

# The Seven Pillars of Transnational Terrorism

By Umej Bhatia

Serial terrorist attacks by militant jihadis in the name of Islam have made the 'Islamic threat' a global public fear. However it is a mistake to profile Islam as a threat or to equate it with extremism. This plays into the hands of the militant jihadis who will exploit this perception in their quest to destroy the existing geopolitical order. A more sophisticated understanding of the political ideology of the militant jihadi networks is needed in order to defeat them. In particular, we should recognize that they have distorted the Islamic religious tradition and manipulated it to serve their cause. In this article, Umej Bhatia examines the ideology and practices of these militant groups.

## A Global Public Fear

**9/11** and the subsequent, serial terrorist attacks have made the 'Islamic threat' a global public fear. But the threat from militants who use Islam and its symbols does not equal an Islamic threat. A former bodyguard to Osama bin Laden, Abu Jandal, admitted in a recent interview that "today Al-Qaeda is not an organization...but only an idea that has become a faith".<sup>1</sup> The faith of Islam and the ideological fervour of militant Islamists must thus not be confused. Not because it is politically incorrect, but because it is strategically incorrect.

Of course, terrorist attacks produce a climate of fear and suspicion. As the 'propaganda of the deed', they are calculated to cause a reaction. Admittedly, terrorism in the name of Islam, which also happens to be the world's fastest growing

religion, undoubtedly creates a special kind of psychological effect. This is a legacy of the historic encounters between Islam and the West. But profiling Islam as a threat or equating it with extremism plays into the hands of militant jihadis.

The five pillars of Islam are not the seven pillars of the militant jihadi international. For the militant jihadi terrorist, Islam is more a political allegiance than a religious observance. Thus, for some Al Qaeda operatives there is no contradiction between womanizing, drinking and blowing up civilians in the name of Islam.

## Understanding the Enemy

**W**hat do the militant jihadis want? Often we hear the mantra that Islamic militants want to terrorize the people, topple the state and restore the rule of the Caliphate under sacred Islamic Law. But that is only one strand of the story. Like the Cold War between the US and the Soviets, today's fight also requires us to study the ideology of the other side more precisely.

Baroness Margaret Thatcher, who spent much of her time fighting the Cold War, dubbed the jihadis early on as the new Bolsheviks. The Egyptian Islamist ideologue Sayyid Qutb, whose brother Muhammed Qutb taught Osama bin Laden, has been called "Lenin in an Islamic dress". When the Cold War began, few knew the difference between Mensheviks, Bolsheviks, Leninists and Trotskyites.

In the 1970s, Dr Goh Keng Swee began lectures on Marxism and Leninism for Singaporean civil servants.<sup>2</sup> This was not merely an academic exercise. To defeat or at least contain the enemy,

<sup>1</sup> Interview conducted in Arabic daily *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* (London), 3 August 2004.

<sup>2</sup> I thank Daljit Singh of the Institute of South East Asian Studies for pointing this out to me.

we must understand their thinking. What makes them tick? What do they want? How do we avoid strengthening them? More attention should be paid to the political ideology of the militant jihadi network. This is after all a war of ideology, a war where hearts must be won and mindsets changed.

In this battle of ideas, we must not fall into the militant jihadi trap of profiling Islam as a threat. It only benefits Al-Qaeda and the international jihadi movement. The real threat lies in the way a religious tradition has been distorted and skilfully mobilized by the militant jihadis to serve their cause. This makes it a struggle over the essence of Islam.

Crucially, the militants believe that violent jihad is the sixth, forgotten pillar of Islam or the Muslims' "Neglected Duty". This was the title of a pamphlet by the Egyptian ideologue Mohamed Farag, whose 1979 publication inspired the assassins of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, and later even Osama bin Laden, who borrowed much of its rhetoric for his early communiqués.

### Geopolitical Islam

**1** 979 is a key date in Political Islam. The Islamic revolution in Iran began, the "Neglected Duty" was published and Soviet tanks rolled into Afghanistan, starting the jihad there. These political events were the catalysts for a new Geopolitical Islam that took shape in the late 80s. Thousands of young Muslims were exhorted to "Join the Caravan" of jihad, to quote the title of a popular recruiting pamphlet by Abdullah Azzam, 'emir of the jihad' and an early Al-Qaeda mentor.

The international jihadis spawned by Geopolitical Islam believe that the Cold War was won not by superior US technology. It was won in the hills and valleys of Afghanistan with the help of Allah. The militants believe that having defeated one superpower, they can now defeat the world's sole superpower.

With the end of the Cold War, what began as a revolt within the heartlands has spilled out onto a global stage. The jihadi networks target the power behind the international system. They violently oppose US foreign policy, including key

international relationships like the US-Saudi oil-for-security deal. As the 9/11 attacks demonstrated, the jihadis seek to undermine economies and confidence which underpin the current geopolitical order.

This spillover seriously threatens our region and our homeland. Some might think that Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda, is heroic in defying the US. Since it is stylish in some circles to be anti-American, bin Laden may be considered a sort of folk hero. Earlier this year, even Catholic Mexicans cheering on their soccer team against the US national team chanted, "Osama, Osama". But it is important for those who sympathize with militant jihadism to understand what and who they're really supporting, and how they see the world.

### The Pillars of Islam . . .

Islamic thought divides the world into two Houses. There is the House of War (*dar-ul-Harb*) and the House of Islam (*dar-ul-Islam*).

The House of Islam is a place where Islamic law is applied and where Muslims are secure. The House of Islam is supported by the five basic pillars of Islam, *shahada* (declaration of faith), *salat* (worship), *zakat* (compulsory charity), *sawm* (fast during Ramadan), *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca).

The House of War is a place of endless strife, ruled by the infidels or non-believers. In this House of War, the al-Qaedaists claim a right to violent jihad as the sixth, neglected pillar of Islam.

### And the Seven Pillars of Transnational Terrorism

**A** part from exploiting the pillars of Islam, such as *zakat*,<sup>3</sup> to solicit charitable donations, and insisting on reviving what they view as a neglected pillar, militant jihadi networks like Al-Qaeda depend on a few more pillars. These are illegal supporting structures, outside the Islamic tradition. These pillars encompass ideology and operations in a globalised world. I call these beliefs and practices supporting the House of Geopolitical Islam the Seven Pillars of Transnational Terrorism.

<sup>3</sup> Zakat is a huge potential source of income. According to a July 2002 study by *The Guardian* newspaper, if the zakat contributions of the Saudi royal family alone were funneled off, they would amount to \$12 billion yearly.

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### The First Pillar: Smash the System

**V**iolent Jihad has been globalised. The hijackers on one of the 9/11 planes received instructions as follows: “When you board the plane, remember that this is a battle in the sake of Allah, which is worth the whole world and all that is in it.”

This strategic shift from fighting the near enemy to the far enemy was master-minded by Ayman al-Zawahiri. He is the Egyptian right-hand man of Osama bin Laden and a prolific writer. In his 1996 book, *Cure for Believer's Hearts*, he wrote that he saw US and Saudi support for the Mujahideen in Afghanistan as a distraction from political change in the Muslim world. He said that the Mujahideen saw through this ploy and established Afghanistan as the base of operations (or Al-Qaeda) for a worldwide struggle. This was an early reference to Al-Qaeda, made not by bin Laden, but al-Zawahiri.

What broadened the Al-Qaedaist vision? It was a combination of severe repression at home and the opportunities of globalization. Ironically, after the Cold War, the democratic West gave many of their former Cold War comrades a lot of breathing space. In England, London became Londonistan. The US stressed human rights over security. Mosques and madrassahs in the west and elsewhere were flooded with oil money and extremist ideas.

Today, what we are seeing is a mixture of local (e.g. in Chechnya, Southern Thailand, the Philippines and Ambon), global (al-Qaeda and jihadi international networks) and diaspora jihad (especially in the European theatre). Iraq is a crucible for all three types of jihad, which have begun to overlap. Thus militants who seized two French journalists in Iraq and demanded the return of the veil to French public schools were practising a cocktail of diaspora and global jihad.

### The Second Pillar: Uplift the Umma

**F**or the jihadis, the worldwide community of Muslims, or the *umma*, is a key constituency. Ironically, one of their objects is to provoke anti-Muslim feeling and in the process strengthen the negative identity of the *umma* by creating a sense of victimhood and oppression.

In raising the *umma's* consciousness, the jihadis tap into a reservoir of resentment and frustration linked to political events like Israel's occupation of Palestine. They ride on a tide of Anti-Americanism tacitly encouraged by some repressive governments in the Middle East that sought to externalize their internal problems, including widespread corruption and inefficiency. The jihadis consider the alliance between their repressive home governments and their foreign patrons as two sides of the same coin, known as *zulm* (tyranny and exploitation) in Quranic terms.

Rightly or wrongly, a common view of the US, even among some moderate quarters in the Muslim world, is that it opposes Islam, and that much of what it does in the Islamic world is part of an effort to weaken, control or destroy Muslims. This mindset led many writers and analysts of the Middle East to interpret US policy in both Persian Gulf Wars as an effort to divide Muslims and take their oil wealth. During the Second Gulf War, this conspiracy theory became globalised and also promoted by the Liberal International, a global network whose spokespersons include writers and activists like Arundhati Roy.

### The Third Pillar: Nurture Networks

**A** strong, resilient network of cells is a hallmark of the jihadi international. The original network of jihadis was held

together by the common experience of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan and the training camps set up after the Mujahideen victory. This is how our regional Jemaah Islamiyah began with participation by Indonesian and Singaporean members.

With the Afghanistan safe haven smashed, new styles of networking have arisen. The new tactic is to send out jihadis to create new cells overseas. Pakistan and Iraq are among new bases of operations. Therefore, the transnational militants no longer have one base or Al-Qaeda, but have spread out. Israeli analysts have thus begun to dub them the “jihadi international”.

New networks have been built based on affiliation to madrassahs or membership of prayer groups. But their best recruiting strategy is what has always worked in creating warriors in history: appeal to men and women who seek a sense of belonging, a cause bigger than themselves and a straight path to glory.

According to research by the International Crisis Group, the JI network in Southeast Asia is held together not just by training and education, but something more basic. There is an intricate alliance of marriages arranged by senior leaders to keep the network secure. Women play a key role cementing the network. This is a time-honoured tradition of Arab-Muslim expansion into our region, especially when polygamy was considered both religiously and socially acceptable.

#### The Fourth Pillar: Bury the Belief

The inclination to dissemble and shroud the movement's profile and aims is a key pillar. This is inspired by the Shiite-inspired doctrine of *taqiya* (not showing their faith) which allowed the disciples of the persecuted Shiite minority to conceal their true faith during times of weakness and difficulty. The extended network of militant jihadis, although conventionally hostile to the Shii as Sunni extremists, has nevertheless borrowed this article of faith.

What this means in practice is that an activist, supporter or sympathizer of the militant jihadi cause may use the rhetoric of moderation but believe in an extremist ideology. Much of this dissembling was uncovered by the French-Arab journalist Ahmed Sifaoui in his book, *Inside Al-*

*Qaeda*, which looked at the operations of the jihadis in Europe, especially France.

Perhaps the most intriguing, systematic and challenging dissembling has been that of the enigmatic network known as *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* (Party of Liberation) dedicated to the restoration of the Caliphate. Its website is [www.1924.org](http://www.1924.org), the date the Turkish leader Kemal Ataturk abolished the caliphate and established his brand of secular rule known as Kemalism. *Hizb-ut-Tahrir* was founded by an exiled Palestinian from Jordan. Its current headquarters is in London and the group has a powerful underground in Uzbekistan, spokespersons in Indonesia and a powerful Internet presence. It is everywhere and nowhere and despite allegations that it supports violent jihad, it has skillfully managed to avoid being put on the United Nation's terrorism watch-list.

We should not underestimate the inventiveness of the militant jihadis, and assume that they do not know how to cover their tracks. One out of every three of the 31 JI detainees here in Singapore were assessed to have intelligence above the population norm. Two had superior intelligence levels.

#### The Fifth Pillar: Feed off Failure

Throughout Islamic history, poor governance and despotism have inspired two responses. The first, that of the Muta'zila, used reason to dissent. The second, that of Kharjites, was based on subversive rebellion. As the renowned Moroccan thinker Fatima Mernissa has observed, “the violence of the caliph and the violence of the subversive” is a regular pattern in this history.<sup>4</sup>

Today, the violent jihadis profit from the lack of avenues for reasoned dissent, which means that in much of the Islamic Middle East, the mosque becomes the sole outlet for political grievance. But more substantially, Islamist networks step in to fill a void left by state or market failure, creating their own “state-shells”. The prototype is the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, a model exported to the rest of the Middle East by Tunisian ideologues. The most prominent example today is the role *Hamas* plays in fulfilling basic social and economic needs in the occupied territories.

<sup>4</sup> Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy – Fear of the Modern World* (New York, 1992).

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### The Sixth Pillar: Trust the Tools of Globalization

In his biography, *Aku Melawan Teroris!* (I fight the terrorists), Imam Samudra, the mastermind of the Bali bombings, and a computer science graduate, devotes an entire chapter to mastering technology and hacking in cyberspace.

Indeed, according to the French expert on Political Islam, Gilles Kepel, “the Internet... erases the frontiers between the dar-ul-Islam and dar al-Kufr. It allows the propagation of a universal norm, with an Internet Sharia and fatwa system”.<sup>5</sup> Kepel has noted that whereas previously Muslims seeking advice on what was acceptable in their faith sought a *fatwa*, or religious-legal ruling, from a cleric who had the best knowledge, now they look to the one with the best web-site.

The problem is that many of these on-line muftis are not licensed by the traditional schools of jurisprudence like Al-Azhar in Egypt. The privileging of form over content allows extremist ideas to sneak in by the back-door. A classic example is the popularity of the user-friendly website Ask-Imam, operated by a self-professed imam and mufti from Johannesburg, South Africa, named Ebrahim Desai. His fatwa have condoned suicide operations under certain circumstances.

Even Yahoo message boards like “Global Islamic Media” have been used to consider militant strategy, such as the terrorize-and-divide tactics used to split the coalition in Iraq. Many of these websites are hard to police. On the Al-Faruq (he who distinguishes truth from falsehood) website, subscribers receive a new link via e-mail every few days. The Internet serves as a virtual training camp for would-be terrorists, creating an online

substitute for the loss of physical infrastructure targeted by coalition forces in Afghanistan and elsewhere.

### The Seventh Pillar: Preserve the Past, Forget the Future

The militants are inspired by a vision of returning to an idealized 7<sup>th</sup> century milieu among their pious ancestors. They imagine themselves as steed-riding companions of the Prophet Mohamed, as suggested by Osama bin Laden’s own choice of wardrobe. Bin Laden’s lieutenant Ayman al-Zawahiri named his biography, *Knights Under The Prophet’s Banner*. The Al-Qaeda logo is a white stallion.

But it is not only the pious ancestors of 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia that inspires the militant jihadis. They also hark back to the last Arab victory in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, when the celebrated Salah-eh-Din pushed the crusaders out of the Holy City of Jerusalem, and drove them to a mere toehold on the coast of the Islamic heartlands. Ayman al-Zawahiri’s own Al-Qaeda code-name is Salah-el-Din,<sup>6</sup> while references to the medieval crusades are a staple of militant rhetoric.

Closely related to idealisation of the past is a refusal to imagine the future. Although popular in opposition, Islamist regimes have always stumbled on the hard rock of governance and economic planning. The devil is in the details.

The Pakistani extremist reformer Abul A’la Mawdudi explained the failure of Islamic rule in 19<sup>th</sup> century India thus: “...failure is apparent not real. The real success for a Muslim is that he works, for the establishment of Islam in order to win the favour of Allah, and works as he rightly should. Judged by this criterion, the Mujahidin succeeded

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Wright, “Terrorism Online”, *The New Yorker*, 2 August 2004.

<sup>6</sup> The *Wall Street Journal* reporter Alan Cullison, who accidentally discovered a hard-drive in Kabul containing Al Qaeda documents, kindly shared with me this fact and several other insights into al-Qaedaism.

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in their mission. But from the worldly point of view they failed because they could not put an end to the un-Godly rule and practically establish the political supremacy of Islam”.<sup>7</sup>

### Conclusion

**A**ny successful counter-terrorism strategy to contain the militant jihad networks must recognize the seven pillars of transnational terror. It must distinguish carefully between the legitimate expression of the five pillars of Islam while finding ways to undermine the seven pillars of transnational terror. Using blunt force alone to

destroy the supporting columns of hate will not succeed. Pure force may work in symmetric warfare, but is defeated by the logic of asymmetric warfare.

Winning hearts and minds was a key component of the strategy of the Cold War, and it should be the centrepiece strategy of today’s war against jihadi terror. Al-Qaedaism must be defeated like its ideological predecessors Fascism, Nazism and Communism. To achieve this, we must show both firm and intelligent resolve against those who have hijacked a world faith, and who would ultimately seek to destroy our way of life itself. ■

<sup>7</sup> Abul A'laa Al-Mawdudi, *A Short History of the Revivalist Movement in Islam* (The Other Press: Kuala Lumpur, 1992).