

The Manhattan Raid

The coordinated suicide attacks of September 11, 2001, were the first major foreign assaults on American soil since 1814, when the British Army and Royal Navy bombarded the city of Baltimore. The attacks of 9/11, as all have come to know those events, also marked the second most violent day in U.S. history, with 2,793 deaths.¹ Only the battle of Antietam on September 17, 1862, surpassed this figure. Even the casualties on D-Day and at Pearl Harbor were lower.

September 11 was a costly day not just in lives lost or families broken apart. The property damage and lost productivity alone probably exceeded \$100 billion. The economic implications of the attack on Wall Street in terms of lower profits and economic volatility pushed the price tag up even further, as high as \$2 trillion according to some estimates.²

Americans should now know a great deal more about the origins of and planning for what al Qaeda calls the Manhattan Raid. They know when the plot was hatched, when key members of the conspiracy were informed of it, what its role model was (an earlier hijacking in Algiers), what arguments arose over the timing of the attack, who trained the plotters and where, and, most important, what their objective was. And yet many in America fail to comprehend the realities surrounding the assault. That ignorance leaves the United States vulnerable to committing the same policy errors that helped lead to 9/11 and to the quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan that flowed from it.

In large part the public's ignorance and vulnerability are a result of a decision by the George W. Bush administration not to clearly explain to the American people the nature of the enemy, namely al Qaeda. The president chose to declare war not on al Qaeda, but on "terrorism," a concept that he and Vice President Dick Cheney arrived at by confusing 9/11 with Saddam Hussein's Iraq. They have also argued that the attacks were motivated by a hate for America's "freedom." As former governor of Arkansas Michael Huckabee has written, "The Bush administration has never adequately explained the theology and ideology behind Islamic terrorism or convinced us of its ruthless fanaticism. The first rule of war is 'know your enemy' and most Americans do not know theirs."³

One has only to look at the opinion polls on Saddam Hussein's role in the 9/11 attacks. Even two years after the attacks, seven out of ten Americans—a clear majority—believed that Saddam was personally involved.⁴ Yet by that time experts who had studied the evidence agreed almost unanimously that there was no link between Iraq and the 9/11 atrocities. The Bush-Cheney administration did nothing to disabuse Americans of these erroneous impressions.

What is more remarkable is that this misperception lingered several more years. A Zogby poll in September 2006 found 46 percent of Americans still believed Saddam was connected to the attacks, and among Republican voters the figure jumped to 65 percent.⁵ By that time the only significant evidence even remotely connecting Iraq to the attacks—an alleged meeting in Prague in mid-2001 between one of the hijackers, Mohammed Atta, and an Iraqi intelligence officer—had not only been generally discounted but also formally recalled by the Czech intelligence service, which had originally produced the report and subsequently admitted to a case of mistaken identity.

Indeed, even as the events were unfolding, intelligence experts like myself had no doubt that the responsibility lay with Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda organization. The attacks had all the hallmarks of al Qaeda and were preceded by months of warning that an assault on America was coming. Gary Schroen, one of my colleagues who led the first CIA team into Afghanistan after 9/11 to hunt for bin Laden, remembers the day at CIA headquarters in Langley this way: "As soon as the second aircraft smashed into the second tower, everyone said, 'Bin Laden. It was bin Laden. This isn't an accident; this isn't some tragedy that, you know,

that's some tragic accident. This is the attack that bin Laden's been promising.'"⁶ I came to exactly the same conclusion at the White House at the same time and told National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice.

Al Qaeda has not been bashful about the raid. It has put out extensive commentaries on the purpose and planning of the attack on each subsequent anniversary of the crashes, often including the martyrdom testimonies of the terrorists taped before September 11 in video format. Several of 9/11's key planners, most notably Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, have been captured and debriefed and their stories made public by the 9/11 Commission. Journalists and scholars have tracked the planning and the movements of the perpetrators in detail. Key players like then CIA director George Tenet have published their memoirs of what they knew and what they learned after the fact.

What, then, are the actual facts? First, the operation was inspired by a terrorist attack that took place six years earlier. On December 24, 1994, four Algerian terrorists dressed as policemen took control of Air France's flight 8969 as it prepared for takeoff at Houari Boumediene International Airport in Algiers. On board were 220 passengers and 12 crew members bound for Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris. The Algerian authorities surrounded the plane and refused to let it depart. The terrorists then began executing hostages until the plane was allowed to leave late on December 25.

French counterterrorism authorities learned that the terrorists were planning to crash the aircraft into the Eiffel Tower to cause a mass-casualty disaster in Paris. They persuaded the terrorists to let the plane land in Marseilles on the pretext that it was running short of fuel. Once in Marseilles, the terrorists demanded that the plane be fueled to its maximum capacity: 27 tons of jet fuel, far more than needed to get to Paris and a clear indication of their intention to crash into the tower. Elite French commandos then stormed the aircraft and in an intense firefight killed all four terrorists and saved the hostages. Eleven commandos, thirteen passengers, and three crew members were injured. Although filled with explosives, the aircraft did not blow up because the detonators were not properly wired together.

At the time, I was serving as the CIA's national intelligence officer for the Near East and South Asia, with a special concern for Algeria because of the growing strength of the Islamist jihadist movement there. As I fol-

lowed the events in Algeria and France, it was clear to me and other observers that the idea of using an aircraft as a guided missile to attack a target on the ground meant a new and horrific threshold had been crossed in international terrorism. Save for the French commandos and their counterterrorism expertise, 9/11 would have happened on Christmas 1994.

The counterterrorism community was not the only one keeping an eye on this incident. Terrorists were watching too—including Osama bin Laden and a young Pakistani, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, or KSM, as he is known in the intelligence world—and were inspired by it. In 1994 KSM was already planning terrorist operations involving aircraft. He and the mastermind of the first attack on the World Trade Center, Ramzi Yusuf, were working on a plot to blow up several American aircraft flying over the Pacific.

The plot to attack the United States began in earnest in 1999, after al Qaeda carried out its first major operations against American targets, the simultaneous bombings of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Bin Laden and KSM began hatching their plan after meeting at bin Laden's headquarters in Kandahar, in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.⁷ The original idea was of even greater proportions than what transpired on 9/11: it was to have a West Coast component to match the attacks on the East Coast, with a total of ten aircraft smashing into targets in the District of Columbia, Virginia, New York, California, and Washington State. KSM was eager to use his connections with jihadists in Southeast Asia, particularly the Indonesian terrorist group Jemaah Islamiyah, with which he had developed a close personal connection while in Afghanistan and the Philippines.

Bin Laden decided this was too ambitious and ordered the plotters to focus on the East Coast but to keep open the option to follow it up with a second wave in California. The first two operatives entered the United States from Malaysia on January 15, 2000, at Los Angeles International Airport, ironically the target of an earlier foiled al Qaeda plot, in December 1999.

In early 2000 bin Laden personally recruited the plot's tactical leader, Mohammed Atta, in Afghanistan. Atta was an Egyptian architect studying in Hamburg, Germany, who came to Kandahar with several colleagues to join al Qaeda. He immediately impressed bin Laden as a smart and ruthless individual, eager to achieve martyrdom. Bin Laden made him the

emir of the Manhattan Raid and dispatched him back to Germany to learn to fly an aircraft. Atta chose to take his flight training in Venice, Florida, instead and arrived in the United States in June 2000.

Bin Laden also personally recruited all the so-called muscle terrorists—the fifteen operatives who would control the passengers during the hijackings—from the large pool of Saudi al Qaeda volunteers in Afghanistan. Fourteen were Saudis and one was from the United Arab Emirates. They entered the United States in late 2000. KSM arranged the logistics and the funding for their travels and those of the pilots, while Atta commanded the team on the ground in the United States. KSM also supervised the training of the muscle in a safe house in Karachi, Pakistan, and in camps in Afghanistan.

The prerecorded wills and final statements of the terrorists reveal a great deal about their motivation. Over the years, al Qaeda has gradually released some of these details on the anniversaries of the attacks. Other such information comes from the testimony of KSM himself after his capture and from bin Laden's own remarks on the attack in several messages since 9/11. In addition, al Qaeda has commented on the attacks extensively in audio and video messages on every anniversary since 2001.

Taken together, these statements clearly indicate that the Arab conflict with Israel, especially the perceived grievances of the Palestinian people, is the all-consuming issue for the terrorists. The Palestinian intifada, the fierce uprising in the fall of 2000 on the West Bank and in Gaza, was a particularly powerful motivating event for the terrorists, KSM, and bin Laden. It had been sparked by the visit of Israeli Likud Party leader Ariel Sharon to the holy mosque in Jerusalem in September 2000. The wills of the terrorists reflect their outrage at the thought of Israelis, especially females, violating the sanctity of Islamic shrines and holy mosques. As terrorist Walid al Shihri put it in his will, released in 2007, "The condition of Islam at present makes one cry. . . . The daughter of Zion plays in the mosques. Dance with pride, daughter of Zion, over our scattered limbs, for we are slaves."⁸ Other grievances mentioned include the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia and Saudi support for the repression of jihad in Syria in 1982.

These several issues form the backdrop of the narrative and ideology of al Qaeda explored in this book. The intifada's power over bin Laden's thinking about the 9/11 raid is underscored by his repeated attempts to

push KSM to advance the timing of the crashes. In September of 2000 he urged KSM to tell Atta to attack immediately to respond to the Sharon visit to the holy sites in Jerusalem; Atta told bin Laden he was not ready yet.

When bin Laden learned that Sharon, who had become Israel's prime minister in March 2001, was going to visit the White House early that summer, he again pressed Atta to attack immediately. And again Atta demurred, arguing he needed more time to get the plan and the team ready to go. Bin Laden agreed to give his emir more time, probably because another key aspect of the plan—the assassination of al Qaeda's main enemy in Afghanistan, the strongest leader in the Northern Alliance, Ahmad Shah Massoud—was not fully ripe for action either.

Bin Laden was also intimately involved in the selection of targets for the Manhattan Raid. He pushed repeatedly to include the White House (where I happened to be sitting the morning of the attacks), despite the difficulty posed by its small size, in contrast to the Twin Towers, the Pentagon, and the Capitol Building. Bin Laden personally handled other essential elements of the plot as well, bringing on board the Taliban—the Afghan militia that hosts al Qaeda in the badlands of Afghanistan and Pakistan—and its leader, Mullah Omar. In his interrogation, KSM suggests the Taliban were uninformed about the Manhattan Raid until the last moment and even pressed bin Laden not to attack American targets. However, other evidence strongly suggests Mullah Omar was well inside the loop much earlier and a partner in the overall plan, if not the details.

For the Taliban leadership, the critical prerequisite to an attack on the United States was another al Qaeda plot in which they had a vital interest, the murder of Massoud, their principal enemy in Afghanistan (see chapter 4). Bin Laden was also in direct command of this plan, which began in 2000 with his recruitment of the Belgian operatives who would carry out the assassination. In her memoirs, the widow of the team leader has given an extensive account of the family's visit to Kandahar, where they stayed at the bin Laden home to prepare and train for the attack on Massoud.⁹

The timing was critical because it had to coincide with the U.S. strike, which in the end it did. Bin Laden and Omar wanted Massoud killed on the eve of 9/11 to decapitate Afghanistan's Northern Alliance and thus render it impotent when America would need it to retaliate. The two operations were interdependent. This, too, was clear to many experts by

midmorning on September 11. Gary Schroen connected those two things as soon as the second aircraft hit: “I was standing in the parking lot at the CIA, saying, ‘Ah, that’s what Massoud’s death was about. It made Mullah Omar indebted to bin Laden for removing his only major enemy.’”¹⁰

The connection is also hinted at in the memoirs of Pakistan’s military dictator, Pervez Musharraf, who says Mullah Omar was aware of the plot against America in 2000 and was initially not pleased with the idea of taking on the United States so directly. In time, however, probably after being briefed on the plot to kill his rival in the north, Omar apparently came around. In any case, as Musharraf notes, he did nothing to stop bin Laden once he learned of the plan.¹¹

Osama was in Kandahar on September 11 and gathered some of his closest lieutenants together to watch the plot unfold on television. Apparently he alone anticipated the magnitude of the destruction, perhaps because of his work in construction for his father, although he was surprised at the total collapse of the two towers. Meanwhile Khalid Sheikh Mohammed watched events unfold in an Internet café in Karachi.¹² He returned to Kandahar later in the month and immediately began working on another plot, this time to repeat 9/11 in London, targeting Heathrow and Canary Wharf and using aircraft hijacked in Eastern Europe. The al Qaeda infrastructure in Saudi Arabia was tasked to find the pilots, but KSM’s capture in Pakistan upset the plot.

From all that bin Laden and other al Qaeda spokesmen have said since 9/11 and the testimony of captured lieutenants like KSM, their objective was to provoke the United States and its allies to retaliate: specifically, to invade Afghanistan and enter into a long and bloody war of occupation in a repeat of the Soviet struggle there in the 1980s. Al Qaeda believed that the United States would bleed to death in the mountains of Afghanistan just as the Soviet Union had bled into collapse at the hands of Afghanistan’s Muslim guerrilla warriors, the mujahedin.

The jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan was a defining event in the lives of the al Qaeda leadership—bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and KSM—and their Taliban host, Mullah Omar. The experience shaped their perception of history and politics. To them, the defeat of the Soviet Fortieth Army was an act of God, and they were the instruments used to accomplish this holy duty, a successful jihad against a superpower. They were (and are) convinced that it would happen again, that the Manhattan

Raid was the opening sortie in a long war that will destroy the United States and compel it to leave the Muslim world and abandon its allies, especially Israel, to their fate.

But bin Laden and Mullah Omar miscalculated. Instead of entering with a heavy footprint that would produce another guerrilla war, the United States made a light counterattack, spearheaded by CIA teams working with the Northern Alliance, which had survived Massoud's death. Backed by American airpower, they defeated the Taliban on the battlefield in a matter of weeks.

Moreover, bin Laden and Omar did not anticipate that their Pakistani friends—who had helped create the Taliban and with whom both had worked for years—would change sides and desert them. The reasons for this betrayal and its temporary character are examined in chapter 4. For now, suffice it to say that Musharraf's change of heart, from being de facto defender of al Qaeda and the Taliban to colluding with the invasion, was quite unexpected.

The invasion in the winter of 2001–02 should have destroyed al Qaeda and the Taliban. The leadership was rapidly cornered along the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Bin Laden was caught between what was supposed to be an American hammer and a Pakistani anvil.

Two events saved him and his organization: the U.S. decision to go to war with Iraq and the Pakistani decision to provoke a crisis with India. Invading Iraq diverted key resources from the job of finding the al Qaeda leadership. As Max Cleland, former U.S. senator from Georgia, noted: "Attacking Iraq after 9/11 was like attacking Mexico after Pearl Harbor."¹³ Key intelligence and military forces were withdrawn from the Afghan-Pakistani borderlands as early as March 2002 to prepare for the war in Iraq. Gary Schroen points out that "the U.S. military did this in order to allow them to regroup and train in preparation for the coming war with Iraq." The best Arabic-speaking CIA collection officers were removed as well.¹⁴ According to Pakistan's ambassador to the United States, Mahmud Durrani, "We had almost licked al-Qa'ida after 9/11 because of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. . . . But what happened? The focus shifted to Iraq big time. This was a rebirth of al-Qa'ida."¹⁵ The hammer was gone.

So was the Pakistani anvil, which had been forced to shift its attention to India. On December 13, 2001, five Kashmiri terrorists from

groups long associated with bin Laden attacked Lok Sabha, the lower house of India's parliament in New Delhi. India blamed Pakistan for harboring the terrorist leadership that ordered this assault and dozens of earlier ones. India mobilized along the border, causing Pakistan to mobilize in turn and divert to the east troops that were needed in the west. For the next year, almost a million soldiers faced each other in a nervous showdown.

It is not clear that diverting forces from the hunt for bin Laden was one of the intentions of the Lok Sabha planners, nor that the real mastermind behind the attack was the Kashmiris on their own, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (which had allegedly trained them), Musharraf and his generals, or al Qaeda. Some believe it was orchestrated by al Qaeda deliberately to allow bin Laden to escape but this remains unproven. Yet the impact was critical. At its moment of greatest peril, the diversion of resources enabled al Qaeda to recover and slip away from the hunt. Although some important al Qaeda figures—Musharraf claims more than 600—were captured in Pakistan, including KSM and Abu Zubayda, the top leadership remained at large.¹⁶

Dozens of works about al Qaeda have appeared since 9/11, but the finest analysis and an outstanding example of its kind is the report of the 9/11 Commission. It covers the events of that day, the operational background of the al Qaeda plot, and the efforts by the Clinton and Bush administrations to foil it. The report relies heavily on the interrogations of KSM and other captured terrorists but also had access to material on the development of al Qaeda compiled by the CIA and other intelligence agencies.

One excellent book about the path to September 11 is the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Looming Tower*, by Lawrence Wright, a seasoned journalist. It will probably remain the definitive work on this aspect of 9/11 for some time. Steve Coll, another renowned journalist, has written the definitive account of the bin Laden family.

This book aims to do something different. Although it reviews al Qaeda's origins and development before 9/11, the bulk of the work is devoted to what happened to the terrorist network afterward. My hope is to explain why the terrorists did what they did and how they justified the largest mass murder in American history. This, then, is a book about the development of al Qaeda's ideology as reflected in the statements of

its senior leadership since 9/11. In aggregate, those commentaries constitute a complex narrative about why al Qaeda went to war with America.

Of course, an important aspect of the story is the immediate objective of the Manhattan Raid, which was to lure the United States into an invasion first of Afghanistan and then of Iraq, so as to replicate the quagmire that brought down the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Part of the discussion is therefore about the leadership's efforts to survive the American counterattack in the winter of 2001–02, its patient reconstruction of a safe haven in Pakistan, its well-planned work to build a trap for the United States in Iraq, and its efforts to overthrow U.S. allies in the Muslim world such as Saudi Arabia.

Since 9/11, al Qaeda or its sympathizers have struck targets the world over: in London, Casablanca, Madrid, Algiers, Istanbul, Mombasa, Bali, Mumbai, New Delhi, Islamabad, Riyadh, Doha, Amman, Sharm al-Shaykh, Taba, Mogadishu, and a host of other places. Almost daily they attack targets in Iraq and Afghanistan. They probably murdered Benazir Bhutto, after a decade of failed attempts. The breadth and audacity of al Qaeda's operations since 9/11 are astounding given the small size of the organization's membership and its extreme notoriety: it is the most wanted organization on the planet with multimillion-dollar rewards posted for all its senior leaders. This is the story that I want to unravel and reveal.

For many of the telling details, I turn to biographical narratives, beginning with the life of Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Egyptian co-leader of al Qaeda and its principal spokesman. Although his life is not as well documented as that of Osama bin Laden, it provides a mine of information on the origins of the jihad. Even more important, since 9/11 Zawahiri has produced dozens of taped messages commenting on the group, its actions, and current events. He has also published several books on the ideology and narrative of al Qaeda. Zawahiri is a central figure in the creation of the terrorist organization and almost certainly would succeed bin Laden upon the latter's death.

Next, I look at the life of al Qaeda's undisputed leader and creator, Osama bin Laden. He is now a larger-than-life, almost mystical figure, known as the man who engineered 9/11 and has escaped justice. Although much has been written about his life, key aspects of it have received insufficient attention, especially his own writings, which clearly explain the reasons behind his campaign of jihadist violence, the 9/11 attacks, and

alienation from his native land, Saudi Arabia. An evil figure, he is without doubt one of the most important men of the current age.

The life of Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban, provides further insight into al Qaeda. Omar is a very secretive man; only a handful of non-Muslims have ever met him. He avoids the press and interviews. He is probably only semiliterate and writes very little. But he created the first and only jihadist state in the Muslim world and was a partner in the attacks of 9/11. Today he has regrouped his Taliban forces and threatens the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's hold on Afghanistan.

The last portrait is of Abu Musaib al-Zarqawi, the leader of al Qaeda's franchise in Iraq and until his death in 2006 a fierce and unrelenting opponent of the American and British occupation. Zarqawi is now a legendary figure among jihadists and the al Qaeda international organization. Rockets fired at Israel are named for him. He brilliantly set an evil trap for George W. Bush and the United States in Iraq and executed it with a ferocity that is remarkable even by al Qaeda's standards.

These four portraits provide a clear indication of al Qaeda's current strategy, laid out in chapter 6. Its three key objectives are to create and nurture "bleeding wars" that will defeat the United States just as the mujahedin defeated the Soviet Union, to build a safe haven in Pakistan for the operational headquarters of the al Qaeda leadership and establish franchises throughout the Islamic world to overthrow pro-American regimes, and to conduct more "raids" on the West like 9/11 and the Madrid and London atrocities, someday perhaps with a nuclear weapon. The ultimate goal is to drive the United States from the Muslim world (the *ummah*), destroy Israel, and create a jihadist caliphate along the lines of the Ottoman Empire at its height.

Perhaps the most important conclusion to emerge from this exploration of al Qaeda's leadership is that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the central all-consuming issue for al Qaeda. Many observers have argued otherwise, claiming that al Qaeda is only a latecomer to the issue, that Arab and Muslim perceptions of injustice arising from the creation of Israel are only tangential to the story of al Qaeda and its appeal, and that al Qaeda has not directly targeted the state of Israel in its history.

On the contrary, Muslims feel a profound sense of wrong about the creation of Israel that infuses every aspect of al Qaeda's thinking and activities and has become the rallying cry used to convince the *ummah* of the

righteousness of al Qaeda's cause. The organization's two key leaders, Zawahiri and bin Laden, decided to become terrorists because of efforts to negotiate a peaceful solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict that would leave Israel in the heart of the Muslim world. Zawahiri opposed the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement and was a minor player in the assassination of Anwar Sadat, the man who more than any other opened the door to such a solution. And as bin Laden's writings underscore, the Oslo peace process of the 1990s turned him into a violent enemy of Saudi Arabia and the United States.

For al Qaeda, the only way to undo the wrong perpetrated against the Arab world is not to negotiate a peace agreement or a bargain between the Israelis and Palestinians, but to destroy Israel. However, its end will come only when its protectors and creators, the United States and Great Britain, are routed and driven from the region, the parties that have made peace with Israel are swept from power, and a united ummah can defeat Israel in battle.

A second major conclusion is that Pakistan is the country most critical to the development and survival of al Qaeda. It is the eye of the storm. Ironically, Pakistan itself has been a prominent victim of jihadist terrorism (recently in the murder of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto) while offering it considerable sponsorship (including a long and intimate relationship with Osama bin Laden). The global jihadist movement was born in Pakistan, in the war to drive the Soviet Union from Afghanistan. The Taliban, too, emerged in Pakistan, in its Islamic schools, the *madrasas*, and was nurtured by the country's intelligence service (interestingly, under the aegis of Bhutto at first). It was in Pakistan that al Qaeda found refuge after the United States intervened in Afghanistan in late 2001. And al Qaeda continues to make Pakistan its home, even as it wages jihad against the state. As Benazir Bhutto wrote just before her death, "My homeland of Pakistan has become the epicenter—the ground zero if you will—of either reconciliation or disaster."¹⁷

Clearly, Pakistan has played a complex but crucial role in the growth of al Qaeda—and will continue to do so. No country is more important for the United States to work with to defeat al Qaeda and jihadism, yet none is a more difficult partner in this venture. Pakistan is the most dangerous country in the world today, where every nightmare of the twenty-first century—terrorism, nuclear proliferation, the danger of nuclear war,

dictatorship, poverty, and drugs—come together in one place. As Mike Huckabee rightly states, “If al Qaeda strikes us tomorrow, the attack will be postmarked ‘Pakistan.’”¹⁸

A final critical point is this: the Sunni-Shia divide that has become a hallmark of Islamic politics in the past decade reverberates in al Qaeda, which since its birth in Afghanistan has been an advocate of extreme Sunnism. The anti-Shia violence promoted by al Qaeda’s leader in Iraq, Abu Musaib al-Zarqawi, was not an aberration but a reflection of fundamental jihadist and al Qaeda thinking. For the Sunni jihadist, Shiism may well be the worst enemy of all because it rejects the principle that the laity can define jihad for itself and instead insists on the primacy of clerical leadership. On a deeper level, al Qaeda’s rejection of Shiism is rooted in centuries of extreme Sunni prejudice against the Shia minority in the ummah.

The clash between Sunni jihadist and Shia thus forces al Qaeda into an antagonistic posture toward the one prominent Shia power on earth today, the Islamic Republic of Iran. That is not to say the two are always in conflict—there have been periods of tacit cooperation, but they are the exception. On the whole, al Qaeda and its sympathizers are more often than not fighting the Shia even as they are battling the West. That has certainly been the case in Afghanistan and in Iraq.

To help elucidate the nature of the struggle against jihadism today, I include a few vignettes from a lifetime spent in the American national security apparatus, especially in the intelligence community. They are provided as glimpses into some of the harsh realities of modern intelligence’s battle against extremism. Many of my colleagues have endured far more costly encounters. Some have made the ultimate sacrifice for defending their country. It is to their memory that I dedicate this account.