

**Matthew Bugeja**

# **Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan**

**Nation-building and combating Al-Qaeda's ideology**



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I would like to dedicate this book to my wife, Krystle Blaire, and my parents, Peter Paul and Maryann, for their love and support throughout the years.

## **Foreword**

This book had been completed in April 2011, mere weeks before Osama bin Laden had been discovered in Abbottabad, Pakistan by U.S. Navy SEALs. I had followed the events that transpired with great interest, and questioned the relevance of this work extensively before attempting to publish it.

In the three years that have elapsed since mid-2011, it has become apparent that the West will indeed be looking to pull their forces out of Afghanistan, and that the Afghan government, whoever will be leading it after Hamid Karzai, remains unprepared to impose its authority on the entire country. As we are currently seeing in Syria with rebels controlling large segments of the country, and the rise of the radical ISIS group in both Syria and Iraq, a country that is unable to impose the rule of law within its borders is leaving the possibility open for a militant group to fill the security vacuum. Al Qaeda is one of these groups, although it has since spawned a vast network of affiliates, ranging from North Africa to Indonesia.

Al Qaeda can be considered as a prime catalyst for the rise of radical Islamist groups in their current form. The West has not yet changed its strategy to focus more on discrediting Al Qaeda's ideology, but has shifted to drone attacks in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen amongst others; in order to eliminate known operatives.

The group, now led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, will not fade away simply through the means of military force. It has succeeded in sparking sentiment amongst other radicals, who have flocked under their banner, or like ISIS, copied Al-Qaeda's ideology and took it a step further – in a more radical direction. It is my belief that this book remains as relevant as ever to the question of Al Qaeda as a 'brand', its future in the context of Afghanistan, and Western strategy to confront it.

Matthew Bugeja

June 2014

## **Abstract**

This book explores the threats posed by al Qaeda in Afghanistan and whether it is first necessary to stabilize this country in order to eliminate the group. It will be argued that al Qaeda's ideology has now become stronger than its ability to threaten international security; that its aim to become an agent of change within the Muslim world has come to outweigh the threat attributed to it as a conventional, kinetic, terrorist entity. The current instability within Afghanistan is not due to al Qaeda's physical presence there but rather an amalgamation of factors. It will be argued that the U.S.-led invasion in 2001 has contributed to al Qaeda's weakening there but it has not contributed to stabilize Afghanistan itself. The instability in Afghanistan will require a strong, long-term commitment by the international community, while the fight against al Qaeda will require more focus on combating its ideology, and less on military action. Whilst al Qaeda remains an elusive enemy for the West due to its ability to constantly adapt, the international community has failed to adapt adequately to not only combat al Qaeda's ideology, but also to implement the necessary long term strategy that is required to achieve stability in Afghanistan.

## **Acknowledgements**

There are a number of people who deserve recognition for their contribution towards the completion of this book.

First and foremost I would like to thank my University of Malta supervisor, Dr. Carmen Sammut, for her guidance, encouragement and support throughout this research. Her words of encouragement have helped me to believe that I could complete this piece, and her help has been invaluable.

I would like to also express thanks to the International Institute for Strategic Studies and their staff in London for the assistance they provided me whilst conducting research on the topic there. Their advice and assistance with literary material was very useful to my research.

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## **Glossary of terms**

<b>Al Jazeera</b>	Translates to “the island”. It is an Arab television news network based in Qatar.
<b>Al Qaeda</b>	Translates to “the base”, or “the foundation”. A loosely linked Sunni militant group allegedly led by Osama bin Laden.
<b>Awakening, Sunni</b>	A Sunni Iraqi self-defense force that acts as a neighborhood watch and had openly opposed al Qaeda, from 2008 to time of writing.
<b>Ba’athism</b>	A secular Arab nationalist movement, with history in Iraq and Syria.
<b>Burkha</b>	An article of clothing worn by some Islamic women that covers the majority of their body.
<b>Caliphate</b>	Refers to a unified, federal Islamic government ruled by a head of state, or caliph. Often called for by radicals such as bin Laden.
<b>C.I.A.</b>	Central Intelligence Agency. A civilian intelligence agency, which mostly deals with foreign intelligence gathering and analysis.
<b>Durand Line</b>	The border in the mountainous region between Afghanistan and Pakistan.
<b>F.A.R.C.</b>	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia. An insurgent group.
<b>F.Y.</b>	Fiscal Year
<b>G.D.P.</b>	Gross Domestic Product. The total market value of all services and goods produced in a country in a year.
<b>Hadith</b>	Verbal tradition of the deeds and acts of the Islamic prophet, Mohammed.
<b>Harakat ul-Ansar</b>	A Pakistani militant group, which mainly operates in Kashmir.

<b>Harakat al-Jihad</b>	Islamic fundamentalist organization, mainly active in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.
<b>Hindu Kush</b>	A highly mountainous range which exists between Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is a sub-range of the Himalaya mountains.
<b>I.E.D.</b>	Improvised explosive device.
<b>I.I.S.S.</b>	International Institute for Strategic Studies
<b>I.S.A.F.</b>	International Security Assistance Force.
<b>I.S.I.</b>	Inter-Services Intelligence. The largest Pakistani intelligence agency.
<b>Islamic Jihad (Egyptian)</b>	A former radical Islamist organization which had been led by now al Qaeda lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri
<b>Jamait-ul-Ulema-e-Pakistan</b>	A Sunni Islamic political party in Pakistan.
<b>Jamait-e-Islami</b>	Oldest religious Islamic religious party in Pakistan. It opposes westernization and seeks to establish Islamic rule in Pakistan.
<b>Jihad</b>	A holy ‘struggle’ against one’s self or as a holy war against an oppressor.
<b>Kafir</b>	An ‘unbeliever’. An individual that does not subscribe to the Islamic faith.
<b>Loya Jirga</b>	A grand council or gathering, in which Afghan tribal elders meet to discuss important political issues.
<b>Madrassa</b>	An educational institution. Madrasah dīniyyah refers to a ‘religious school’, such as that attended by many Taliban members.
<b>M.C.A.</b>	Millennium Challenge Account, a development fund for the nations who meet the U.S. criteria of ‘good governance’.

<b>M.C.C.</b>	Millennium Challenge Corporation, a U.S. government establishment that provides economic aid to those who prove to meet the criteria of ‘good governance’.
<b>Mujahadeen/Jihadi</b>	Refers to Islamic freedom fighters, although of late used interchangeably with Jihadi, which refers to one who fights a holy war against an oppressor.
<b>N.A.T.O.</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. A Western military alliance.
<b>Northern Alliance</b>	A military-political organization comprised of various ethnicities that had been based in northern Afghanistan.
<b>O.E.F.</b>	Operation Enduring Freedom
<b>Pashtunistan</b>	A large area of southern and eastern Afghanistan and western and southern Pakistan comprised mainly of ethnic Pashtuns.
<b>Pashtunwali</b>	A traditional Pashtun code of ethics, and honor which predates Islam.
<b>P.D.P.A.</b>	People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan, the former communist party prior to and during the Soviet invasion.
<b>Politburo</b>	The Soviet communist executive committee effectively controlled nearly all governance.
<b>P.R.T.</b>	Provincial Reconstruction Team
<b>Shariah law</b>	Islamic law comprising of both civil and criminal justice according to Islamic tradition.
<b>Shi’a</b>	Second largest sect of Islam, who believe Mohammed’s cousin, Ali, was his rightful heir as leader of Islam.
<b>S.I.P.R.I.</b>	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

<b>Sunni</b>	Largest sect of Islam, who believed that Mohammed's successor should be selected by the people.
<b>Taliban</b>	A Wahhabi Islamist political entity that rule Afghanistan in the late 1990's, before starting an insurgency after their overthrow.
<b>Ulema</b>	Islamic legal scholars.
<b>U.A.V.</b>	Unmanned aerial vehicle.
<b>U.N.</b>	United Nations
<b>USAID</b>	United States Agency for International Development
<b>U.N.A.M.A.</b>	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
<b>Wahhabi</b>	A conservative Sunni Islamic sect, based on the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, an 18 <sup>th</sup> century scholar.
<b>Wikileaks</b>	A non-profit organization that acts as a whistleblower entity, whilst keeping its sources anonymous.
<b>W.M.D.</b>	Weapons of mass destruction.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

*What did they accomplish in Afghanistan? They evicted the Taliban government from Kabul, but it centered itself in the villages and mountains – where the real power of Afghanistan lies.<sup>1</sup>*

-Ayman Al-Zawahiri

Deputy leader of Al Qaeda, former leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad.

Al Qaeda has long been a hot topic of focus for national governments, international and organizations, and academics for the last decade. Its impact on the conventional wisdom regarding international security and the position of the nation-state as the sovereign actor in conflict cannot be understated. The invasion of Afghanistan, after the September 2001 attacks on the U.S. brought to the fore a number of related and complex questions. A military intervention was launched in a third party country (Afghanistan), whose government (the Taliban) provided shelter to the main suspects (the al Qaeda network) of a terrorist action on foreign soil (the United States). Now, a decade later, the question is whether that intervention has accomplished any concrete results in dismantling the al Qaeda network, whilst simultaneously attempting to stabilize Afghanistan after decades of war.

As a result, since September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, the issue of international security has become invariably linked with the issue of transnational terrorism as a result of the attacks on New York and Washington D.C. Such an attack on the world's lone superpower was bound to bring a change of focus in academic research on the topic of terrorism. With the attack being planned and carried out by al Qaeda, a radical Islamic terrorist entity, the focus also came to center on Afghanistan, which had been deemed one of the world's poorest and most war-ridden nations. Their status as guests of the Taliban regime in Kabul had marked the Afghan government as the main target of America's reprisal, and their subsequent ousting from power had posed a number of questions – not least revisiting a key 1990's issue raised by the wars in former Yugoslavia, namely that of nation-building.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Al Qaeda Reader*. New York City: Broadway, 2007. Print. Pg 176

However, as the American-led intervention in Afghanistan slowly turned into a drawn out occupation, the capture of al Qaeda high value targets being illusive, and the progress of the Afghan conflict being questioned, the results thus far have not appeared to be overwhelmingly positive. The Afghan war has now surpassed most of the major conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in terms of duration (both World Wars, the Korean War, Gulf War, and the Iran-Iraq war), and will have surpassed the length of the Soviet intervention in the country on November 28<sup>th</sup> 2010, for a total of 3339 days. Such an ominous landmark should pose a number of questions about the current Western presence in the country, and leads to the introduction of this book.

This book will be seeking to answer a rather interesting research question, which is whether al Qaeda poses a threat from within Afghanistan, which is a key argument used by the West for a continued presence in the country, as well as what would be required in order to stabilize Afghanistan. On the surface, one would be forgiven to feeling perplexed as to how such a question can be tackled, with one focusing on what is known in the West as a terrorist organization, and the other issue being a long and increasingly difficult insurgency eroding at the fabric of an already weak state. The answer lies within the Western strategy itself, which has used its presence in Afghanistan as both a counter terrorist force against supposed al Qaeda remnants as well as a stabilizing variable that can help to shore up the reach and power of the Afghan central government. This strategy has been ongoing since the invasion itself, and it is only in the last several years that it is coming into question more widely, as the years creep along and allied casualties continue to increase.

The research question itself reflects the progress, or lack thereof, made in the war to date. With the West, particularly the United States and its N.A.T.O. allies, investing so much in terms of manpower and finance in Afghanistan (with N.A.T.O. arguably using the war to prove its relevance in a post Cold War, multipolar world); it is vital to attempt to establish a bridge between what is perceived as al Qaeda's present threat to the West and the achievement of stability in Afghanistan. Whilst many commentators and academics have often analyzed either al Qaeda or the war in Afghanistan, they have rarely done both simultaneously in detail. As a result, one of the main focuses of this thesis will be to establish whether al Qaeda currently presents a threat as the conventional, centralized terrorist organization depicted by the media and

Western governments; and whether the emphasis placed by Western powers on Afghanistan is justified under the pretext to ensure Bin Laden and his supporters do not return to the country. A comparison will be drawn between what threat may be posed by al Qaeda in its current form, and the result of the Western powers and Afghan government failing to bring stability to Afghanistan itself. The dissertation will seek to deeply scrutinize the Western narrative for the occupation of Afghanistan.

In order to tackle the research question, the book will begin by analyzing the issue of al Qaeda as a transnational terrorist organization and the type of threat that it currently poses, in order to juxtapose the al Qaeda of the present with that which had struck on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. In the next chapter, the focus will shift to Afghanistan's own historic and political development in light of foreign interventions and the results those have had on country's political trajectory. Chapter 5 recounts the U.S. handling of the war by the Bush and Obama administrations (until the time of writing), and what progress had been made utilizing the strategy of both nation-building and counter terrorist operations to date. Finally, the sixth chapter looks at Afghanistan and explores the various areas in which the country's development has been lacking.

This research comes at an appropriate time, with the West's own economic issues being a sensitive topic due to the recession which began in late 2007, and the Western public's growing antipathy towards the war effort in Afghanistan pushing events towards a hasty withdrawal. The structure of the book has been done in a manner which will allow an analysis of the U.S.-led Afghan strategy in detail, and effectively dividing it into its counter terrorist and nation-building pillars with in depth background information on both Afghanistan and al Qaeda, and the synergy (or lack thereof) which has existed between the two over the years. This is done in order to ascertain whether al Qaeda's metamorphosis as a terrorist organization or whether Afghanistan's instability should be the prime focus for a continued Western presence in the country, if that same presence is determined to be required at all.

The implications of the war in Afghanistan on international relations is certain to help steer the discourse of future interventions in hotspots all over the globe for the next generation. Scholars, historians and government policy makers alike will be analyzing the war for years to come, with the Afghan story being rich with a number of issues, with repercussions for the conflict itself, and other future conflicts alike. It touches upon nation-building and failed states, humanitarian issues, counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, and the future of conflict in underdeveloped nations. Like the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, and the American experience in Vietnam, it will be dissected and argued about for years, if not decades, to come - well after the last Western soldier has left the country. Afghanistan currently represents the future of foreign intervention and counterterrorism operations, and the variety of issues which fall in between. As a result, it is deserving of an in depth analysis, which this book seeks to provide.

### **Methodology**

I had chosen this topic as the focus of my book as I had felt that it was an area in which so many of the key questions facing International Relations, such as transnational threats to established nation states and nation-building initiatives, could be tackled under the umbrella of one topic. With the attention of the U.S. and the West at large focusing once again on their mission in Afghanistan, it felt necessary to revisit and analyze some of the key points and arguments that had been made on the subject over the period of the last several years.

Conducting research on an ongoing topic such as Afghanistan and al Qaeda posed a number of interesting challenges. One notable example was lack of availability of research from a non-Western standpoint in English, as well as the inability to travel to Afghanistan in order to obtain first-hand research without risking life and limb in the prevailing circumstances at the time of writing.

Although the theories of International Relations have been used in parts throughout the book, this research mainly comprises of empirical sources. These sources had been a mixture of primary sources, such as the Congressional Research Service papers, N.A.T.O. and U.S. government documents; as well as secondary sources such as peer-reviewed journals, newspaper

reports (in order to include the most up to date information on the topic) and books written by experts and analysts amongst others. I had chosen to use these sources in order to provide a balance of official reports and data (primary sources) and analytical critiques (secondary sources) on the issues of Afghanistan and al Qaeda. These had been juxtaposed in order to depict the scale of the topic and the conflicting interpretations of the policies being enacted.

On the one hand, conducting research about an ongoing topic such as this one poses a number of problems, as one can come to a reasonable conclusion based on the data available at the time of writing, only for events to occur in Afghanistan several days later that would render the conclusion irrelevant or incorrect. As a result, it was essential to use the research available in order to provide the most accurate analysis possible, whilst allowing for events to alter the circumstances somewhat, and being able to make the necessary amendments as time elapsed and new information transpired.

The data used throughout the book had been gathered between July 2008 until October 2010. The situation in Afghanistan, as well as the questions revolving around al Qaeda as a militant entity, have been ongoing since 2001, and the conclusions reached at the end of this book are relevant at the time of concluding the book, which had been October 2010.

There had been some limitations in the regards of research material. In order to obtain a larger amount of data, I had travelled to London (specifically, the International Institute for Strategic Studies) in January 2010 in order to obtain new research material in order to supplement that which I had found locally, through online book retailers, such as Amazon and Barnes & Noble, and via online databases such as JSTOR amongst others. The I.I.S.S. in London had a wealth of information on Afghanistan, al Qaeda, nation building, and terrorism in general. The information I had found there had been more than sufficient for me to complete this book, as I had also found a number of primary source materials, such as Congressional Research documents, and N.A.T.O. and U.S. government reports on Afghanistan which had been invaluable to my research and overall understanding of the topic.

Another issue which had to be dealt with was that of the language of the research that had been available. The research material which I had found had been in the English language, as my level of understanding of French is limited, whilst I do not have an understanding of Arabic, Pashto or Dari (the latter being the official languages spoken in Afghanistan). Inevitably, the research found often portrays the topics from a Western point of view, although I tried to temper this by using material from non-Western academics such as Tariq Ali, Ahmed Rashid, and Col. Muhammad Yahya Effendi, who are all of Pakistani descent. Unfortunately, academic research conducted by Afghans proved to be difficult to find, and those that had been available were not available in an English translation. Thus, there had been limitations in the scope and balance of the research material available, which I had made every effort to balance in order to conduct an impartial piece of analytical work.