Al-Qaeda, spectre of globalisation

Faisal Devji

Faisal Devji *argues that Al-Qaeda should be understood as sharing many features with other international movements for social change, largely because it operates, as they do, in a global arena that offers little purchase for traditional politics.*

Like environmentalism, pacifism and other global movements, Al-Qaeda's jihad is concerned with the world as a whole. Just as climatic change or nuclear holocaust are not problems that can be dealt with regionally, but require global attention, so too the jihad's task of gaining justice for Muslims cannot be accomplished piecemeal, and has meaning only at a global level. This is why the whole world must be brought within Al-Qaeda's purview. And Al-Qaeda's violence - ironically - is intimately linked to the connectedness together of all the world's people in a web of mutual obligation and responsibility. It is this web of universal complicity, after all, that allows American or British civilians to be killed in recompense for the killing of Muslims in Iraq. The worldwide web of war spun by Al-Qaeda exists as a kind of spectre of our global inter-relatedness, one that has as yet no specific political form of its own.

Not unlike companies in the world economy, to which they are often compared, participants in the global jihad have neither the ability nor the inclination to control the territories within which they operate. Their

relationship with these territories can instead be seen as a series of indirect and speculative investments. Just as with players in the global economy, participants in the jihad are drawn by their investments into a world that does not operate according to their intentions but seems to possess a life of its own. While the attacks of 9/11, for instance, were meticulously planned, they were at the same time completely speculative as far as their effects were concerned, since these could neither be predicted with any degree of certainty, nor controlled in any fashion.

This state of affairs is characteristic of social and oppositional global movements more generally; these are also unable to predict or control the effects of their own actions. These are all movements whose practices are ethical rather than political in nature, because they have been transformed into gestures of risk and duty rather than acts of instrumentality. Like other global movements, the jihad's spectacular demonstrations of strength escape a politics of intentionality and control that is organised around some common history of needs, interests or ideas; they thus create a landscape of relations in which very little, if anything, is shared. So the worldwide mass demonstrations of 2003 protesting the impending war in Iraq were not only the largest global demonstrations yet seen, they also brought together individuals and groups who possessed neither organisational nor ideological commonality of any sort. Like many such movements - for instance Greenpeace - the jihad brings together allies and enemies of the most heterogeneous character, who neither know nor communicate with each other, and who share almost nothing by way of a prior history.

But unlike other forms of global activism, Al-Qaeda's jihad lacks any notion of apocalypse, which is something far more characteristic of Christian and Jewish radicalism, with their talk of the rapture and the end of days, all of which spills over into the apocalyptic imagination of the West's secular movements, such as environmentalism. One could thus argue that the holy war - martyrdom operations and all - is fundamentally about life, while the West it fights appears to be singularly focused on death, even on the annihilation of humanity as a whole: Euro-American cultures are full of concern about every form and manner of disaster, from global warming to weapons of mass destruction. The jihad, however, is worldly and even prosaic; the end it envisioned has nothing supernatural, rapturous or even final about it, and seems

indeed to be something of an anti-climax. It gives us no vision of an alternative universe, nor even some revolutionary utopia, only statements about fair trade and democracy.

My argument is that Al-Qaeda's non-apocalyptic stance, and its attention to the prosaic nature of everyday life, forces us to think about its violence in new ways. For one thing, this violence occurs in a world whose concerns are global in dimension and hence resistant to old-fashioned political solutions, thus seeming to call instead for spectacular gestures that are ethical in nature. Such gestures sometimes announce their distance from political rationality by the self-destructive character of their violence. Suicide bombing is the most individualistic of practices, perhaps the only way in which individuality can be exercised in a world that seems to have spun out of control. It is also an ethical gesture that participates only indirectly, if at all, in a solution to the problem it advertises.

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-Qaeda is murderous because it is so unstable, since it is at any moment capable of shifting its practices into those of non-violence. This suggests that violence is not in itself the most important consequence of the jihad. In the long run, violence is probably Al-Qaeda's most superficial and short-lived effect, though it is certainly one of great importance for the moment. Far greater and almost incalculable in its effects is the jihad's democratisation of Islam - accomplished by its fragmentation of traditional forms of religious authority and the dispersal of their elements into a potentially endless series of re-combinations.

Genealogies of Muslim militancy

These possibilities have presented themselves because the jihad has put an end to old-fashioned fundamentalism as a movement dedicated to the establishment of an ideological state. The jihad has replaced what used to be called Islamic fundamentalism at the edge of Muslim militancy. Traditional Muslim militancy had been part and parcel of Cold War politics, and was concerned with the founding through revolution of an ideological state, fashioned in many respects on the communist model that was so popular in Africa and Asia following the Second World War. With the end

of the Cold War, however, and the coming into being of a global market for transactions of all kinds, the revolutionary politics whose aim was to institute ideological states quickly began to break down. This sort of fundamentalism, after all, had enjoyed only one success in its many decades of struggle, with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In order to understand Al-Qaeda's novelty, its jihad must be torn out of the genealogies of political Islam within which it is generally confined. Faced with what is new, and especially what is radically new, the scholar's conservative instinct is always to reach for some genealogy within which this novelty might be anchored and neutralised. In the case of the jihad, this instinct works to place it in the genealogy of something called political Islam, where its ancestry is generally traced to Middle Eastern movements of the modern period like Salafism or Wahhabism.

A curious feature of such genealogies of the jihad is that they all originate in and remain focused specifically upon Sunni Islam and the Middle East, despite the fact that arguably the most successful examples of political Islam have been revolutionary Iran and the Hizbollah in Lebanon, both Shia movements. Among other things, these have contributed to an ostensibly Sunni jihad the language and practice of the 'martyrdom operation', as its suicide attacks are known. Similarly, the fact that the jihad today happens to be based for the most part outside the Middle East (in places like Chechnya, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and the Philippines), among populations that have barely an inkling of Salafi or Wahhabi traditions, seems to have escaped the notice of scholarly genealogists.

Apparently the very presence of Arab fighters or funding in such places is evidence enough that Salafi or Wahhabi Islam has been exported in sufficient measure to determine the nature of jihad there. That the reverse might be true, with Arab fighters and financiers importing the jihad from these regions to the Middle East, is not seriously considered, although it is certainly true of Al-Qaeda and the phenomenon of the so called Arab-Afghans - militants who returned after the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan to their homes in the Middle East and founded new jihad movements there.

In general the importance of non-Arab Muslims and of non-Arab Islam to the Middle East has been underestimated, as borne out by the example of Iraq in early 2005: Ayatollah Sistani was that country's great Shiite authority, even

though he is an Iranian whose Arabic remains heavily accented by his native Farsi. Much of Sistani's authority in Iraq, moreover, derives from his control and disbursement of funds raised by Shia populations elsewhere, a very significant portion of which comes from India and Pakistan. Sistani's constituency in the subcontinent, then, through his agent in Mumbai, might well hold a key to the Ayatollah's importance in Iraq.

This Shiite example apart, the presence of large non-Arab working populations in the Arabian Peninsula, as well as the dominance of non-Arab Muslims in the formulation and dissemination of Islamic ideas globally, especially in languages like English, renders nonsensical any notion that the Arab Middle East is the original homeland of radical Islam. The Taliban provides a perfect illustration of the kind of movement that has repeatedly been described as a foreign import. It was supposedly influenced by Deobandi practices from India, themselves funded and influenced by Saudi Wahhabism, and by Wahhabi practices coming directly from Saudi Arabia - both of which were imparted in Pakistani seminaries, and were supposedly legalistic and scripturalist in the extreme. And yet the Taliban leader Mullah Omar chose in Kandahar to drape himself in a mantle belonging to the Prophet and declare himself the Commander of the Faithful, a title used for the caliphs who were meant to be Muhammad's successors - he was in fact flatteringly called a caliph by no less a person than Osama bin Laden. In what way could this coronation be understood as conforming to any Deobandi or Wahhabi teaching? If anything the vision of Mullah Omar donning the Prophet's mantle suggests Sufi and especially Shia themes, since the latter believe in the apostolic succession of those members of Muhammad's family whom he famously covered with his cloak. And it is precisely such charismatic forms of authority that both the Deobandis and Wahhabis are supposed to execrate.

'a global movement like the jihad depends upon the erosion of traditional religious and political allegiances for its very existence'

There is nothing more calculated to degrade the celebrated scripturalist or legalist forms of Islam associated with these groups, tied as they are to the authority of a class of scholarly commentators, than the institution of a self-proclaimed Commander of the Faithful - one who claimed, in addition, to have received divine instruction in his dreams. By acts such as these, the Taliban

not only assumed an immediate superiority over their Saudi or Pakistani teachers; they also forced from the latter an acknowledgement of religious forms and practices that were barely dreamt of in the Deobandi and Wahhabi schools. Suddenly it seemed as if the direction of Islamic influence had been reversed, with teachers in the centre taking dictation from students on the periphery.

Is a genealogical mode of explanation at all credible in a situation where participants in the jihad come from all manner of national and religious backgrounds? Quite apart from the hijackers in New York or the bombers in Madrid who betrayed no obvious signs of Muslim piety, we know that in places like Afghanistan, too, fighters came from many different and even opposed Islamic affiliations, which are generally kept far apart by scholarly genealogists. But the plethora of groups, often very exclusive, participating in the jihad does not indicate their alliance for some common cause. It may however signal the fact that a global movement like the jihad depends upon the erosion of traditional religious and political allegiances for its very existence. After all Al-Qaeda, like other global movements, possesses an extraordinarily diverse membership, one that is not united by way of any cultic or ideological commonality, to say nothing about any common class, ethnic or personal background. Indeed it can only function as the network it is by disrupting and disregarding old-fashioned forms of political and religious allegiance.

If there exists any genealogy within which Al-Qaeda can be located, it is a mystical or heretical one. For example there is a widespread rejection by the jihad of the classical doctrine of holy war as a collective or political obligation similar to that of choosing a ruler or administering justice. One implication of treating holy war as an individual ethical obligation like prayer is that it becomes spiritualised and finally puts the jihad beyond the pragmatism of political life. So whereas liberal as well as fundamentalist Muslims tried to instrumentalise Islam by attributing social, political or economic functions to its beliefs or practices, the jihad does just the opposite - its task is to de-instrumentalise Islam and make it part of everyday ethics.

There is a tradition of holy war that does exactly this, one that possesses all the requisite ingredients of religious fervour and popular support, and has, in addition, nothing to do with the juridical politics of a state. Such a tradition of jihad, while it might well have given rise to states, was characteristic of charismatic, mystical and heretical movements, often messianic in nature, that

were located at the peripheries of Islamic power or authority, and frequently directed against them as much as against any infidel presence. Indeed all the great jihad movements from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries were Sufi ones. It is hardly accidental, therefore, that by far the most popular examples of the ghazi or holy warrior in the Muslim world happen to be members of Sufi or mystic fraternities, whose tombs continue to be places of pilgrimage, healing and spiritual succour.

In many ways today's jihad builds upon these Sufi ventures. It, too, is located on the peripheries of the Muslim world, geographically, politically and religiously; it operates now in places like Chechnya, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, as well as in Thailand and the Philippines. Like its predecessors, the jihad in our times is also peripheral as a set of practices, being charismatic, heretical and even mystical. And like these holy wars of the past, the jihad, too, attempts to move such populist and non-juridical elements to the centre of the Islamic world as part of its struggle. Yet Al-Qaeda's jihad does not replace one sort of authority by another, for instance Salafism by Sufism, but fragments Muslim forms of authority altogether, thus democratising Islam itself. What emerges from this fragmentation is a new kind of individual, or rather a new form of Muslim individualism.

The global landscape of Al-Qaeda

The new Muslim individual brought into being by Al-Qaeda's jihad moves across a different kind of landscape than that with which scholars tend to be familiar. Let us look at how that prime location of Muslim radicalism, the Middle East, constitutes such a landscape for this individual. The Middle East today is a truly dispersed entity, with much of its press headquartered in London, its language used by Arab and non-Arab alike, and even its jihad originating elsewhere. Indeed the Middle East might well be grounded in a specific territory only by its oil wells. But even this definition disintegrates on closer inspection. The oil-rich kingdoms of the Persian Gulf, for example, which play such a large role in the jihad, from providing it with funds to supplying homes and constituencies, were initially created, governed and exploited by British imperialism in the form of the Government of India. It was this government and its Indian subjects that founded, managed and manned the oil industries of these countries, including Iraq, till well after the end of British rule in 1947.

Even today this area is linked demographically, economically and culturally more to the Indian Subcontinent, South-East Asia and East Africa than it is to the rest of the Middle East. So apart from the large foreign populations settled in these monarchies, sometimes forming the majority of their inhabitants, many of the historical centres in this extended region owe their existence to commercial links with Asia and Africa. Aden, for instance, from whence Osama bin Laden's family originated (his father leaving this declining city for new opportunities in Saudi Arabia), was an important place in its time only because it served as a link in the British route to and from India; and it also possessed, therefore, a large Indian population. Aden, indeed, was in some ways the Dubai of its time - a cosmopolitan city more similar in every way to Bombay or London than to the Yemeni capital of Sana. This is why the common description of the Bin Laden family as Yemeni is as much correct as it is not.

But the relationship between the Persian Gulf and points south or east of it is not all one-way. Just to take the example of India: this small region provides that huge country with the bulk of its foreign investment, mostly in the form of remittances from Indians settled there; it keeps its national airline financially viable by ferrying Indians to and from various sheikhdoms; and it acts as a major centre both for its entertainment industry and crime syndicates. Given all this, it should come as no surprise that a Christian migrant from the Indian state of Kerala could be far more integrated and at home in a place like Dubai than an Arabic-speaking Muslim migrant from Morocco. After all, one is as likely to encounter Urdu or Swahili in public places here as to encounter Arabic.

Most important in its fragmentation as a Middle Eastern region, however, is the fact that the Persian Gulf's disparate populations are not linked by any relations, whether social, political or economic, that happen to be based on citizenship. Foreigners in the Gulf tend to have no rights of permanent residence, let alone equal rights with those defined as indigenes - who themselves are by no means equal citizens of nation states. All relations among these populations therefore tend to be cosmopolitan instead of national. The moment that citizenship rights are denied to a segment of a state's population, especially an enormous population such as that of foreigners in the Gulf, citizenship itself disappears as an aspect of national uniformity, along with many other notions of a common culture and solidarity. The end result is perhaps a

kind of market managed by rules that have nothing to do with political representation or participation as we recognise them.

The global marketplace: home of the jihad

This curious world, which may function in various forms within immigrant and other cosmopolitan enclaves elsewhere, seems to mirror rather closely the world of the jihad itself. It is, after all, the world of the global marketplace, and it includes within its ambit not only multinational corporations or transnational trading networks, but also the international students, economic migrants, illegal aliens and political refugees who form part and parcel of these commercial enterprises. And we know that the global transactions of the jihad, along with its incredibly mobile operators, use and indeed emerge from such networks and enclaves, in which an old-fashioned politics of intentionality and collective mobilisation, based on some common need, interest or idea, has been ruled out.

One has only to consider the remarkable peregrinations of the 9/11 hijackers - which ran the gamut from German universities and Afghan training camps to American flight schools, passing through the immigrant enclaves of European cities in the process - to realise that such networks and enclaves operate according to the norms of the global marketplace. And this is regardless of whether or not they happen to be located in traditional nation states where political and other relations are meant to be defined in the language of citizenship. All of this makes for a whole new world of cosmopolitan relations between people.

I want to end this essay by returning to its beginning, more precisely to my claim that the global arena does not yet possess a political form proper to itself. Al-Qaeda's actions and rhetoric continuously invoke the spectre of a global community that has as yet no formal existence of its own. And this is what allows its jihad to draw 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.

What Al-Qaeda does is to invoke the spectre of a global community, not by providing an alternative to liberal democracy, but rather by universalising - albeit in its own particular way - its ideals. Earlier movements of resistance or terror had advanced critiques of existing

conditions, for instance of capitalism or imperialism, and offered alternatives to them. This was the case with Marxists and Anarchists as well as with nationalists and fundamentalists. But, like the more pacific global movements that are its peers, Al-Qaeda's jihad poses no real criticism of existing conditions and possesses no alternative to take their place.

Osama bin Laden's rhetoric has consistently voiced a desire for global equality between the Islamic world and the West. Having accused America of hypocrisy as far as its advancement of this equality is concerned, Bin Laden turns his attention to the only form in which such equality is possible: the equality of death. This is why he has repeatedly emphasised the need for an equivalence of terror between the Muslim world and America, as if this were the only form in which the two might come together and even communicate one with the other. For Al-Qaeda terror is the only form in which global equality is now available. It therefore functions as the dark side of America's own democracy, as inseparable from it as its evil twin.