

## THE AL QAEDA GAMBLE, TEN YEARS ON

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Americans commemorated with great solemnity the tenth anniversary this year of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. President Obama journeyed to all three sites where hijacked airliners had crashed, with the largest loss of life ever recorded in a terrorist strike. Al Qaeda's audacious blow against the world's most powerful state abruptly shifted global attention to the designs and ambitions of ultra-conservative Islamic extremists.

Before those attacks, no one would have imagined that the United States would dispatch a hundred thousand troops to a remote, landlocked country that even during the cold war it was happy to leave alone as a neutral country content to play off its Soviet and Chinese neighbors against each other and the Americans. No one would have imagined that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization would be leading a military operation so far from the territory of any of its member states.

Certainly no one would have predicted that NATO's latest aspiring entrants, such as the Baltic republics, would be expected to contribute modestly to the collective effort, with 235 Lithuanian troops in Afghanistan ten years later. Lithuanians would be among the few in the International Security Assistance Force who might have collective memories of Afghanistan lodged into their subconscious from their involuntary participation in the Soviet Union's fraternal intervention of the 1980s on behalf of Kabul's cornered Communists.

The attacks forced a drastic reordering of the international agenda. The new American administration of George W. Bush had spent its first seven months in office trying to curb what its senior officials had seen as the Clinton administration's excessive accommodation of traditional cold-war adversaries--especially North Korea, Russia, and China. After Al Qaeda struck, Washington found deep interests in common with Russia and China in a global war on terror.

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And, of course, the vast military machine the United States had built during the cold war and continued to update and improve after its end sprang into action, in the first large-scale war since Iraqi forces' expulsion from Kuwait in 1991.

Many wondered what the Al Qaeda strategists who conceived the attacks expected to be the consequence. Did they not imagine that if the attacks succeeded in destroying their targets (as the New York attacks devastatingly did), the Americans would react, not with a pinprick cruise missile strike on Al Qaeda training camps, but with crushing force to expel Al Qaeda and its Taliban protégés from Afghanistan? Did it not occur to them that they were jeopardizing the one ally in the world they had – the Taliban “emirate” that had given them sanctuary and bases?

What were they thinking?

We now have a pretty clear idea of what they imagined would follow their bold stroke, thanks to the investigative reporting of a courageous Pakistani investigative journalist, Saleem Shahzad, who paid for his reporting with his life just after his book, *Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban*<sup>1</sup>, was published last spring. Evidently, they expected to incite a *Götterdämmerung*.

Al Qaeda's leaders intended their attacks of September 11 to suck the United States into a debilitating war in a distant, landlocked Muslim country – a war that would so outrage Muslims everywhere that it would incite a worldwide Islamic uprising against America and its apostate Muslim minions. And in remote, inaccessible Afghanistan Al Qaeda would spring the trap, just as its leaders had sprung the trap on the atheistic Soviet occupation forces who—despite having a long border with Afghanistan – found themselves in a militarily untenable position.

“You will lose this Crusade Bush began,” Osama bin Laden told<sup>2</sup> Americans after the United States struck back, “humiliated by the hands of the Mujahideen.” The Americans' fate, he confidently predicted, “will be that of the Soviets who fled from Afghanistan to deal with their military defeat, political breakup, ideological downfall, and economic bankruptcy.”

Were Al Qaeda's leaders as smart about grand strategy as they were about the tactics of the most notorious suicide attack in history?

<sup>1</sup> See: <http://www.plutobooks.com/display.asp?K=9780745331010>

<sup>2</sup> See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/nov/24/theobserver>

Certainly the gut-wrenching attacks that leveled New York's Twin Towers did succeed in drawing world attention to Al Qaeda. They certainly woke up the Bush administration to the pernicious development of Al Qaeda capacities, and prompted the president's global strategists to set aside the cold war lenses that had obscured the jihadist threat.

The attacks even paid a dividend the plotters had not anticipated, as Osama bin Laden was reliably reported to have told visitors in October 2001: Sales of the Qu'ran in Western countries soared, as Westerners sought to understand what kind of holy book could inspire men to such acts. But disappointingly, book sales did not translate into conversions.

Much greater, and more consequential, disappointments lay ahead.

Embarrassingly, most Afghans rushed to welcome the infidel intervention. The Taliban emirate disintegrated with remarkable speed. Inconveniently, it fell not to American troops, but to Afghans -- the armed factions of the Northern Alliance that had persisted in resistance to Taliban supremacy in a tiny sliver of the country.

Al Qaeda leaders thoughtfully took the precaution of arranging for suicide attackers to assassinate the charismatic leader holding the quarrelsome Northern Alliance factions together, Ahmad Shah Massoud, on 9 September. But the dispirited resistance pulled together once the 9/11 attacks put America's air force and special forces teams at their disposal, and it was their fighters that marched into Kabul and other Afghan cities. (Indeed, this is what permitted the discredited Northern Alliance "warlords" to re-entrench themselves on the ground before the United Nations conference in Bonn in December 2001 could hammer out agreement on an interim government led by Hamid Karzai, who had no men with guns at all.)

Alas for Al Qaeda, the rest of the Muslim world did not rise up in outrage at the ouster of Al Qaeda and the Taliban from Afghanistan either. The rule of rigid rural clerics in Islam's most poor and peripheral outpost had never much impressed Muslims in the Arab world or South Asia. Even Pakistan, despite its tight alliance with the Taliban, sided with America in its "war on terror" and provided it vital access to landlocked Afghanistan to clean out the Qaeda abscess.

And the dramatic refocusing of the attention and assets of nations' intelligence agencies - led by those of the United States--on the deadly threats

posed by Al Qaeda's internationally far-flung jihadi network proved remarkably effective in tracking down and weeding out its leadership ranks.

Al Qaeda's great gamble seemed lost. But a series of strategic blunders by Washington evened the score.

Conservative ideologues carried the day in Washington as Taliban leaders and fighters melted across the border into Pakistan. The United Nations should have a "light footprint," with no peacekeeping force to help secure the country; the only peacekeepers would be in Kabul, and they would rotate in and out from various NATO countries. There would be no U.N. reconstruction effort; a handful of Western powers divided up responsibilities for Afghan reconstruction that were inevitably uncoordinated and largely ineffective.

There would be no effort to entice senior officials of the deposed Taliban emirate into the political process unfolding in Kabul. Scorned as "dead-enders" and "a spent force," they found no place in the constitution-writing process for the nascent Islamic republic that Karzai was leading, despite the pleas of U.N. special representative Lakhdar Brahimi.

Fatefully, Afghanistan was left largely to fend for itself, with scarecrow military forces and reconstruction aid, as Washington's attention too quickly moved on. Already by mid-2002, U.S. military and economic resources were being shifted out, as a capital giddy from the seemingly easy success of American arms in Afghanistan decided to launch a second campaign in the name of a war on terror.

Intent on toppling a defiant and unrepentant secular leader in the heart of the Arab world (and, some advocates argued, securing a "new American century" in the process), the United States aimed directly at Baghdad, epochal center of Islam's most brilliant days under the Abbasid caliphate a millennium ago. Unintentionally, it salvaged Al Qaeda's failed strategy of 9/11.

For an Arab world already profoundly alienated by American support for Israel's ongoing occupation in Palestine, the unprovoked invasion of Iraq incited a furious backlash. It generated waves of new recruits to Al Qaeda's *jihad*, and opened a new direct front against U.S. power. Washington accelerated recruitment through widely reported abuse of detainees in Iraq and Guantánamo and the resort to torture – directly by its own agents or by subcontracting to brutal Arab security services, including Moammar Qaddafi's in Libya.

Insurgents in Iraq pioneered new techniques of "resistance" unknown to the Taliban – such as suicide bombings against civilians and ever more so-

phisticated explosive devices against U.S. troops – that migrated back to Afghanistan and threw U.S. forces and their hapless Afghan allies in Kabul on the defensive.

Moreover, many Afghans too, who had been untroubled by the U.S. presence in their country when it deposed the grating Taliban regime in self-defense after 9/11, began to see American motives in a different light after the invasion of Iraq. Anatol Lieven finds the same shift in *Pakistan: A Hard Country*.

In the immediate wake of 9/11, to judge by my researches in Pakistan in 2001-2, the US move into Afghanistan was accepted with surprisingly little protest by most Pakistanis, and there was some willingness to accept Al Qaeda's responsibility. The invasion of Iraq, however, and the mendacious arguments used by the Bush administration to justify the invasion, appeared to confirm every Muslim fear about the American threat to the Muslim world.

The disastrous impact of this invasion in Pakistan is reflected in the fact that it retrospectively destroyed the justification for the Afghan war as well, as far as most Pakistanis are concerned.

Security in Afghanistan began to erode, even as multiple insurgent groups challenged the United States in Iraq. Washington reconsidered the utility of multilateral operations in the Afghan theater, and won NATO's collective assent to deployment and command of a security assistance force across the country. By the end of 2008, as the Afghan government's authority swooned and the Taliban re-entrenched itself in Afghanistan's south and east, President Bush felt compelled to order a major reinforcement of the American troop presence there – which Barack Obama followed with even larger troop increases before initiating, in late 2011, a gradual draw-down.

Al Qaeda strategists worked feverishly again to re-set the trap on the eastern front, according to Shahzad, seeking to break Pakistan's formal cooperation with Washington's war effort and cut off the supply line essential to its forces. Militant groups in wild frontier provinces bloodily challenged the Pakistani army, and others launched terrorist attacks against India aimed at triggering an Indo-Pakistani war. They came appallingly close to succeeding with their spectacular assault on Mumbai in late 2008, and were frustrated only by energetic American diplomacy in the dying days of the Bush administration.

At the same time, however, the world's attention was understandably focused on a global financial meltdown that was rapidly spreading fears of a new world

depression to rival the disaster of the 1930s. While he would have been wrong yet again, Bin Laden could be forgiven for thinking the immense military expenditure that Washington undertook after his 9/11 attacks was leading it to the economic bankruptcy he had predicted.

But Osama bin Laden is no longer here to weigh the successes and failures of his grand strategy. Ten years on, the Al Qaeda network has been decimated, of which his extrajudicial removal in May is the symbolic centerpiece.

The Obama administration is extricating the United States from the poisonous occupation of Iraq. The United States is once again honoring the international convention, and domestic law, that barred torture. The Afghan war remains problematical, but Washington now signals a readiness to negotiate, including the terms of its troops' withdrawal.

Most remarkably, a wave of popular uprisings is indeed bringing down repressive Arab regimes - but they are falling with Obama's backing, not Al Qaeda's. That in itself suggests how much has changed in the past ten years.