



How Little We Know

BY LAURIE MYLROIE

If al Qaeda is supposed to represent the “new” terrorism, it remains puzzling why U.S. intelligence since the Clinton era has not connected the dots and confronted their implications.

AL QAEDA REPRESENTS the most serious terrorist threat we face, but how much do we understand about this elusive enemy? Few Americans even knew of al Qaeda’s existence during its first decade. We now know (from documents discovered since 9/11) that al Qaeda was founded in August 1988, by Osama bin Laden with 14 associates, as a relatively small and highly secretive organization. There is virtually no public mention of it for a full ten years—a Lexis-Nexis search for *al Qaeda*, using all possible spellings, produces only five articles—until the bombing of two U.S. embassies in Africa on August 7, 1998. It was only *following* the embassy bombings that al Qaeda was added, belatedly, to the official U.S. list of terrorist groups. As the 9/11 Commission notes, “While we now know that al Qaeda was formed in 1988, at the end of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, *the Intelligence Community did not describe this organization, at least in documents we have seen, until 1999.*” (Emphasis added.)

No precedent exists for such a level of damage being inflicted by an organization whose existence had been scarcely recognized. How did al Qaeda succeed in carrying out the near-simultaneous bombings of two U.S. embassies—let alone the 9/11 attacks three years later, which are comparable in American history only to Pearl Harbor? The scenario is very much as if the U.S. intelligence agencies had first begun to identify and analyze the Japanese Imperial Navy in 1939.

Al Qaeda and the New Terrorism

AL QAEDA’S ATTACKS are the embodiment of the so-called “new” terrorism, which aims to cause truly massive casualties, but is not state-sponsored, or so it is said. The “new” terrorism began one month into Bill Clinton’s first term in office, with the February 26, 1993, bombing of the World Trade Center. Our understanding of the “new” terrorism is rooted in the Clinton administration’s handling of the attack, and Clinton’s feckless attitude toward national security matters is one more reason to reassess that understanding.

The first assault on the World Trade Center was intended to be even more lethal than 9/11. The conspirators aimed to topple one tower onto the other, to bring them both down. The mastermind of that attack, Ramzi Yousef, boasted when he was arrested two years

later that he had meant to kill 250,000 people. *It is crucial to recognize that al Qaeda was not involved in this plot.* Despite serious efforts to uncover evidence leading to Osama bin Laden, he has never been indicted for this attack. (The United States did not indict bin Laden until June of 1998, when he was charged with conspiracy in another bombing plot that never materialized.) Moreover, the military charges issued against detainees at Guantanamo Bay omit the Trade Center bombing in the official account of al Qaeda’s conspiracy against the United States.

Indeed, it would have been a truly massive failure of virtually every U.S. agency involved in fighting terrorism if bin Laden had tried to kill a quarter of a million Americans in 1993, but the Justice Department only charged him with any crime at all five years later, and the intelligence community only began to analyze his organization the following year. As the *New Yorker’s* Lawrence Wright concludes (in his new book, *The Looming Tower*), “although al Qaeda had existed for ten years, [at the time of the 1998 embassy bombings] it was still an obscure and unimportant organization.”

This, however, is not generally recognized, because following those attacks, analysts routinely began to attribute the earlier assaults to al Qaeda, and bin Laden began to assume mythic proportions. A few knowledgeable individuals, such as Milton Bearden, former CIA station chief in Pakistan, complained then, “He is public enemy No. 1.... We’ve got a \$5 million reward out for his head. And now we have, with I’m not sure what evidence, linked him to all of the terrorist acts of this year—of this decade, perhaps.” One serious consequence was that some other very formidable players continued operating beneath the radar of U.S. intelligence.

Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and His Nephews

IN JUNE 2002, CIA Director George Tenet told the Congressional Joint Inquiry, “We now believe that a common thread runs between the first attack on the World Trade Center in February 1993 and the 11 September attacks.... Mukhtar is the uncle of Ramzi Yousef, who masterminded the 1993 bombing plot against the World Trade Center. Following the 1993 attack, Yousef and Mukhtar plotted in 1995 to blow up [twelve] U.S. planes flying East Asian

routes, for which Mukhtar was indicted in 1996.”

“Mukhtar” was an alias used by the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, who was captured in the early morning of March 1, 2003, as he slept in a private home in Rawalpindi, just outside Pakistan’s capital city of Islamabad. U.S. authorities then revealed what

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they believe to be his real name, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, or KSM, as he is commonly called, and released his photo, that of an unshaven, heavy-set mustachioed figure in a white T-shirt. He is now in CIA custody, held in a secret prison.

“Since September 11, the CIA has come to believe that KSM may have been responsible for all bin Laden operations outside Afghanistan,” the Congressional Joint Inquiry reported. A senior U.S. counter-terrorism official told the *Los Angeles Times* that KSM is believed to have been “actively involved” in both the bombing of the U.S. embassies and the USS *Cole*. “There is a clear operational link between him and the execution of most, if not all, of the Al Qaeda plots over the past five years.”

Yet U.S. authorities did not learn until well after 9/11 that KSM was actually a member of al Qaeda—a reflection of how deeply he was hidden within the organization, as well as of our still limited understanding of it. Only after Abu Zubaydah, who helped run al Qaeda’s training camps, was captured in March 2002 and subsequently interrogated, did U.S. authorities learn of KSM’s key role in al Qaeda’s terrorism. As a U.S. intelligence official later told the *Washington Post*, “It wasn’t until recently that any of us even realized he was part of al Qaeda.... The big problem nailing him down is that the informants that we relied on, especially before 9/11, were mujaheddin. They’d been in Afghanistan, in Sudan, back in Afghanistan. *Khalid was never a part of any of that.*” (Emphasis added.)

That the mastermind of 9/11 should be the uncle of the man who masterminded the first attack on the World Trade Center is a strikingly odd detail, and the full picture becomes even stranger. Several other nephews of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed are also terrorist masterminds. To a very significant extent, the “new terrorism”—starting with the 1993 Trade Cen-

ter bombing, running through 9/11, and even continuing afterwards—has actually been a family business according to U.S. authorities.

KSM provided the money—roughly \$500,000—to finance the 9/11 attacks, and Ammar al-Baluchi, another KSM nephew and first cousin of Ramzi Yousef, sent the “primary funding” to the hijackers in the United States, as FBI Director Robert Mueller has explained. Deputy Attorney General James Comey described al-Baluchi as KSM’s “right hand man.” Based in Dubai, al-Baluchi assisted at least nine of the hijackers with their travel plans and coached them on how to act once they arrived in the United States. Jose Padilla, arrested in May 2002 as he returned to the United States to carry out a major attack, dined with both KSM and al-Baluchi before leaving Pakistan, and al-Baluchi provided him with \$10,000 and a cell phone for his mission.

Two additional KSM nephews have been identified as terrorist masterminds. Following KSM’s capture, U.S. authorities told the *Washington Post* that they were “concerned that his nephews—the brothers of imprisoned terrorist Ramzi Yousef—may be positioned to take over planning of future terror attacks.” They named two men: Abdul Munim and Abdul Karim. Nothing further has been reported about Abdul Munim, but Abdul Karim proved to be a key figure. He was captured in Karachi in May 2004; his interrogation led to further arrests in both Pakistan and Britain and to the discovery of a major plot against financial centers in New York, Washington, and New Jersey. As a Pakistani official told the *Post*, “There is not a single significant al Qaeda arrest that didn’t yield us more.”

Finally, in November 2004, Pakistani authorities accompanied by FBI agents raided a house in Karachi that happened to belong to yet another of Yousef’s brothers (and KSM nephew), one Abdul Qadir. He was arrested as well.

The Baluch

THIS TERRORIST FAMILY EXTRAORDINAIRE IS, ethnically, Baluch. The Baluch are a Sunni Muslim people, with their own compact territory in Eastern Iran and Western Pakistan and their own language. Like the better-known Kurds, the Baluch aspired, unsuccessfully, to a state of their own during the last century. The Baluch have strong tribal traditions that pre-date their conversion to Islam, and they are less religious than most contemporary Mus-

lim groups. The Baluch are currently spearheading an insurgency in Muslim Pakistan, clearly an ethnic-nationalist rather than *jihadi* struggle: Islamabad in fact accuses India of supporting it.

The United States has virtually nothing to do with the Baluch. Most Americans have never heard of them. What motive might these people have for attacking us, and—above all—*why should this group be at the core of the “new terrorism”*? Just to ask these questions, however, is to dissent sharply from the current intelligence orthodoxy; and that is undoubtedly a major reason why this Baluch connection has been essentially buried from public view.

Ramzi Yousef was arrested in Islamabad in February 1995, following his aborted attempt to bomb 12 U.S. airliners. The *New York Times’s* John Burns reported then, long before this issue became so thoroughly politicized:

The Pakistan newspaper, *The News*, which is said to have good sources in the Pakistani military’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency, said that “if features could betray geography,” Mr. Yousef appeared to Pakistani investigators “as if he is from the coastal belt of Baluchistan.”... *The News* said Pakistani investigators had noted that President Saddam Hussein’s Government in Iraq had tried to exploit animosities against the Iran Government among Baluch tribal people in southeastern Iran during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. The newspaper said this could explain how Mr. Yousef came into possession of the Iraqi passport that he used when he arrived in New York in September 1992, six months before the World Trade Center bombing. “If Ramzi is in fact of Iranian Baluch origin, it would not have been a big problem for him to get an Iraqi passport,” the newspaper said.

Pakistani authorities—who understand the peoples of that region far better than Americans—suspected a link between Yousef and Iraqi intelligence on the basis of his Baluch ethnicity. This, however, was not an issue the Clinton administration would have wanted to pursue. Its novel theory that a new kind of mega-terrorism had emerged that did not involve states served to sidestep the difficult question of how to respond to state-sponsored terrorism.

Iraq did indeed have extensive ties with the Baluch, on both sides of the Iranian-Pakistani border, as General Wafiq Samarrai explained to me. Samarrai

headed Iraqi Military Intelligence during the 1991 Gulf War but defected in 1994, and he is now a security adviser to the Iraqi president. In the late 1980s, the American journalist Mary Anne Weaver visited Pakistani Baluchistan and was told there are “some four thousand Iranian Baluch living in the Central Mak-

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ran Range [in Pakistan], *fully armed and supported by Iraq*, who are running cross-border operations into Iran. No one can touch them—not the Army, not the government. They do whatever they want.” (Emphasis added.)

Yet there is no precedent for a single family to be the sole, or even the key, source of expertise for a major terrorist group. The official U.S. position—these individuals constitute one family—is questionable. If our enemy in this war were the Soviet Union, we would surely consider the possibility that this remarkable terrorist family is not a family at all. We would probably think of these highly skilled individuals in the same way that we would regard an elite squad of our own: They were selected from a much larger pool of people on the basis of their particular aptitudes, and then were given additional training.

That, rather than some vague genetic predisposition, would constitute a rational explanation for this “family” of terrorist masterminds. It would also explain how a virtually unknown organization like al Qaeda managed to bomb two U.S. embassies nearly simultaneously: It had help from a far more experienced party.

An Alternative Explanation of Al Qaeda

AN ALTERNATIVE UNDERSTANDING of al Qaeda views it as the fruit of an opportunistic alliance. After bin Laden was expelled from Sudan to Afghanistan in 1996, two groups joined forces—either by merging or simply undertaking to cooperate. One group is the original al Qaeda, represented by bin Laden and the militants around him. This group was predominantly Arab and motivated by Islamic radicalism.

The second group is Baluch and consists of KSM and his extended “clan.” The “new terrorism” really began with these Baluch *even before their alliance*

with al Qaeda, with the 1993 Trade Center bombing and the 1995 plot against U.S. airliners. The cooperation with al Qaeda may have provided the Baluch a substantial base of willing recruits, but for al Qaeda the alliance was transformational. It was only *after* KSM joined with bin Laden, bringing with him the

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skills of his group, that al Qaeda's major attacks against the United States began—starting with the 1998 embassy bombings.

Compared to figures like Osama bin Laden, or his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, we know little about these masterminds; probably, we don't even know their real names—KSM used some 60 aliases. It might be asked why, if they as Baluch opposed Iran, would they become involved in massive attacks against the United States? We don't really know, but we can reasonably exclude a religious motive. In Manila, where they plotted to bomb U.S. airplanes until their plot went awry, when Yousef accidentally started a fire while mixing explosives in his apartment, they had girlfriends and frequented the city's karaoke bars—not the behavior of Islamic militants.

The suggestion here is that these Baluch were Iraqi “illegals,” agents of the Iraqi *mukhabarrat* who did not operate out of its embassies (the term for such U.S. agents is NOC—non-official cover). They were simply doing their jobs. Yousef's interview with the U.S. agents who flew him back to New York following his arrest suggests that he took pride in his work, repugnant as it was, and that he felt a professional disappointment when the Trade Center did not fall.

Elements of an Intelligence Failure

THE CENTRAL ROLE THE BALUCH have played in the terrorist attacks against the United States is not in doubt, even though most experts are, astoundingly, unaware of it. To borrow terminology from Roberta Wohlstetter's classic study on Pearl Harbor, the facts concerning these Baluch are “signals,” i.e., important information that has been lost amid “noise,” the mass of unimportant information. The need to “connect the dots” is by now a truism—but which dots are significant, among the millions of items of data? Intelligence analysts are typically overwhelmed with

the enormous amount of information they must process. Unless they have an appropriate conceptual framework and know what signals to look for, they may fail to recognize the crucial dots.

The American term for this error is “mindset.” The Israelis have an analogous term, *conzeptzia*, coined by the commission that investigated how Egypt and Syria were able to launch a successful surprise attack against Israel in 1973. As the commission concluded, Israeli intelligence maintained a fixed belief, a *conzeptzia*, that the Arabs would not launch a war before they had an air force to counter Israel's, which would not be in place before 1975. Therefore, Israeli analysts simply did not recognize the Arab preparations for war. The Arabs did in fact need a counter to Israel's air force, but they used missiles—a contingency Israeli intelligence failed to consider.

Similarly, an established mindset left the United States vulnerable at Pearl Harbor. Deteriorating relations with Tokyo in the fall of 1941 led to grave concern about a Japanese attack. In late November, Washington dispatched a “war warning” to the Pacific Fleet, but because the mindset held that Japan would attack somewhere in Southeast Asia, Hawaii was caught unprepared on December 7. In fact, so strong was this mindset that even as the bombs began falling, some officers in Honolulu thought errant U.S. pilots were to blame.

Does a corresponding mind-set compromise our policies today? Islamic militants do not live in a hermetically sealed environment. Yet we treat the *jihadi* networks as if they do, as if their only significant interactions were with one another. Intelligence agencies routinely penetrate other organizations in both offensive and defensive operations (indeed, the CIA was criticized for *not* penetrating al Qaeda). If a few talented and well-trained individuals are inserted into a receptive environment, these few well-trained individuals can dramatically reshape an organization's aims and capabilities.

To what extent have the *jihadi* networks been penetrated by terrorist states? The official mindset does not permit this question to be asked, let alone answered—even in the highly relevant context of Iraq. The United States now possesses an enormous quantity of Iraqi documents, and about 500,000 of them have been translated or summarized. American and Iraqi officials who are familiar with that material say it shows extensive Iraqi dealings with terrorists, *including Islamic terrorists*, throughout the 1990s.

Our view of these shadowy Islamic networks, in-

cluding al Qaeda, contrasts sharply with our understanding of other terrorist organizations. We recognize the essential role that Iran and Syria play in supporting Hezbollah in Lebanon. We recognize Iran's role in supporting Shia militias in Iraq and in providing expertise for terrorist attacks there. We recognize Syrian support for Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Yet when it comes to these elusive Sunni groups, we maintain an *idée fixe*: they operate independently of state support.

Of course, the main target of Hamas, Hezbollah, and PIJ is Israel. To acknowledge the role of Iran and Syria in supporting these organizations imposes no great burden on the United States. But to suggest that one or more hostile states have penetrated the *jihadi* networks does impose a serious burden, when the *jihadis'* terrorism is directed against America. Indeed, the suggestion here is that the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center was an act of war and should have been met in kind. Moreover, the failure to do so led directly to 9/11.

Present and Future

THE PROBLEM OF THIS MINDSET is not limited to past attacks. As a senior Iraqi politician complained, "*The United States has the relationship between states and groups backwards.*" Last summer, the new Iraqi government issued a "most wanted" list, which was dominated by Baathists. As Iraqi officials regularly explain, the Baathists are the core of the insurgency there; they receive crucial support from the Baathist regime in Syria; and both the Iraqi and Syrian Baathists are allied in support of the *jihadis*. Until early 2005, this was also the U.S. view. At that point, however, U.S. commanders in Iraq began to focus on Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, on the grounds that he was responsible for the most spectacular bombings. They failed to understand that al-Zarqawi's operations relied on the logistical support he received from the Baathists. Yet once the analysts began to focus on the *jihadis*, that was all they soon saw—like "moths drawn to the flame," as one U.S. military officer put it—and U.S. officials ceased to understand the Iraqi insurgency.

Similar problems seem to exist elsewhere, although local leaders may understand better. As Taliban violence surges in Afghanistan, Afghan president Hamid Karzai has charged that Pakistani intelligence is providing the rebels training and safe haven. Following last July's train bombings in Mumbai (former-

ly Bombay), in which seven bombs exploded within eight minutes, killing over 200 people, India's prime minister also accused Pakistan: "These terrorist modules are instigated, inspired and supported by elements across the border without which they cannot act with such devastating effect."

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Shortly after the London train bombings in 2005, the *Washington Post* reported that a pattern existed behind many recent attacks, including bombings in Madrid, Casablanca, Istanbul, Mombasa, Kenya, and the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Taba. As the *Post* explained, "officials were able to determine who actually carried out the attacks and arrest most of the surviving perpetrators, usually homegrown cells of Islamic radicals... but failed to find or even learn the names of the individuals who conceived and directed the attacks."

This is a key observation, but it contains an unexamined assumption: that the elusive masterminds of these bombings are just cleverer versions of the radicals who got caught. They may in fact represent something quite different: They may be trained agents of one or more terrorist states that have penetrated the Islamic networks—an obvious contingency, but one that few want to consider.

It is frequently remarked that al Qaeda is unlike any enemy in history. It occupies no clear territory; it is extraordinarily resilient, constantly reinventing itself; and it still poses an enormous threat, even five years into the U.S.-led war against it. Every post-9/11 study has warned against "group-think," but there persists a pervasive and stifling group-think regarding the *jihadis*, a mindset that dates from the Clinton era: the dictum that their terrorism does not involve states.

It is time for a profound reassessment of this assumption. Our current, blinkered understanding of a deadly serious enemy suggests all too clearly historic hallmarks of a major intelligence failure. ■

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