

Book Reviews

Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban : Beyond Bin Laden and 9/11. By Syed Saleem Shahzad, Pluto Press, 2011, pp. 260. ISBN : 978-0-7453-3101-0 (paperback).

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‘Terrorism’, though most studied, suffers from three problems (Colin Wight, 2007: 99). First, it defies definition; second, it is difficult to obtain primary data due to various obstacles; and finally, it has attracted major attention of policy makers without studying the phenomenon itself. Colin, therefore, suggests adopting a structural approach rather than the present psychological approach, and studying the phenomenon in a historical context rather than concentrating on its contemporary manifestations (p. 100). Saleem Shahzad’s *Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban*, by and large, complies with Colin’s suggestion. It provides the picture of Al-Qaeda and traces its historical roots, its arguments, as well as explores its different parts. The author highlights the implication of ill-understanding the subject in the light of series of developments from 1996 to 2010. The book was launched on May 24, 2011, and its author was kidnapped allegedly by the Pakistan’s intelligence agency on May 29, 2011, and his body was discovered the next day far from his home.

The book is about Bin Laden and Mulla Omar’s colleagues, their strategists, and ideologues. At the very beginning, Saleem reminds the readers that “there is more to Al-Qaeda than just Bin Laden” (p. ix). The book focuses on three groups or elements who contributed to the development of Al-Qaeda in its contemporary form. First, those ideologues who transformed a service-providing organization namely *Maktab-e Al-Khidmanta* into the most effective international non-state actor. Saleem considers a minor role for Bin Laden, instead finds that Al-Qaeda owes much more to a group of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood militants, particularly Aimen Al-Zawaheri (pp. 74-79). According to Saleem, it was Zawaheri and his colleagues who drew Al-Qaeda’s dialectic of struggle, by arguing that “the concept of ‘No God but Allah’ does not only have ritualistic connotations,” rather “symbolizes a rebellion against any human-made system” such as democracy, socialism etc. (p. xv). Based on this notion, a Marxist-like dialectic was developed, initially polarizing the society into two poles of “practicing Muslims” and “non-practicing Muslims”, and then defining two levels of struggles: Islamists versus polytheists in the Muslim world; and in the last stage, Islam versus the West (p. xvii).

Second, those who reorganized Al-Qaeda which was “believed to be buried under the rubble of the Tora Bora mountains as a result of the U.S. bombing in 2001” (p. x). The writer mentions a group of Pakistan’s army officers known as *pir bhaee*, who had their allegiance to some Jihadi spiritual mentors (p. 8). Besides, there were some self-retired army men who had joined Al-Qaeda. Among them he specifically focuses on the role of two brothers—Khurram and Haroon—in formulating Al-Qaeda’s post 9/11 strategies, which revolutionized Al-Qaeda in terms of capacity, and equipments (pp. 82-91). Even the night vision glasses arrived in Pakistan in President Mushraff’s official car (p. 88).

Third, those warriors and guerrilla commandos in the tribal areas of Pakistan and Kashmir who were fighting against NATO forces on the ground. These people had two different orientations. One group was the product of the Pakistani military establishment expanding Pakistan’s strategic regional agenda. The author claims that the military establishment of Pakistan has been convinced that within five years, the U.S. would leave the region, therefore, Pakistan would need these militants as strategic assets to pursue a proxy war in the region. But, these so called strategic assets fell on the lap of Al-Qaeda as they were too big to be controlled by Pakistan anymore (p. 185). The other groups comprised of fighters who were directly attracted to Al-Qaeda, following Pakistan’s military operation in its autonomous tribal areas against Al-Qaeda elements. Shahzad argues that Al-Qaeda was not interested to extend the theater of war to Pakistan as it needed its tribal areas as safe-havens, as well as recruiting field (p. 11). Yet, Al-Qaeda knew that Pakistan would operate against them as a result of the U.S. pressure. So, it was also prepared for the second scenario. When Pakistan went to war against Al-Qaeda, the latter’s message from “fight the U.S.” was changed into “fight the Muslim regimes allied with the US” (pp. 9-10).

The writer notes that the Al-Qaeda was always a step ahead of its enemies. It had a good understanding of how to exploit the situation in its favour. For instance, while the Pakistan army was conducting operation against them in Pakistan’s tribal areas, as result of a religious decree prohibiting the burial of soldiers fighting against Al-Qaeda in Muslim cemeteries, some parents refused to receive their bodies, and some middle rank officers preferred court martial rather than going to war against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda elements (pp. 40-43).

Saleem argues that while the commentators on Al-Qaeda due to their lack of understanding about the internal dynamics of Al-Qaeda, would horrify the world with a nuclear-armed Al-Qaeda, they missed the point that “Al-Qaeda’s arsenal is not its weaponry, but its uncanny ability to exploit unfolding events to engineer the collapse of its hi-tech enemies” (p. xi). He argues that “the militants always had a broader macro strategy in their minds whereas the Pakistan Army carried out operations within a much narrower prism.” This point ended up in Al-Qaeda’s favour (p. 184). In some places the

writer's pen turns fierce, and he writes "A befuddled Pakistan Army danced to the tune of the militants. They were dragged in the direction the militants wanted them to take" (p. 186).

Although Pakistan, and the U.S have succeeded in killing some of the Al-Qaeda leaders so far, the writer asserts that both the U.S and Pakistan missed the point that "Al-Qaeda did not rely on individuals," as its dynamic strategy, behind the personality on surface, "had raised a motivated cadre that could both perpetuate the war against the US-NATO forces in Afghanistan" (p. 6). In addition, Al-Qaeda strategy went beyond its material strength (p. 77).

The author also explains a less-addressed question of why Al-Qaeda is so determined to retain Afghanistan at any cost? He believes that this determination is based upon a *Hadith* by the holy prophet (SAW), which says that the ancient Khurasan (currently Afghanistan, Central Asia, Afghanistan and some parts of Iran and Pakistan) would be the first theater of war (p. xvii). From a strategic point of view, the author finds that Al-Qaeda aimed at engaging the U.S. in a region with stone-age condition, and then defeat it through a war of attrition (p. xi). Therefore, "the 9/11 attacks were organized for a particular purpose: to provoke the United States and bring it into the Afghan trap" (p. 138).

While some analysts do not differentiate between Taliban and Al-Qaeda, Salim makes it clear that they should not be considered identical, as AL-Qaeda has a global agenda while Taliban are only fighting to control Afghanistan. In other words, while the conflict in Afghanistan is assumed as war by Taliban, to Al-Qaeda it is a single battle of wider global war (p. xviii). He argues that the Al-Qaeda did not fight in Afghanistan, as the strategy was to save the energy for the second phase of resistance once the U.S got well-rooted in the field, at time exhausted after fighting with the Taliban; hence, Al-Qaeda retreated to Pakistani tribal areas and engaged in capacity building for its broader agenda (pp. 183-184).

The writer reveals when Taliban succeeded to establish their Islamic Emirates, they were recognized as member of international community by some countries. Even China was about to recognize them. But it did not sit with Al-Qaeda's strategy, as it was planning to make Afghanistan as a trap for the U.S., the way the latter had previously used Afghanistan against the Soviets (p. xix). Perhaps it was the second misfortune of Afghanistan. In their book, *Bear the Trap : Afghanistan's untold story*, Muhammad yousaf and Mark Adkin narrate a similar story, and show that when the Soviet Union was defeated and the Mujahedin were close to victory, their struggle were sabotaged by the Americans and the West and thus was converted into a civil war. In the same way the writer reveals that, when the US 2007 wanted to initiate a dialogue with moderate Taliban, the inside informants had already alerted the Al-Qaeda leaders, so, it sabotaged the plan (pp. 62-64). In a more recent development in Pakistan, the All Party Conference

resolved that the government should enter into dialogue with Taliban, but few days later the Pakistan's interior minister claimed that some were trying to sabotage the plan (see: Abbas Ansari, 2013). It shows there are still some forces to whom peace with Taliban is equal with their insecurity.

Salim Shehzad's book is a potential contribution to the studies of terrorism. His insights are unique and first hand. As an investigative journalist he has collected his information directly from the field. He has tried to open a new window for understanding the phenomenon of terrorisms at the cost of his own life.

References

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Islamic civilization in South Asia : A history of Muslim power and presence in the Indian subcontinent. By Burjor Avari. London : Routledge, 2013, p. xviii+317. ISBN 978-0-415-580625 (Paperback)

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In *Islamic Civilization in South Asia*, Burjor Avari analyses the history of Islam and Muslims in South Asia. The book attempts to articulate "dispassionately the issues concerning the Islamic past of South Asia" (p. xvii). It consists of eleven chapters in addition to a preface and concluding remarks.

Chapter One provides a brief description of terms like 'Muslim', "South Asia", "Indian subcontinent", 'India', "Islamic Civilization", and Muslim 'Power' and 'Presence'. Starting with the advent of Islam in Arabia, Avari provides a brief history of major Islamic events from the Prophet's (SAW) first revelation to the pinnacle of the Islamic empire which later facilitated Europe's "cultural transition from the dark ages to the renaissance" (p. 4). In this chapter, while discussing the subcontinent's cultural legacy, Avari points out that "political India is a new nation, but cultural India is an ancient regional civilization" (p. 5). The first chapter provides the gist of the book but may also be considered a prelude to subsequent chapters.