



IDSS COMMENTARIES (01A/2005)

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Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia (Part II)

The Ideologues

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The Key Ideologues

Al Qaeda legitimises its fight in Saudi Arabia by adopting an almost ideological belief that the Saudi regime is “unislamic” and therefore deserved to be attacked. This ideology is not new to both the Saudi regime and the terrorists in the kingdom. However, it had not been able to gather much support in the country. For this reason, an important ideologue for al Qaeda fighters, the Jordanian, Abu Mohammed al Maqdissi, travelled to Afghanistan to conduct several ideological workshops in al Qaeda camps. Possibly with the objective of trying to reach out to as many people as possible, he started a website known called *Minbaruttawhid waljihad* (Al Jihad and Attawhid Voice) (<http://www.almaqdese.com/>). Although al Maqdissi denied any links with Osama, he heaped praises on him for the September 11 attacks in the United States.

In the Saudi kingdom three of al Qaeda’s key ideologues were Sheikh Nasser al Fahd, Sheikh Ali al Khudair and Ahmed al Khalidi. They were respected among their followers because of their deep religious knowledge. They played a big part in the establishment and spread of Al Qaeda thinking in the kingdom and called for the withdrawal of American soldiers from the country. They also spoke out about the “apostasy” of the Saudi state, the acceptability of killing Saudi police and the legitimacy of suicide operations in the kingdom.

Rehabilitation of the Ideologues

These clerics were however subsequently detained and charged with “advocating violence in sermons in mosques and on the internet”. Following their detentions, the three ideologues distanced themselves from terrorist activities.

Sheikh Nasser al Fahd recanted on November 21, 2003. During an interview with Saudi television, he admitted crying when he saw television images of the November 9 Mohaya attack. The car bombing of a residential compound in Mohaya, Riyadh killed 18 people and injured at least 120 others. He conceded that the attack was a sinful act and that the bombers were not martyrs because they violated Islam by killing both Muslims and non-Muslims residing under the protection of the state.

“What happened is not Jihad in the name of Allah.” When asked about the individuals pursuing the fight in the kingdom to expel the “Crusaders and the Jews” from the Arabian

peninsular, Sheikh Fahd replied: “We know the results and we have seen how many innocent people have been killed.” Sheikh Fahd withdrew his *fatwas* which advocated militancy and described them as “a grave mistake”.

Sheikh Ali al Khudair recanted on October 19, 2003. When interviewed by Saudi television, he said the Mohaya attacks resulted in the deaths of many innocent people, and that all religions would consider such behavior despicable. When asked whether the people behind the attacks were warriors or aggressors, Al Khudair said: “They committed offences against the society and its wealth.” He added that non-Muslims who entered the country with a visa should be protected and should not be harmed. Al Khudair had previously praised the 19 terror suspects wanted by the Saudi government and acknowledged his relationship with some of them. He added that only rulers were in a position to declare jihad.

Ahmad al Khalidi, recanted on December 20, 2003. Like the two other clerics, he publicly declared that he regretted his anti-state actions. He added that foreign workers and diplomats were protected by the government and should not be harmed.

After the arrests and rehabilitation of the three theorists, Al Qaeda suffered a major setback in Saudi Arabia. A new generation of ideologues however emerged, chief amongst whom being Turki Addandani and Youssof al Ayiri. Both became leaders of al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia but they were immediately killed by Saudi forces. This effectively weakened Al Qaeda’s ideological front. But new theorists emerged to fill the void.

Faris bin Hazzam, a Saudi researcher, argues that the current theorists of Al Qaeda in the kingdom can be divided into two groups: the first includes those who are more knowledgeable in religion such as Faris Azzhrani and Isa al Awshan; the second comprises individuals with less knowledge in *Fiqh* (Jurisprudence), such as Sultan bin Bajad al Outaibi and Abdul Majeed al Manee’a.

The Future

An anonymously-written book was recently posted on an Al Qaeda website, entitled the “Dubiosity of Jihad in the Arabian Peninsula”, which however reflects Al Qaeda thinking. It highlighted two views with regards to the war against the Americans:

- 1 The first view advocates that the fight against the Americans should take place on their land and outside the Arabian peninsular. According to this view, the Americans should not be given a chance to prepare themselves to invade the Muslim lands, especially the Arabian peninsular. Their camps and military bases have to be destroyed so that they will not be used to reach the peninsular;
- 2 The second view uses Saudi Arabia as a justification for the propagation of Jihad. As it is every Muslim’s sacred duty to keep the state safe and secure, Saudi Arabia is regarded as an ideal base for recruiting fighters and for getting financial support.

Both views are accepted by Al Qaeda and the book suggests a balance between the two. It also argues that whenever the enemy is given a chance at peace, he will use all his military facilities to strike at Muslims. Both views have been used by Al Qaeda to shape the group’s war strategy in the Arabian peninsular.

In a videotape released on December 16, 2004, Osama bin Laden focused on the situation in

the Arabian Peninsula and spoke about how the Americans have been involved directly in the policy making of the region. He talked about using oil as a weapon and told his followers: "Targeting Americans in Iraq is a golden and unique opportunity. Be active and prevent them from reaching the oil, and mount your operations accordingly, especially in Iraq and the Gulf."

Based on the video recording, it can be concluded that Osama has come full circle and has returned to where he started from – the Arabian peninsular. It should not be a surprise if a new war is waged from there against the Americans and the Saudi state.

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