



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

911 Conspiracy Theories: The Absent Perspectives

Muhammad Haniff Hassan & Mohamed Redzuan Salleh

7 May 2010

The truth of 911 has long been a point of public contention. But why is it not so among former Muslim extremists, even those who once were close allies of Al Qaeda?

THE DEBATE on whether 911 was an inside job may never end. We, therefore, do not purport to disprove the inside job theory or seek to make any claim to the truth. However, we will attempt to provide perspectives that may not have been given their necessary exposure.

Background

When it comes to the truth of 911, skepticism has been unceasing for the last nine years. In 2006, a 13-nation survey conducted by Pew Research Centre asked Muslims whether they believe that groups of Arabs conducted the 911 job. The survey concluded that “by wide margins, Muslims living in Muslim countries say they do not believe this to be the case”. Four years later, the former Malaysian premier, Mahathir Mohamad, echoed a similar sentiment when he stated on his blog that “if they (the US) can make the film Avatar, they can stage the attack and collapse of the World Trade Centre in New York”. When a figure as senior as Mahathir raises this question, his anti-Western perspectives notwithstanding, it does amplify and reinforce the views held by a large swath of the population. Ironically, many of the assumptions made by Mahathir are based on western sources, which he would normally find very suspicious.

Amidst all the debates between supporters and skeptics of conspiracy theories pertaining to 911, a critical set of voices has been relatively absent from the public discourse. They are voices of former leaders of extremist Islamist movements. Interestingly, Islamist extremists and former ones are not known to deny the involvement of Al Qaeda in the 911 operations.

Admissions of Al Qaeda

Most importantly, Al Qaeda, referring to the event as the Manhattan Attack, has repeatedly admitted to the act. Al Qaeda's leader, Osama Bin Laden, has reportedly admitted involvement in the attack at least thrice -- in 2001, 2007 and again in 2010 -- when he stated that he was the "only one responsible" for the deadly assaults on New York and Washington.

In his book *Truths of Jihad and Flaws of Hypocrisy*, Al-Qaeda No 2, Ayman Al Zawahiri, admitted that "the mujahidin, by the will of God, has intercepted the US by attacking them on the 11 September before the US was able to initiate a response to attack Afghanistan..." It is difficult to refute the statements of the top two leaders of Al Qaeda when their admissions are conflated with statements of former extremists.

Statements of Former Compatriots

The dismissing of conspiracy theories gets stronger support from two of the most influential extremist Islamist groups in the world, once close allies of Al Qaeda: Gama'a Islamiyya (a.k.a. Islamic Group - IG) and Al-Jihad Organisation (also known as Egyptian Islamic Jihad – EIJ). Both have penned their views on 911, called an end to the armed struggle, and have actively condemned indiscriminate violence in the name of jihad.

In its book *River of Memories*, IG dedicated a section on "The Conspiracy Theory – Analysis and Critique". In it, IG expressed their amazement for those who have resorted to conspiracy theories with regards to 911, especially in the Arab world. To IG, it was very clear that Al Qaeda was the obvious perpetrator of 911, especially by the leader's own admission which, in Islam, is enough evidence to prove one's guilt.

In his latest book *The Future of Conflict in Afghanistan*, the EIJ ideologue, Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (a.k.a. Dr Fadl) has no qualms stating the obvious involvement of Al Qaeda. He bluntly posits: "Khalid Sheikh Mohamed was initially in two minds on whether to involve bin Laden in the 911 operation as he knew how disorganised Al Qaeda was, but he felt compelled (to involve Al Qaeda) due to his needs in terms of finance and individuals to execute the 911 operation. And that, he can only get from bin Laden." Sayyid Imam further declared that the whole responsibility falls squarely on the shoulders of bin Laden, stating that he was "solely responsible for the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and all the bloodshed following the 911 incident".

A similar sentiment has also been echoed by Sheik Salman Al-Awda, a highly influential Salafi scholar, who was once imprisoned for his extremist views. He issued an open letter to Osama, asking whether he was happy to face God with this burden on his shoulders. Noman Benotman, a key leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), an Al Qaeda associate group which broke away in 2007, said the two Al Qaeda leaders had spoken to him one year before that attack. They told him that they were seriously planning to attack the US, without disclosing specific details, and inflict as many casualties as possible.

Supporting the above, Omar bin Laden, Osama's son who initially was not sure of his father's involvement, eventually abandoned his doubt and conceded that his father was responsible for the attack. He came to this conclusion after hearing an audio tape in which his father admitted to his involvement.

CIA's hand?

To hold their argument, a somewhat outlandish theory of some 911 skeptics is the premise that bin Laden is a CIA agent who conducted the attack under American orders. This fanciful statement is

highly imaginative as the extremist Islamist movements themselves do not resort to such myths. On a similar note, the Bali bombers themselves were outraged and felt insulted when their acts were alleged to be in concert with the CIA.

Proponents of the 911 conspiracy theories can choose to forever doubt the publicised truth of 911 and hold that the lack of facts can prove a theory. However, they can never ignore the violent ideology of Al Qaeda that clearly justifies the atrocities of 911. A survey on Al Qaeda's literature demonstrates an ideology of permissive jihad -- a jihad that permits acts of indiscriminate violence to justify their perceived noble ends. This is sufficient ground to reject Al Qaeda and its ideology.

Summing up, supporters of conspiracy theories would do well to consider the fact that Al Qaeda leaders themselves, as well as their former allies, do not disclaim any responsibility for 911.

Muhammad Haniff Hassan is Associate Research Fellow and Mohamed Redzuan Salleh is a Research Analyst specialising in the ideological revisions of jihadists, at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University.