

Knowing
the
Enemy

Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror

Mary R. Habeck

Copyright © 2006 by Yale University.

All rights reserved.

This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, including illustrations, in any form (beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law and except by reviewers for the public press), without written permission from the publishers.

Designed by Rebecca Gibb.

Set in Janson text type by Integrated Publishing Solutions.

Printed in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Habeck, Mary R.

Knowing the enemy : jihadist ideology and the War on Terror / Mary R. Habeck.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-300-11306-4 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Terrorism—Religious aspects—Islam. 2. Islam and world politics. 3. War on Terrorism, 2001—. I. Title.

BP190.5.T47H33 2006

297.2'72—dc22

2005015210

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

10987654321

Contents

- 1 Why They Did It 1
- 2 Historical Context 17
- 3 The Qur'an Is Our Constitution 41
- 4 Our *'Aqida* 57
- 5 The Clash of Civilizations, Part I:
The American Campaign to Suppress Islam 83
- 6 The Clash of Civilizations, Part II:
Jihad on the Path of God 107
- 7 From Mecca to Medina:
Following the Method of Muhammad 135

8 Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror 161

NOTES 179

GLOSSARY 233

INDEX 237

Knowing the Enemy

I *Why They Did It*

Immediately after September 11, 2001, Americans agonized over the reason why nineteen men hated the United States enough to kill three thousand civilians in an unprovoked assault. The list of explanations offered by analysts and scholars was long and varied—U.S. policies in the Middle East (most especially America’s support for Israel), globalization, U.S. arrogance, imperialism (cultural, political, and economic), and the poverty and oppression endemic in many Arab countries were all blamed as the root causes for the attacks. Other observers, like President George W. Bush, argued that it was the very existence of the United States that led to the attacks. In this view certain nations and people fear and envy what they do not have for themselves—the freedoms, democracy, power, and wealth of the

United States—and this alone is enough to explain why the towers had to fall.

Among all these explanations the one voice missing was that of the attackers themselves: what were the reasons that they gave for the attack? Their deaths should not prevent us from listening to them, because they belong to a larger extremist group that has not been shy about sharing its views with the entire world. To understand “why they hate us” we therefore need first to know where to look and who listen to: our first question must not be “why do they hate America?” but “*who* is it that hates America enough to kill?” Not all Arabs and not all Muslims chose to carry out the attacks, but rather a particular type of militant with specific views about a need to resort to violence. Knowing who these people are, and what their views are, we will then be able to hear what they themselves say and why they decided to kill as many Americans as possible that September day.

Any answer to this initial question must acknowledge the fact that the hijackers were Muslims and that al-Qaida, the group they were associated with, claimed to carry out the attacks in the name of Islam. But we must be clear about the relationship between these men and the religion of Islam. Just as not all Muslims deliberately murdered three thousand innocents in New York City, Washington, D.C., and rural Pennsylvania, it would also be misguided—even evil—to suggest that all Muslims desired the deaths that happened that day. Indeed, though demonstrations in support of the hijackers and protests against U.S.

policies have occurred since, the “Muslim street” has not risen, taken up arms, and attacked America. The few thousand extremists who are fighting U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq pale in comparison to the bloodshed that would occur if the entire Islamic community decided to kill Americans.

Yet it would be just as wrong to conclude that the hijackers, al-Qaida, and the other radical groups have nothing to do with Islam. As we shall see, these extremists explicitly appeal to the holy texts (the Qur’an and *sunna*, as laid out in the *hadith*) to show that their actions are justified. They find, too, endorsement of their ideas among respected interpreters of Islam and win disciples by their piety and their sophisticated arguments about how the religion supports them. The question is *which* Islam they represent. As the religion of over a billion people, Islam does not present a united face, and it is practiced in a variety of ways: syncretistic forms in Indonesia and Africa; traditional beliefs in rural areas of central Asia, Egypt, Iran, and North Africa; secularized variants in Tunisia, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey; and mystical Sufi sects, which dominate large swathes of the Muslim world. None of these versions of Islam—which encompass the vast majority of the world’s Muslims—have called for a war against the United States. To blame “Islam”—full stop—for September 11 is not only wrongheaded, it is ultimately self-defeating in the struggle that confronts America. By lumping Muslims into one undifferentiated mass it threatens to radicalize the more than billion believers who do not want the United States destroyed.

Some analysts have suggested that the attackers should be identified with “fundamentalism” or “Islamism,” the reforming Islam that calls for a revival of the religion and a “return” of Islam to political power. But Islamism likewise represents neither a unified nor uniform phenomenon. The term describes, rather, a complex of often antagonistic groups with differing beliefs, goals, and methodologies for attaining their ends. Some of these groups (such as Turkey’s Justice and Development Party [the AK]) are committed to democratic processes and to the international system. To identify parties like the AK with the terrorists of 9/11 threatens to confuse rather than clarify the situation. It prevents a differentiation between Islamists with whom one can hold discourse and work with as friends and allies, and the armed gangs who may need to be dealt with through force.

This book will argue that the nineteen men who attacked the United States and the many other groups who continue to work for its destruction—including al-Qaida—are part of a radical faction of the multifaceted Islamist belief system. This faction—generally called “jihadi” or “jihadist”—has very specific views about how to revive Islam, how to return Muslims to political power, and what needs to be done about its enemies, including the United States. The main difference between jihadis and other Islamists is the extremists’ commitment to the violent overthrow of the existing international system and its replacement by an all-encompassing Islamic state. To justify their resort

to violence, they define “jihad” (a term that can mean an internal struggle to please God as well as an external battle to open countries to the call of Islam) as fighting alone.¹ Only by understanding the elaborate ideology of the jihadist faction can the United States, as well as the rest of the world, determine how to contain and eventually end the threat they pose to stability and peace.

Some might object that nationality, social factors, and historical processes are more important than religion in explaining the larger motives of these hijackers and their reasons for carrying out their attack. All nineteen men were Arabs, and fifteen of them even came from one country, Saudi Arabia—surely, supporters of this view argue, such factors must account for their involvement in this heinous act. Public intellectuals such as Edward Said, and experts like Tariq Ali and Tariq Ramadan, have concluded that the colonization of Islamic lands and their (often) forcible Westernization—modernization is cause enough for the radicals to strike out at the United States. In these analyses religion is taken as epiphenomenal; economic, political, and social factors are seen as the basis for any serious explication of the extremists’ actions. The argument of this book, however, is that all these factors (nationality, poverty, oppressive governments, colonization, imperialism) only partially explain a commitment to extremist religious groups. These are important underlying issues that may push Muslims toward some sort of violent reaction, but they do not, by themselves, explain why jihadis have chosen to turn to violence now, and why the extremists offer re-

ligious explanations for all their actions. Muhammad Atta and the other eighteen men who took part in the September 11 attacks were middle-class and well-educated, and had bright futures ahead of them. They participated in the hijackings not because they were forced to do so through sudden economic or social deprivation, but because they chose to deal with the problems of their community—for religious/ideological reasons—by killing as many Americans as they could. Explanations that focus on the negative effects of colonization require similar qualification. Although colonization was certainly a traumatic experience for the Middle East (as it was for the rest of the colonized world), its impact again explains neither the timing nor shape of the current extremism. If the entire purpose of jihadism is to break an imperial stranglehold on the Islamic world—symbolized by U.S. support for Israel—why did the U.S. become the focus of Sayyid Qutb’s anger in the early 1950s (more than a decade before the United States became associated with Israel)? Moreover, how do the effects of colonization account for the fact that one of the earliest jihadist thinkers, Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, developed his version of radical and violent Islam long before the West colonized Islamic lands, indeed at a time when Islam seemed triumphant? Other Islamic extremists in Africa, men like Usman dan Fodio, Muhammad al-Jaylani, and Shehu Ahmadu Lobbo began jihads aimed at restoring “true” Islam before Europeans became a factor in West Africa. Meanwhile Shah Wali Allah articulated a new

vision of forcing Islam on Hindus for their own good—through jihad—at the very same time as Wahhab was preaching his version of offensive jihad against apostate Muslims.

The consistent need to find explanations other than religious ones for the attacks says, in fact, more about the West than it does about the jihadis. Western scholars have generally failed to take religion seriously. Secularists, whether liberals or socialists, grant true explanatory power to political, social, or economic factors but discount the plain sense of religious statements made by the jihadis themselves. To see why jihadis declared war on the United States and tried to kill as many Americans as possible, we must be willing to listen to their own explanations. To do otherwise is to impose a Western interpretation on the extremists, in effect to listen to ourselves rather than to them.

How do the jihadis explain their actions? They say that they are committed to the destruction of the entire secular world because they believe this is a necessary first step to create an Islamic utopia on earth. The chain of thought that leads to this conclusion is complicated and uses reasoning that anyone outside the extremist camp may find hard to fathom. This, as we may expect, matters little to the jihadis. They do not care if their assertions find resonance within any community other than their own, and they use concepts, symbols, and familiar events that appeal to discontented Muslims, not to outsiders. It is also worth emphasizing that they play fast and loose with both historical fact and traditional religious interpretation in order to understand their

past as they believe it must be understood. First, they argue that Islam is meant to be the only way of life for humanity. After earlier versions of the one true religion had become corrupted by willful men, God sent down to mankind the Qur'an and Muhammad to show people how to please Him and how to create the perfect society. The Muslims were those men and women who submitted to Him and His law, and their community (*umma*) was told that they were divinely destined to lead mankind.² Once Muslims were given the Truth, it was now their duty to share with others the way to divine favor and the ideal society. If prevented by unrighteous rulers from doing so, they must fight (wage jihad) to open the country for the call to Islam. In addition, since Islam is a message meant to create a community of believers, jihadis argue that Muslims must live in a society that implements all the laws commanded by God—and as lived out by Muhammad and explained by the learned men of religion (the *ulama*). Not even the least of the ordinances of God can be ignored or flouted. In their vision of history, Muslims did as they were commanded for over a thousand years, spreading the true faith, creating a unified society (the Caliphate, or *Khilafa*) that followed the law system given by God (the *shari'a*), and in return were granted the right to rule the world, dispensing justice and calling people out of darkness and into light.³

Then, in the jihadist account, something went terribly wrong with this God-ordained order. Christians and Jews, followers of the corrupted religions, somehow became the new leaders of

mankind and began to dictate to Muslims how they should live. The Christian Europeans even conquered and occupied Islamic territory and created Israel as a permanent bridgehead in the lands of the umma. Meanwhile, the United States, Europe, and even Japan and other Asian states developed militarily, economically, and politically into superpowers that dominated international politics, finance, the media, popular culture—in sum, all of human life. Every day the community of true believers is publicly humiliated, reminded that it is powerless and ruled by the unbelievers rather than ruling them. These are the “inversed facts,” the predicament that has left nothing in its “right place,” and has “turned life inside out,” making the umma a “dead nation.”⁴

How did this terrible situation come about? Jihadist ideologues offer three basic explanations. One locates the problem in the earliest years of Islam, after the four righteous Caliphs (*al-Rashidun*) were replaced by a hereditary monarchy under the Abbasids. This unlawful system of government led to a variety of intellectual, religious, and political ills.⁵ Politically and religiously, the new monarchy gave rise to despotic rulers who created their own laws rather than implement the God-given law system of shari‘a. The jihadis argue that these tyrants, by ruling with their own laws, actually dethroned God and set themselves up as divine in his place. Today the tyrants still exist—Mubarak, Musharraf, Assad, and the Saudis are all the spiritual heirs of those first hereditary rulers—and are supported in their apostasy

by the United States and other Western countries, which use them as their puppets to undermine Islam and destroy God's laws on earth. Intellectually, jihadis argue that the Abbasids brought an end to reason (*ijtihad*) as a way to adapt Islamic beliefs to changing circumstances. In this view Islamic scholars, until the age of the Abbasids, had the ability to creatively interpret the sacred texts. By imposing one particular school of jurisprudence as the official interpretation of Islam, these Caliphs destroyed the ability of the Muslim nation to react to new threats and challenges.⁶ Precisely the opposite argument is made by most modern scholars, who note that the Abbasids and the Caliphs who followed them attempted to integrate Greek thought into Islam, thus opening the door for human reason to supplement divine revelation. The jihadis will have none of this argument, since for them the intermixing of Greek and Western ideas with Islam only further polluted an already weakened religion. The overthrow of the Abbasids did not undo the damage, for a few hundred years later Islamic jurists announced that they had decided every important legal question, and that therefore "the gates of *ijtihad* were closed." After that, Muslims were told they could only seek out a learned religious leader and follow his example.⁷ Blind imitation led to the stagnation and inflexibility of the Ottoman Empire and, when faced with the challenge of a resurgent Europe, the eventual destruction of Islam as a thriving civilization. The solution of jihadis to this intellectual stagnation is a return to the Qur'an and hadith alone as the only authorities for

their actions. They want to eliminate interpretations and traditions that they see as heretical and, using their own reason, justify their conduct through the sacred texts alone.

Other jihadis believe that the trouble began on 3 March 1924, when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk abolished the Ottoman Caliphate—the religious ruler seen as the only authority for all of Islam. That act, called “the mother of all crimes” by one jihadist professor, spelled an end to “true” Islam.⁸ Despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, jihadis assert that since the death of Muhammad there had existed only one Caliph at a time who ruled the entire community of believers. It was the duty of the Caliph to guard the Muslims, lead them into battle with the infidels, and make certain that good deeds were promoted and evil deeds prevented. Since only under a Caliph recognized by the entire Muslim nation could the shari‘a be fully implemented, the abolition of the Caliphate destroyed Islam. Sayyid Qutb, the main ideologue of modern jihadist groups, argued that this crime meant that so-called Muslims had been living in sin since 1924 and that Islam was no longer being practiced anywhere in the world.⁹

Finally there are jihadis who believe that Muslims lost their dignity and honor through a deliberate assault by “unbelief” on Islam.¹⁰ Since the beginning of time falsehood (*batil*) and unbelief (*kufir*), envisioned as purely evil forces that take on different forms depending on the epoch, have attempted to destroy the one true faith. With the coming of the last prophet, Muhammad,

the conflict between the two sharpened into outright warfare. At that time *kufr* was represented by the unbelieving Jews and Christians who rejected Islam. For over 1,400 years the war raged, with the “Truth” always able to win out in the end, even when Christian crusaders invaded the Muslim homeland in a futile attempt to destroy Islam. Then the latest embodiments of unbelief, Europe and America (still representing the crusaders and the Jews), managed to weaken the *umma* as none of the other forms of unbelief had—colonizing their lands and humiliating them before the entire world.¹¹ In contrast to Western critics of colonialism, who attribute European imperialism to capitalism, power politics, or greed, the jihadis argue that religion alone explains this hostility. The entire purpose of imperialism was, in this view, to destroy Islam and kill as many Muslims as possible. The decline of Islam is thus not mainly the result of internal weaknesses or sin by the Muslims themselves, but is rather the deliberate policy of an external religious enemy whom jihadis can—and do—blame for all the evils suffered by Muslims around the world.

In many ways, the course of action chosen to correct the ills that have befallen Islam and Muslim societies depends upon which of these explanations a particular jihadist group prefers. All jihadis agree that Muslims must “open the doors of *ijtihad*,” allowing every individual to interpret the sacred texts through his own reason (informed by the interpretations of respected *ulama*) rather than blind imitation. The result is the overthrow

of 1,400 years of development in Islamic law and theology, the rejection of any interpretations but those that fit into the preconceived notions of the jihadis, and the creation of hundreds of splinter groups, each convinced that it alone knows the truth about the faith. After these few points of agreement, jihadist groups differ significantly about strategies to return Islam to greatness. Those jihadis who locate the problem in the offenses of Muslims themselves, and particularly in the evil system of monarchy represented today by the rulers in every Islamic country, talk openly about killing these “agents of the West” and replacing them with men who will rule by the shari‘a alone. The jihadis who see the destruction of the Caliphate as the essence of the problem want to recreate an all-encompassing Islamic state (not just one in any individual country), and then go on to conquer the rest of the world for Islam. The group most associated with this view, Hizb al-Tahrir, while refusing to engage in offensive warfare itself until the “restoration” of the Caliphate, nonetheless spends much of its energy inciting Muslims to violence and promoting a defensive jihad to expel the unbelievers. Other jihadis see Europe, the United States, and the Jews—collectively viewed as the modern representative of “unbelief” and “falsehood”—as the sole reason for their decline. To solve their internal problems (poverty, tyrannical governments, and lack of military power), and to end the oppression and aggression of the West, they have decided to concentrate on the destruction of one or the other of these “eternal” enemies.

The September 11 attackers belong to this last category. For these jihadis, fighting under the banner of al-Qaida, the attack on the United States was required of them as defenders of the “true” faith. Al-Qaida believed that the United States, as the greatest representative of “unbelief,” had to be struck a stunning blow, killing as many Americans as possible to frighten the U.S. government into submission (as earlier blows in Beirut and Somalia had), and to begin the ultimate destruction of falsehood around the world. Once the United States had left Islamic lands, ending its “occupation” of Arabia and retreating behind its own borders, they intended to turn their violence upon the unjust rulers of Muslim countries, beginning with the Saudis. After the tyrants had fallen, they would take up the warfare by Islam against the rest of the world—a battle that they believe colonialism interrupted. Al-Qaida hoped as well to provoke the United States into an unconsidered response that would unite the entire Islamic world behind their vision of eternal warfare against the unbelievers.¹² In many ways, then, the attacks of September 11 were as much about convincing other Muslims to join the extremists in their war as it was about killing Americans.

There are, of course, numerous parts of this explanation that make little or no sense to an outside observer. To understand why September 11 happened, and what the jihadis are likely to do in the future, the reader must be willing to suspend cultural and intellectual preconceptions and become submerged in the mindset of the extremists. In this world, historical facts do not

matter, nor do the realities of power balances (military, economic, political, and diplomatic). What is important to the jihadis is getting the fundamentals of life “right.” Once the believers understand these basic principles, and act correctly upon them, everything else will fall into place. In concrete terms jihadis believe that their mission is to implement their version of Islam, including the imperative to carry out warfare against the unbelievers, and all the troubles of the Islamic world will disappear.

Faced with this acutely religious sensibility, the United States, and the West in general, must be willing to lay aside prejudices and be open to hearing what the jihadis themselves are saying. They are telling everyone in the world what they believe and how they will act. The question is whether anyone is listening to them.