

# **THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF AL QAEDA'S IDEOLOGY: UNDERSTANDING AYMAN AL ZAWAHIRI'S VISION AND DEVELOPING AN APPROPRIATE RESPONSE.**

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The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and subsequent Westernisation of the Arab world marked the beginnings of Islamism in Egypt as groups began organising themselves to establish an Islamic state mainly fuelled by a rejection of western dominance and secular influence.

Da'wa or the Islamic tradition of spreading Islam through words and deeds was the original path that was chosen. Gamal Abdul Nasser's program of modernisation presented a barrier to the achievement of the groups' aims, most notably the goals of Akhwan al Muslimeen (Muslim Brotherhood). As Nasser's aspirations for Egypt dwindled with events such as the loss of the six day war in 1967 (resulting in the loss of Sinai peninsular to Israel), the Islamist movement, the Akhwan gained popular support as an alternative to Nasserism for disgruntled Egyptian youth.

The death of Nasser in 1970 and installation of Anwar Sadat as his successor marked a shift as Sadat, unlike Nasser, attempted to appease the Akhwan and win their support by lightening the restrictions on their political activities put in place by his predecessor. In the more politically free environment, a number of organisations and splinter groups developed with the aim of overthrowing the government and instilling Sharia law and governance. This period also saw a shift to the use of militant actions by some groups such as Gemaa Islamiya and Al Takfir wal Hijra.

It was against this historical backdrop, presented briefly here, that a man by the name of Ayman al Zawahiri became involved in the Islamist movement in Egypt and was later to become Osama Bin Laden's deputy and an ideological force in al Qaeda. An examination of Zawahiri's history and his progression from a virtual unknown to Bin Laden's collaborator in the International Islamic Front for Jihad on the Jews and the Crusaders in 1998 offers critical understanding for the development of counter terrorism strategies that seek to address, not only current threats, but future intent and take a long term approach to countering the terrorist threat.

In short, my argument is that Zawahiri's major contribution to the current jihadi movement and in particular to the ideology espoused by Al Qaeda is discourse- a discourse which has gained legitimacy among the Muslim Ummah, a discourse which has galvanised mass support and a discourse which has a regenerative capacity. Zawahiri's discourse has become ontogenetic such that the messages embedded in this discourse have taken on a life or many lives of their own. The ontogenetic power of this discourse resides in its core message of Islam under attack and a shared identity of Muslims as victims of a conspiracy to undermine Islam as a global religion. It's a message that resonates with the personal and communal situations of Muslims of all ages, nationalities, backgrounds. Most importantly it is a message that has permeated the identity construction of Muslim youths. It is therefore no longer enough to stop the messenger- our attentions must focus on diffusing the message. If we do not, in five or six years time we will be dealing with generations of Muslim youths for whom the victim identity is so entrenched that the allure of fighting Islam's opponents is almost impossible to resist.

Ayman al Zawahiri was born into an aristocratic family in 1951 in the upper class Cairo suburb of Maadi. Some accounts have Zawahiri leading an unnamed clandestine cell in 1966 at the age of just 15 - notably also the year that Sayed Qutb, Zawahiri's primary ideological influence, was executed. By Zawahiri's own

accounts, he was part of group that established the cell but did not take over leadership of the cell until after 1974 when the cell consisted of 11 members. Their objective, as stated by Zawahiri was “to topple the government” and “establish an Islamic government that rules according to the Sharia”. Zawahiri’s cell understood jihad to mean “removing the current government through resisting it and changing the current regime to establish an Islamic government through a military coup”. At least one of Zawahiri’s went on to establish jihadi training camps in Pakistan. Abdul Azeez, as he is known, along with Zawahiri established the first Islamic Jihad in Peshawar- a group which Zawahiri eventually took leadership of in 1992.

Importantly, like many of the members of jihadi groups in Egypt, Zawahiri and his confidantes were not poor. They were not economically disadvantaged. They were not uneducated. They were doctors, engineers, pharmacists, professionals- middle or upper middle class or, like Zawahiri, from an aristocratic background. Militant Islamism flourished not among the poor, underprivileged or the masses, but among the elite. Many of those recruited by Zawahiri for his cell between 1967 and 1981 were students.

The demoralizing Egyptian defeat in the 1967 war against Israel revived the jihadi movement sparked by an Islamic awakening. In *Fursan Taht Rayet al Nabi* (Knights Under the Banner of the Prophet) Zawahiri gives a clear insight into how the 1967 defeat presented an opportunity for jihadi groups:

*“The direct influence of the 1967 defeat was that a large number of people, especially youths, returned to their original identity: that of members of an Islamic civilization.”*

This notion figured prominently in the development of Zawahiri’s approach: the potential to galvanise large numbers of people on the basis of a shared Islamic identity.

Zawahiri graduated with a degree in medicine in 1974 and then went on to attain a Masters degree in surgery and a PhD in surgery while he was living in Peshawar. He was arrested in connection with the assassination of Anwar Sadat on October 15 1981 (one week after the assassination on October 6) and sent to Tora prison where he was allegedly tortured into confessing the whereabouts of certain individuals- among them Esam al-Qamari, an officer in the Egyptian Armed Forces who had joined Zawahiri's group.

After being acquitted and released from Tora in 1984 Zawahiri travelled to Saudi Arabia in 1985 where he worked at a hospital in Jeddah before moving to Afghanistan in 1986 where he came into contact with Bin Laden. Between 1987 and 1990 he gained prominence among jihadi groups in Afghanistan where his efforts were focussed on regrouping the jihadi movement, training and preparing foreign(Arab) fighters in the Afghan jihad against the Soviets. During this time he maintained links to Cairo and the jihadi movements there.

In 1992, along with other Arab mujahideen leaders, he was forced out of Afghanistan having splintered from the Afghan mujahideen who had turned against them. Under the hospitality of Bin Laden, Zawahiri fled to Sudan. He eventually returned to Afghanistan when the Taliban had taken control and welcomed back the Arab mujahideen. The Taliban enjoyed the support of the Islamic Jihad and in turn offered protection to Arab jihadists fleeing intolerant regimes. This agreement allowed jihadi movements to flourish under the protection of the Taliban regime and Bin Laden.

Zawahiri was already familiar with Afghanistan having spent four months there in 1980 and another two months in 1981 filling in for a colleague at Al Sayiddah Zaynab clinic run by the Muslim Brotherhood. By his own account, this precipitous event, over a decade before he was to ally himself with Bin Laden marked the beginning of Zawahiri's connection with Afghanistan and opened his eyes to the opportunities for coordinating jihadi activities in Egypt from a base in

Afghanistan. Zawahiri saw the Afghan arena as a model example for jihad- the victory over the Soviet superpower provided not just a blueprint but, more importantly, renewed hope and affirmation that the jihadi could emerge victorious from a battle with the world's other superpower- the US :

*"I saw this as an opportunity to get to know one of the arenas of jihad that might be a tributary and a base for jihad in Egypt and the Arab region, the heart of the Islamic world, where the basic battle of Islam was being fought".*

Although Zawahiri is cautious not to admit it, his efforts to coordinate the Egyptian Islamic Jihad from abroad failed dismally. Between 1988 and 1997 jihadi groups attempted a series of assassinations that failed. During this volatile period clashes between jihadi groups and police were increasingly common- resulting in the imposition of curfews, mass arrests of Islamic group members. In essence the campaign of continued confrontation with the government went against the philosophy of Zawahiri who had maintained that the core activity of his Islamic Jihad group should be to recruit and train members in preparation for the overthrow of the regime. However, his members argued that Gemaa Islamiya was continually launching attacks against the government and winning new recruits: for Islamic Jihad to gain support, it too would have to put into practice the tactics learnt at the Afghan training camps. In 1997 Gemaa Islamiya called for a cease fire of all armed operations. The Ikhwan's had already pledged allegiance to President Hosni Mubarak, a move that Zawahiri described as political and ideological suicide. The Ikhwan now enjoys political representation in Egypt and popularity in some of its strongholds located in the more conservative areas of Southern Egypt (or Upper Egypt as it is known).

The failed operations damaged the public opinion and support for the Islamic groups particularly when two of the failed assassinations resulted in the death of innocent bystanders, one a young school girl. In 1998 Zawahiri joined Bin Laden in forming the International Islamic Front for Jihad on the Jews and Crusaders.

The principles and aims are markedly different from those that Zawahiri had developed for Islamic Jihad. For one thing, the Israeli- Palestine issue (though a central issue of concern in the Arab world) was never a focus for Zawahiri. Zawahiri's focus had always been on the internal enemy: the regime and in particular on toppling the Egyptian regime as he stated time and time again with the catchcry "The way to Jerusalem passes through Cairo." The liberation of Palestine and enmity of the US would come only after the battles in Egypt had been won and Cairo opened. While we cannot be completely sure why Zawahiri joined Bin Laden in forming the front and apparently shifting his vision, Montasser al Zayat suggests that waning public opposition, dwindling financial funds, increasing crackdowns on jihadi activities by the police in Egypt (including the handing down of the death penalty in absentia for Zawahiri), serious losses and internal fracturing of Islamic jihad contributed.

But does the formation of the Front really signify a shift in Zawahiri's ideology? While some have argued that the Front represents a shift in Zawahiri's focus from the near enemy to the far enemy- the principal focus of Bin Laden's jihad - I'm not so sure. Zawahiri's history tells us otherwise. Firstly, Zawahiri's approach has always based on recruiting mass support in preparation for an armed coup. In reference to the jihadi movement in Egypt, Zawahiri delivers this powerful caveat "*the battle has not stopped in the past 36 years. The fundamentalist movement is either on the attack or in the process of preparing for attack*" (p. 114). Under the banner of al Qaeda and with the financial support of Bin Laden, he could continue to coordinate the activities of Islamic Jihad to covertly recruit members in Egypt. Secondly, he makes clear reference in Knights Under the Banner- written in 2001, three years after he formed an alliance with Bin Laden which carried out operations on the American embassies in Nairobi and Darusalam and ultimately the tragedy of 911- to the establishment of an Islamic caliphate in Egypt:

*“If God will it, such a state in Egypt, with all its weight in the heart of the Islamic world, could lead the Islamic world in a jihad against the West. It could also rally the world Muslims around it. Then history would make a new turn, Insha Allah, in the opposite direction against the empire of the US and the world’s Jewish government” (p. 113)*

Zawahiri has never waived from his original objective of toppling the Egyptian government. He attributes the failures of jihadi movements in Egypt such as Gamaa Islamiya to their failure to recognise the relationship between the external enemy and its internal agent (the regime). He advocates for no separation between the external and internal enemy- suggesting that the movement had misplaced its trust in the ruling regime that could only be challenged through armed force. This singular vision of an Islamic state in Egypt as a base for the Caliphate has underlined all of his efforts both within Egypt and abroad. At the heart of this vision is his belief that this can only be achieved with the support of the masses by reviving their communion with a global Islamic identity. Zawahiri’s approach is therefore very much centred on connecting with the masses.

*The fruits of the jihad resistance go beyond inspiring hope in the hearts of the Muslim youth. The resistance is a weapon directed against the regime’s henchmen, who are demoralised as they see their colleagues falling around them. Furthermore, stepping up the jihad action to harm the US and Jewish interests creates a sense of resistance among the people, who consider the Jews and Americans a horrible symbol of arrogance and tyranny” (P. 109).*

I do not think that it is possible to overestimate the significance of this statement or the centrality of this notion to al Qaeda’s ideology- an ideology created, disseminated and promoted through a discourse of jihad. One of the most significant developments in the transformation of al Qaeda from a “base” to what has variably been described as “a global movement” an “ideology” a “phenomenon” is that recruitment to al Qaeda is no longer a process of

identification and indoctrination. It is largely self selection. Indeed, if we want to understand how al Qaeda's ideology has generated and regenerated itself we need to begin with Zawahiri's discourse of jihad.

### **Al Qaeda's discourse of jihad**

Zawahiri's discourse of jihad has as its principal audience Muslim youth. Effectively, the discourse serves the ultimate purpose for Zawahiri: that of galvanizing popular support for the Islamist movement and ultimately recruiting for jihad.

The core elements of this discourse are:

1. **The battle is universal:** it involves the "world coalition"; "the universal regime that is hostile to Islam"- the West (US, Israel and Russia) has defined Islam as its enemy and has formed an alliance that includes the United Nations, Muslim states, multinational corporations, the media and relief agencies in its attack. The jihadi movement represents a growing alliance of Muslim youth prepared to defend Islam against infidelity
2. **Jihad is the only solution-** peaceful dialogue is a failed option
3. **Endurance, patience and perseverance** are the keys to victory: adherence to the goal of establishing a Muslim state as a base for launching the battle to restore the Caliphate. "it is a long road of jihad and sacrifice"
4. **The nation must be mobilized-** the masses must be motivated to defend their honor and fight injustice- the nation must own jihad- there must be unity before the single enemy. Public discontent is a condition for public support- Palestine is "a rallying point for all the Arabs, be they believers or non-believers, good or evil" because every Muslim in Palestine is a part of the global Muslim community
5. **Every person is capable of performing jihad** and inflicting terror on the Americans and the Jews "Tracking down the Americans and the Jews is not impossible. Killing them with a single bullet, a stab, or a device made up of a popular rod is not impossible. Burning down their property with

Molotov Cocktails is not difficult. With the available means, small groups could prove to be a frightening horror for the Americans and the Jews. (212)

6. **Victory is achievable**- the superpowers can be defeated (Afghanistan) they can be opposed with strikes that inflict maximum damage (911)

The discourse of jihad provides a narrative basis for a shared Islamic identity: in this narrative the imagined nation of Islam is under attack from the West- constructed as the US and Israel- which seeks to destroy it by infiltrating the Muslim world both politically and ideologically.

It's a powerful narrative for unifying the masses. It is not the shared Islamic identity that is the issue here. Indeed the Ummah has long been a unifying concept for Muslims all over the world who find ontological security in belonging to an imagined community of believers. What is at issue here is the basis for that shared identity. In the discourse of jihad that basis is victimhood and injustice. This is where the discourse of jihad gets its power- this is what has enabled Zawahiri's message to proliferate and permeate the world views of Muslims around the globe and become subsumed into their understandings of what it means to be Muslim.

Importantly it's not a message that appeals only to the poverty stricken, disaffected, marginalized youth- although these are more likely the kind of people who will be recruited as today's terrorists- it's a message that appeals to Muslims of all ages everywhere.

Why?

It is CONSISTENT and UNWAVERING

From Bin Laden to Qadrawi to the youths who bombed London- the message is consistent- "Islam under attack".

It RESONATES WITH THE REAL OR IMAGINED EXPERIENCES OF MUSLIMS

Zawahiri knows very clearly who his audience is and he speaks to them. He has criticized the Brotherhood for gearing their message to the elite and has developed a message to “fill the gap in understanding between the jihad movement and the common people”. The narrative of victimhood is one that is easily subsumed into the real life or imagined experiences of Muslims in the diaspora and in the Muslim world. Discrimination, vilification, negative media reports, Bosnia, Chechnya, Palestine- all evidence that the West hates Islam and wants to destroy it. During the first Gulf War and in the aftermath to 9/11, stories about Muslim women being abused in public places circulated among members of Muslim communities. The notion of Muslims as the “common enemy” became the framework for understanding these kinds of experiences.

In my interviews with members of the Muslim communities in Perth as well as in my everyday dealings with Australian Muslims as an Australian Muslim myself the most consistent and salient theme expressed is that Muslims are the targets of negative media, negative public opinion, negative political rhetoric. This perception is embedded in a broader framework in which Australian Muslims who see themselves as part of a global community of believers identify with a notion that Muslims around the globe are under attack, and that they are the victims of a larger conspiracy aimed at undermining Islamic identity and eradicating Islam as a world religion. The following quotes show just how much this notion has permeated the views and opinions of Australian Muslims:

*--They [the West] are aiming to destroy us and we are not aware of it but now we are under attack we are being destroyed. What about realising we are being attacked by purpose not by our people. And now there are terrorists- all these crimes that are happening under the name of the Muslims. Who are really behind them?*

*--Because we have something different we have Islam, and that is the difference. They want that we must not lead that way of life.*

Finally it is CORROBORATED BY THE ACTIONS AND RHETORIC OF THE WEST- THERE IS NO COUNTER MESSAGE THAT IS EQUALLY AS CONSISTENT.

911 was a galvanizing event designed to inspire youths to jihad. What has transpired since then- most notably the war in Iraq, the revelations of mistreatment at Abu Ghraib and the Lebanon Israel war inveterated key points in Al Qeda's jihad discourse and reinforced the image of the US and the West in general as the enemy infidel.

So we have a situation now in which the basis of al Qeda's ideology embodied in its jihad discourse, that basis of Islam under attack, has to a very large extent become entrenched as the primary basis for the formation of an Islamic identity of shared injustice and victimhood. We have generations of Muslim youths both in the Muslim world (where there are several polls that show various negative attitudinal patterns with regards to the West) and the diaspora who are increasingly identifying with this notion of victimhood who are growing up with this definition of what it means to be a Muslim in today's world. What is most problematic here is that if an individual or group identify with the notion of Islam under attack they are exponentially more likely to also identify with the notion of the West as the infidel enemy. They may also be more likely to identify with the notion that the Ummah must unite against this enemy and with the notion that violent jihad is not only their duty but also easily achievable and something that they are capable of. While it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when radicalization transforms from a belief or idea to an actual physical action, when people are identifying with the notions of Islam at war with an infidel enemy, the bridge that spans ideas, notions and beliefs and behavioral responses is significantly narrowed.

How do we address this? There are also certain issues that we must admit we simply cannot influence: we cannot for example influence the increasing sense of

dissatisfaction with and resentment towards the Egyptian government among the masses in Egypt or in other Arab states; we are not going to solve the Palestinian issue in the near future, and certainly Iraq has now developed into a fertile training ground for jihadis. We certainly can't change the past where the political and media discourse on Muslims and on terrorism in Australia has, whether knowingly or inadvertently, contributed to social divisions and inculcated a sense of fear among Muslim communities about being objectified as 'the enemy'- a fear which is manifested in the reformulation of Australian Muslim identity. It is no longer enough to attempt to boost the reputation of the West- I include here Australia for the Australian context- among Muslims in either the Arab nations or the diaspora.

As I mentioned earlier, it is no longer enough to stop the messenger we need to focus on diffusing the message. Traditionally counter terrorism strategies have tended to focus on neutralising the capability for terrorism and on crisis management. Strategies that involve intelligence and evidence assessment, disruption tactics and crowd behaviour target the capacity of individuals and groups to perpetrate terrorism and focus on managing the impact of a terrorist attack on infrastructure are needed for today's terrorist threat but do little to address tomorrow's terrorist threat. Social issues are often the most difficult to address because they cannot be quantified, mapped or diagrammatised. It takes years of long term commitment to bring about social change and the outcomes of social projects are not easily measured.

One good thing we have on our side is time. There are already observable changes particularly in media reporting on issues regarding Muslims in Australia which have tended to shift away from negative stereotyping (the exception ofcourse being the classic current affairs types programs). The Federal government's efforts in implementing the strategies of the National Action Plan hold some hope- although to date I must say that the kinds of programs being implemented that I have had experience with are questionable in their capacity to achieve any short or long term outcomes. The issue of leadership in the Muslim

communities is a critical one and one that is starting to be addressed. Where a vacuum of leadership exists, it becomes very easy for a charismatic person who may hold particular views to garner support for their agenda and secure a position as 'leader' or even 'mufti' of Australia. Remember that Osama bin Laden although referred to as Sheikh by his followers is not a theologian but, essentially a politician. Another critical issue which I think we perhaps aren't doing so well in is broadening the focus of counter terrorism to counter the galvanizing capacity of the jihad discourse. One of the most important lessons we can learn from the historical development of Zawahiri's discourse and its impact on al Qeda's ideology is the strong focus on capturing the attention of the masses and gaining mass support. Zawahiri's main vision was that jihad should not be confined to the elite but that every Muslim in the Ummah should be committed to the Islamist cause. The problem here is that the jihadi's are seen to have a cause: the cause of freeing Islam from the infidel shackles- we do not have a cause. If our cause was to democratize Iraq- that was doomed to fail and indeed it has. And perhaps it is because we do not have a cause that we have failed to recognize the efforts needed to counter the jihadi message.

I am astonished for example, that Hizb ul Tahrir held a conference in Sydney this year. They may not be listed as a terrorist organization in Australia but their message is an attractive one to those young (particularly men) who may be feeling isolated and vulnerable- it is a message that promises a return to the "golden" days of Islam- one in which they can identify some kind of allegiance. It is also a message that is welcomed and manipulated by some elders and "leaders" as it helps them to keep the youth "Muslim and proud" and resist the threat of adopting "Western ways".

It is not HTs activities that constitute a terrorist threat, but the message that is delivered through these activities. Perhaps it is difficult to fully comprehend the significance of this message and its possible impact unless you are a Muslim- when you know and realise just how easy it is for our youth to succumb to the notion of a pan Islamic state worth fighting for. The MI5 report stated that the

London bombers were not known to intelligence. Security services had actually tapped the phones of the young men but had completely missed the seriousness of their words. A brutal lesson in why we need to recognise the power of the message instilled in second generation young men.

Having said that, I am equally astonished at the adulation for Ayaan Ali Hirsi during her visit. Her vitriolic attacks on Islam and the unquestioning enthusiasm with which she is embraced by the Australian media and some sections of the public have confirmed the perceptions of many Muslim youth with regard to the agenda of the West and serves only to further inculcate the belief that Australia is a willing and complicit player in the effort to undermine Islam.

However, driving a message underground is not the answer. We certainly cannot abandon the cherished ideal of free speech, but we can make certain segments of the community responsible for the messages espoused by those they support. While I am not sure about banning HT for example, I think that the spokespersons and leaders of HT should be engaged to discuss the possible impact of its messages on some Muslim youth. Similarly, the Sydney Writer's Festival should be able to allow those who take issue with Ms Ali's views to have an equal voice in open and free dialogue.

What I'm espousing here is egalitarianism and equality- supposedly the kind of egalitarianism that is enshrined in the Australian constitution and that is encompassed in the very ethos of democracy. This should be our cause. This should be the message, the narrative and the discourse. If Australian Muslims can begin to rebuild their identity not on the basis of shared injustice but on the basis of shared and equal rights then we have gone a long way to addressing the future terrorist threat.