

Syed Saleem Shahzad. *Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban: Beyond Bin Laden and 9/11*. London: Pluto Press, 2011. 272 pp. ISBN: 9780745331010. US \$ 21.65/ UK £ 17.99.

Reviewed by Richard Phelps

To understand the origins of Al-Qaeda, one's eye must focus on Cairo and Riyadh. Yet mere knowledge of Arab politics will offer only limited help in understanding the evolution of the historic Al-Qaeda organisation in the years following 9/11. Based in Pakistan and Afghanistan, it is instead an understanding of the militant landscapes of these frontiers that will be of greater benefit for understanding "Al-Qaeda Central". This is what the Pakistani journalist Saleem Shahzad offers in his remarkable account of the of Pakistan's militant underground.

Numerous journalists continue to dine out on the experience of having interviewed Osama bin Laden during the 1990s. The insight that such journalists can offer as a result of what undoubtedly proved to be curious and once-in-a-lifetime experiences is, however, questionable. After all, the Al-Qaeda leadership welcomed such journalists as the recipients of their press releases: the more the merrier. By contrast, those with high-level militant access in the post-9/11 period have understandably been few and far between. In this way, Shahzad stands out in his success in making contact with leaders within Pakistan's clandestine movements, and his writing benefits a great deal from the details that such encounters provide him with. Shahzad's proximity cost him, as his new book went to press, his life. Shahzad was murdered after publishing a newspaper article – the basis of which he doubtless gleaned from his militant contacts. For some, he knew too much.

What *Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban* offers is a survey unlike any other of the militant landscape in Pakistan since 9/11. What emerges is a picture very different from the popular account that presents al-Qaeda Central as a spent and marginal organisation long prior to the death of Bin Laden, with only about a hundred fighters remaining after having been devastated by US drone strikes. Whilst the latter point is not disputed, the above picture overlooks what Shahzad presents: an Al-Qaeda that has grown away from its Arab roots of exiled "strangers" into a Pakistani-staffed organisation that has developed deep roots in the country by piggybacking on the infrastructure of existing local networks, many of which have access to the state's resources through patronage from the military.

Such a presentation is reflected in Shahzad's access to Ilyas Kashmiri, the reclusive Pakistani militant leader whose death shortly after Bin Laden's was arguably far more damaging to the organisation in operational terms than the Al-Qaeda leader's own slaying. Kashmiri's background was that of a veteran of various Islamist militant networks in Kashmir, long-sponsored by Pakistan's military and intelligence apparatus in its conflict with India. Yet Kashmiri moved away from such sponsorship, and became as comfortable targeting Pakistan's

military as he was targeting India's. By doing so, he earned a seat on Al-Qaeda's leadership council.

The underworld that Shahzad presents is complex. It consists of the Afghan Taliban, a slew of Kashmiri militant groups, other Pakistani anti-Shi'a militants, former Pakistani army officers, the Pakistani Taliban, the Haqqani network, al-Qaeda as well as other foreign militants such as Uzbeks, who also operate from Pakistan. What he presents is the blurring and interweaving of these nebulous groups. Shahzad describes disaffected officers quitting the Pakistani military and pressuring their comrades to follow suit, before targeting the officers they previously answered to, all the while still making use of military facilities. Little is as it appears to be in the world that Shahzad presents: for example, the Iranian regime allows NATO troops to transport equipment through Iran in order to sustain the occupation in Afghanistan; Al-Qaeda supports Jundallah (an Iranian Sunni Islamist organisation that targets the Iranian regime) yet after an Iranian diplomat named Heshmatollah Attarzadeh was kidnapped in Pakistan in 2008, Iranian intelligence officers became close to Al-Qaeda's interlocutors during the course of their negotiations for his release and ended up releasing many of the Al-Qaeda leaders that Iran had earlier detained when they fled from Afghanistan.

Shahzad's presentation is granular, and offers a profile of several Al-Qaeda figures that few will previously have heard of. For example, Shahzad presents Sheikh 'Isa al-Masri, a septuagenarian Egyptian dissident cleric who learned Pashtu and rooted himself among Pakistani tribesman of North Waziristan, earning a loyal militant following by so doing. The strength of this book is the alternative picture it presents. Yet Shahzad errs half way through the book by offering a lengthy interruption that analyses the ideology and Arab politics that gave rise to Al-Qaeda in a way that is both tiring and unsophisticated. The book could have done without this. Similarly, both the structure of the book and Shahzad's style of writing are frustrating: Shahzad hops back and forth in a number of places, making the book seem repetitive in spite of its novelty; likewise, every couple of pages he insists on stating that Al-Qaeda's situation in Pakistan is reminiscent of a drama from *Thousand and One Nights*.

Though tempering the overall feel of the book, one must overlook such imperfections in presentation in order to benefit from the content Shahzad offers. Though the numbers he cites seem exaggerated, he nevertheless presents an alarming situation regarding Pakistan, in which the state's writ is increasingly surrendered, the army is an institution rotten to the core, and high levels of hatred, extremism, and violence circulate in an underworld populated by thousands of militants. S.S. Shahzad, the Pakistan Bureau Chief of *Asia Times Online*, however, was not killed by this underworld but apparently at the order from someone in the upperworld, with the ISI as most likely suspect.

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