

Spectral brothers: al-Qaida's world wide web

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19 August 2005

A product of the global culture, modern radical Islam is the shadow of what it opposes, writes Faisal Devji.

The global *jihad* retailed by al-Qaida has obscured the old-fashioned Islamic fundamentalism which dominated Muslim politics during the cold war, adopting from it categories such as ideology and revolution in the quest for an Islamic state. With the end of the cold war and the emergence of global networks in which goods, ideas and people circulate outside the language of citizenship, the fundamentalist fight for ideological states has lost influence.

Islamic fundamentalism is even becoming politically moderate, for despite struggling from Algeria to Afghanistan it stands defeated everywhere but in Iran, and even there it is not in the best of health.

Muslim radicalism, by contrast, has moved beyond the language of citizenship to assume a global countenance, joining movements as different as environmentalism and pacifism in its pursuit of justice on a worldwide scale. Such movements are ethical rather than political in nature: they can neither predict nor control the global consequences of their actions. The acts of those involved in global networks such as al-Qaida are free from politics of a traditional sort, which demands collective agreement on certain theses, plans and goals.

Democratising Islam

The global jihad has no coherent vision for the future and thus no plan of action to bring it about. Its acolytes possess no ideological or doctrinal unity, coming together only in the execution of specific operations, perhaps for very different reasons. They hail from the most diverse backgrounds and each fights his *jihad* in the most individual of ways. They are neither recruited nor indoctrinated into al-Qaida but simply franchise the skills and connections it makes available.

The diversity of al-Qaida's soldiers is illustrated by their practices, which run the gamut from praying in mosques to drinking in bars. Their religious beliefs, too, are individualistic, drawing from the whole range of the Islamic tradition, especially its mystical and heretical forms. Unlike fundamentalism, in other words, which makes use of Islam's juridical tradition for the building of an ideological state, al-Qaida's ostensibly *Sunni* minions turn to its *Sufi* and *Shi'a* forms, particularly in their espousal of practices such as martyrdom operations. Indeed their conception of holy war as a moral duty derives from the mystical tradition: Sufis having led all the great *jihad* movements from the 18th to the 20th centuries.

The prophetic dreams and charismatic practices that often underpin the jihad paradoxically illustrate its secular credentials as well. The Islam espoused by al-Qaida is given over to the individual conscience, becoming a spiritual force far stronger than the merely political force exercised by Islamic fundamentalists. Even the most extreme of these manifestations, such as the Taliban, could be dealt with on the basis of *Realpolitik*. But with individuals becoming personally responsible for the fate of Islam, such purely political dealings lose significance.

All these developments suggest that the *jihad* has democratised Islamic authority by dispersing it among individuals with little regard to the tradition's various divisions and boundaries, to say nothing of the clerics and seminaries associated with them.

This does not mean that al-Qaida's advocates have adopted a tolerant or pluralistic attitude towards this tradition, only that they have broken its sectarian borders to constitute an Islam made up of constantly shifting fragments, as if it were some enormous spiritual kaleidoscope. And in this the *jihad* resembles the "new age" religions of our time, which plunder from the old orthodoxies without assuming a like form.

The extraordinary violence that marks al-Qaida should not blind us to the fact that it belongs to the world in which we all live, indeed this violence might only represent one point in a trajectory. We have seen, for example, that even at its most foreign the behaviour of soldiers fighting the *jihad* approaches territory that is disconcertingly familiar. Indeed, the more distant such behaviour seems, the closer to us it often is. Thus the relations I have posited between the holy war and our quotidian practices of secularism, democracy and individual ethics are not in any sense accidental. They derive instead from the global nature of holy war.

The world wide web of war

Like environmentalism, pacifism and other global movements, al-Qaida's jihad is concerned with the world as a whole. In the same way that climatic warming or nuclear holocaust are not problems that can be dealt with regionally, the *jihad's* task of gaining justice for Muslims has meaning only at a global level. This is why the whole world must be brought within al-Qaida's purview. Al-Qaida's violence links all the world's people together in a web of mutual obligation and responsibility, allowing American or British civilians, for example, to be killed in recompense for the killing of Muslims in Iraq.

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The worldwide web of war spun by al-Qaida thus exists as a kind of spectre of our global interrelatedness, and the same web of responsibilities and obligations linking the holy war to its enemies also links them together as a community, even as a community of possible brothers. Is it the possibility of such a community that makes al-Qaida rage for equality with its enemies, even if this is nothing more than the equality of death?

This potential brotherhood allows many among al-Qaida's operatives to participate fully and with evident relish in the lives of their enemies, for both belong to the same world and form a single global community, whether this be defined in ecological or ethical terms.

Perhaps this is why the violence of holy war tends to be so impersonal and dutiful, why its warriors express no real hatred for their civilian victims. For are not these victims said to be merely the counterparts of innocent Muslims killed elsewhere? They are therefore in some perverse way brothers at one remove, made even more like brothers by dying alongside al-Qaida's suicide-bombers and mingling blood.

In the global perspective adopted by the *jihad*, the peoples of the world are bound together in a web of mutual relations and complicities. For the moment this intimacy expresses itself in the most murderous way, though even here it represents what I have referred to as the dark side of another, more benign kind of relationship, like that of universal brotherhood. Indeed al-Qaida's actions and rhetoric continuously invoke the spectre of a global community, drawing upon the forms and even the vocabulary of other global movements such as environmental and pacifist ones, all of which bear a family resemblance to one another.

As an explicitly ethical enterprise, therefore, the holy war is a highly unstable phenomenon because its violence derives from the same source as the non-violence of other global networks. Perhaps al-Qaida is murderous because it is so unstable, since it is at any moment capable of shifting its practices into those of non-violence.

This hasn't happened yet, and is unlikely to in the near future. But the possibility of a non-violent *jihad* is discernible in the blameless private lives led by many of its warriors. Non-violence is in fact the shadow that dogs this holy war, just as violence shadows even the environmental and other movements for global social justice.

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