fundamentalists in the democratic process.

Gerecht says that he believes in democracy, but 'something organic that may not be terribly liberal.' What he is describing sounds more like reform than democracy, which must of necessity be regime-led. Syria's Assad has toyed with such a model, but this is plainly not what President Bush had in mind when he talked about bringing democracy to the Middle East, or he would have been prepared to push on the open door offered by Syria's ruler. By 'not terribly liberal' Gerecht could mean a regime which is led by fundamentalists. What sort of precedent is there to indicate the success of such a venture? Iran? Algeria? The Palestinian Authority? Perhaps Turkey, but Turkey has a very different history to the Arab Middle East. In the event, Gerecht escapes serious cross-examination along with his opponents. Despite the fact that the participants actually had a Bush defender in captivity, he was nevertheless allowed to escape unmolested.

War on Terror

The War on Terror is dismissed as a failure. But this conclusion follows less empirically than syllogistically; failed policies are defined as those which have stirred up resistance. Al-Qaeda resists, therefore US policies have failed. The discussion about al Qaeda in Europe is more specific. One of the most useful contributions is from Rohan Gunaratna, one of the world's leading experts on al-Qaeda. Comparing US responses to terrorism post 9/11 to that of Europe, he points out that US law enforcement, security, intelligence and public vigilance have been largely responsible for the prevention of further attacks. In addition, the US has not simply gone after operational cells as in Europe, but has targeted the support cells as well. Hence the danger of attacks in Europe is, or was at the time of the conference, probably greater than in the US. All of these issues are mentioned briefly – they should probably form the heart of a consideration of al-Qaeda considered as a terrorist organization.

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The question of al-Qaeda's media strategy claimed a lot of attention at the conference, and rightly so: it is central to its image and existence. The al-Qaeda approach to the media involves the staging of spectacles as a way of claiming media attention – a worldwide audience can be the prize for capturing the eye of the media. Fame is a currency which can be parlayed for funding, and acts as an aid to recruitment. The status gained through access to television is not, however, the same as that of a leader such as Nelson Mandela whose prestige is based on a more organic relationship with his or her followers. It would appear that some of the conference participants were in awe of al-Qaeda's ability to achieve instant empowerment through its use of the media. They did not appear to have been detached enough, or perhaps they didn't feel free enough, to offer a critical analysis of this process. They failed to see that terrorist spectacles are theatre, and theatre only works if there is a willing suspension of disbelief. Some speakers appear to have been so spellbound by the al-Qaeda blockbuster, or so uncritical of al-Qaeda tactics, they were prepared to view al-Qaeda according to its own media-enhanced self-image.

Apart from the predictable conclusion that the US should change its foreign policies there were few specific policies proposed to defeat the threat. The few which stand out come from those participants who take terrorism seriously. One of these is Colonel Pat Lang, the former Chief of Middle East Intelligence at the Defense Intelligence Agency, Department of Defense. He argues that the single greatest failure for resisting terrorism is the failure of human intelligence or HUMINT. This requires training Arabic speaking operatives to engage in espionage within Jihadi groups. The origin of this failure, he states, lies with the heads of the intelligence community, who are afraid of failure and the adverse effects that this would have on their careers.

The book reinforces the notion that US policies have failed while al-Qaeda, on the other hand, is portrayed as having been successful. As a result, there is a strong undercurrent of defeatism on display.

But is retreat really the best way to defeat the threat from al-Qaeda? Is our job really to stand in opposition to ourselves? Giving an enemy what it wants only work in certain situations. If we are dealing with liberationists, as the British were in India, and the Americans were in Vietnam, the likelihood is that by giving them what they want, which is their freedom and independence, they will cease their struggle because they have achieved their aims. If totalitarian expansionists are given what

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they want they will simply want more. Appeasement is to terrorism what petrol is to fire. If it is fed what it wants it will burn more fiercely. If it succeeds in frightening one group or country into submission, terrorists will feel that they have scored a victory and try again. If people stand up against terrorism, then the terrorists will have less reason to attack, for they will have nothing to gain. We need to develop political resistance to all forms of international political terrorism. Without this, there will be no will to campaign for greater vigilance, better security and intelligence, and little stomach for the sorts of education work needed to convince potential terrorists and their supporters that there is a better way.

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