

What were the causes of 9/11?

by Peter Bergen / September 24, 2006

No event in recent times has produced as many explanations as the 11th September attacks five years ago. Within the space of an hour, al Qaeda inflicted more direct damage on the US than the Soviet Union had done throughout the cold war, a cataclysm seen by more people than any other event in history. Yet it took only 19 men armed with small knives to destroy the World Trade Centre, demolish a wing of the Pentagon and kill 3,000 people. This mismatch has led some—especially in the Muslim world—to seek a deus ex machina to explain what otherwise appears inexplicable. The usual suspects have been assembled on 9/11's grassy knoll: the Jews were behind the attacks; the US government engineered them; the "Cheney-Bush energy junta" planned them so that they could grab the oil fields of central Asia, and so on.

Osama bin Laden himself claims that al Qaeda was solely responsible for 9/11. In 2004, he released a video in which he explained his dealings with lead hijacker Mohammed Atta. After the largest criminal investigation in history, the US government's 9/11 commission also concluded that al Qaeda was solely responsible for the attacks.

Attributing the sole responsibility for 9/11 to al Qaeda then brings us to the larger question: what caused al Qaeda to launch the attacks? Explanations for the attacks can be sorted into two categories—the seemingly plausible but flawed, and the more credible.

Plausible but flawed theories

Poverty. Many politicians and commentators see the poverty of the middle east as a factor. (Some political leaders even argued that the Doha round of trade talks, launched soon after 9/11, were intended partly to quash terrorism.) This claim is not supported by the evidence. Those who attacked on 9/11 were sons of the middle eastern middle and upper class, not the dispossessed. Throughout recent history, from the Russian anarchists to the German Baader-Meinhof gang in the 1970s, terrorism has largely been a bourgeois endeavour. Al Qaeda is no different.

Madrastas. A related argument to the poverty canard is that madrasas, religious schools that teach the Koran by rote and sometimes instil a simplistic view of jihad, are breeding grounds for terrorists. Quite the opposite. Madrasa graduates have rarely, if ever, carried out major anti-western attacks. None of the 9/11 hijackers attended a madrasa and most had been to college, several of them in the west. Bin Laden went to the European-influenced Al Thagr high school and then studied economics at King Abdulaziz University, both in Jeddah.

They hate us because of the freedom-loving people we are. President Bush has been the principal exponent of this view. In 2004 Bin Laden responded by asking why, if this were true, had he not attacked freedom-loving Sweden?

The CIA. The notion that Bin Laden is a CIA creation, and that the attacks on the Trade Centre and Pentagon were "blowback," is a standard analysis among leftists around the world. Indian novelist Arundhati Roy has written that Bin Laden was "among the jihadis who moved to Afghanistan in 1979 when the CIA commenced its operations there. Bin Laden has the distinction of being created by the CIA." This theory is advanced as axiomatic but it has no supporting evidence. The real scandal here is not that

the CIA helped to create Bin Laden during the 1980s, but that the agency had no idea of his significance until sometime in 1996, when it set up a special unit to track the Saudi exile.

Weak and failing states. It is a staple of international relations theorists that weak and failed states are attractive bases for terrorists and criminals. That the 9/11 attack was first hatched in 1996 as al Qaeda moved its base from a weak state, Sudan, to a failed state, Afghanistan, seems to underline this theory. Certainly al Qaeda thrived under the incompetent rule of the Taliban. However, much of the 9/11 plot took shape in Hamburg, where most of the pilots and secondary planners of the attack became more radical than they had been while living in their home countries. Although Afghanistan was critical to the rise of al Qaeda, it was the experience that the plotters acquired in the west that made them both more militant and better equipped to carry out the attacks.

Saudi financiers. Little or no hard evidence has been proffered for the claim that Saudi financiers were sponsoring al Qaeda, and the 9/11 report determined that there was no evidence that the money for the attacks came from Saudi Arabia. Moreover, money is not the “oxygen” of terrorism. Terrorism is a cheap form of warfare—the first Trade Centre attack in 1993 cost only a few thousand dollars. No amount of money will buy you 19 young men willing to commit suicide in a terrorist operation. According to court documents entered in the trial of the supposed 20th hijacker, Zacarias Moussaoui, the 9/11 operation cost a little over \$200,000, a trivial sum considering the damage it inflicted. The pilots who flew the hijacked planes into two of the world’s most famous buildings saw what they were doing as an act of worship. Al Qaeda’s strength lies not in its material resources, which are small, but in its beliefs.

The Saudis in general. Some commentators have assigned much of the responsibility for the rise of al Qaeda to the Saudis. This is also the contention of many of the families of the victims of the 9/11 attacks, who have signed on to a class action lawsuit against a range of Saudi institutions and individuals. In this view, the Saudi royal family made an unholy alliance with the purist Wahabbi sect and exported Wahabbism in order to shore up its shaky credibility as the custodian of the holy places of Mecca and Medina. The historian Bernard Lewis has observed: “The custodianship of the holy places and the revenues of oil have given worldwide impact to what would otherwise have been an extremist fringe in a marginal country... Imagine that the Ku Klux Klan or some similar group obtains total control of the state of Texas, of its oil and therefore its oil revenues, and having done so, uses this money to establish a network of well-endowed schools and colleges all over Christendom, peddling their own peculiar brand of Christianity.”

The Saudi export of Wahabbism did eventually bear disastrous fruit in Afghanistan with the advent of the Taliban, a regime that was recognised and supported by only three countries, including Saudi Arabia, and was influenced by Wahabbist doctrines. However, since at least the mid-1990s, al Qaeda’s ultimate goal has been the destruction of the Saudi royal family and so it is a stretch to blame the Saudi state for al Qaeda’s recent activities. Moreover, there are millions of Muslims who follow a Wahabbist version of Islam, yet only a very few turn to violence.

The clash of civilisations. Samuel Huntington famously predicted that clashes between civilisations would replace cold war rivalries, and 9/11 seemed to vindicate his theory. But did it? Most Muslims condemned 9/11, and after the attacks Bin Laden’s attempt to ignite a clash of civilisations fizzled out. It is rather the US war of choice in Iraq that galvanised anti-Americanism among Muslims.

Suicide terrorism, including 9/11, is a response to foreign occupation. In his influential 2005 book *Dying to Win*, political scientist Robert Pape examined a series of modern suicide campaigns and concluded that

they are driven not by religious zeal but by foreign occupations (see review by Peter Nolan and Patrick Belton). Pape pointed out that the secular Tamil Tigers have engaged in one of the most protracted and bloody campaigns of suicide terrorism of the modern era. Pape's theory might explain why 15 of the 9/11 hijackers were Saudis, as there was a substantial US presence in the Saudi kingdom around that time, but it does not explain the other four hijackers, who were Lebanese, Egyptian and Emirati, none of whose countries were occupied by the US.

Moreover, events in Iraq have undermined Pape's contention that foreign occupation is the driving force behind suicide attacks, particularly in the Islamic world. Suicide attackers in Iraq are largely foreigners, and half or more are estimated to be Saudis, while the rest are from other middle eastern countries, with a sprinkling of Europeans. Only around 10 per cent of the suicide attacks in Iraq are undertaken by Iraqis. It is not foreign occupation, but rather a globalised culture of martyrdom that is driving suicide attacks in the Muslim world. Indeed, in 2003, US forces in Saudi Arabia—Bin Laden's original *casus belli*—were reduced almost to zero, yet Bin Laden and his followers continued to advocate attacking the US.

We are in a clash with a totalitarian ideology, similar to communism. The most serious proponent of this idea is Paul Berman, whose 2003 book *Terror and Liberalism* places "Binladerism" squarely in the tradition of modern millennial totalitarian ideologies such as fascism and communism: "9/11 was an event in the 20th-century mode. It was the clash of ideologies. It was the war between liberalism and the apocalyptic and phantasmagorical movements that have risen up against liberal civilisation ever since the calamities of the first world war." While this idea has some attractions, Binladerism does not pose the existential threat to the west presented by the totalitarian ideologies of the 20th century. And although it is certainly an ideology, it has precious little to do with either communism or Nazism, both of which abolished the very notion of God. Binladerism is not just another totalitarian ideology of the kind which we have seen before. Al Qaeda may use modern technology but it is animated by a 7th-century view of the world that has nothing in common with Hitler or Stalin.

The death rattle of political Islam. Could 9/11 be the last gasp of the radical Islamists? French academic Gilles Kepel has made the point that Islamist states such as Sudan and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan have turned out to be abject failures. In his book *Jihad: the Trail of Political Islam*, published after 9/11, Kepel argued, "in spite of what many commentators contended in its immediate aftermath, the attack on the US was a desperate symbol of the isolation, fragmentation and decline of the Islamist movement, not a sign of its strength." However, Kepel was writing before the US occupation of Iraq, the election of Hamas in Palestine, and the present troubles in Lebanon. Today political Islam seems to be on the march around the middle east, and to treat 9/11 as the swansong of militant Islamists seems like wishful thinking.

The most credible explanations

None of the following explanations is alone sufficient to explain the attacks, but together they do help us to understand 9/11. They are ranked in ascending order of importance.

10. Radicalisation caused by the Afghan jihad. While there is no evidence that the CIA trained or funded Bin Laden or his followers, the Afghan war against the Soviet Union nonetheless radicalised a generation of Arab militants. They swapped business cards, gained battlefield experience and came to believe that they had played a big role in the destruction of the Soviet Union. All of these factors would lead to the founding of al Qaeda in 1988, established to take the jihad to other parts of the globe.

9. *A particular reading of Islamic texts.* In the many discussions of the “root causes” of Islamist terrorism, Islam itself is rarely mentioned. But if you were to ask Bin Laden, he would say that his war is about the defence of Islam. We need not believe him but we should nevertheless listen to what our enemies are saying. Bin Laden bases justification of his war on a corpus of Muslim beliefs and he finds ammunition in the Koran to give his war Islamic legitimacy. He often invokes the “sword” verses of the Koran, which urge unprovoked attacks on infidels. Of course, that is a selective reading of the Koran and does not mean Islam is an inherently violent faith, but to believers the book is the word of God.

8. *Decline and stagnation in the middle east and the “humiliation” of the Islamic world.* Bernard Lewis is the best-known exponent of the idea that the Muslim world is in a crisis largely attributable to centuries of decline, symbolised by the fate of the once powerful Ottoman empire and its ignominious carve-up by the British and French after the first world war. Lewis also argues that the problems of the middle east were later compounded by the import of two western ideas—socialism and secular Arab nationalism—neither of which delivered on their promises of creating prosperous and just societies. The economic and political failures in much of the Muslim world are underlined by statistics such as the fact that the non-oil revenues of all of the gulf states add up to less than the GDP of Finland.

Three weeks after 9/11, as the US began launching air strikes against Taliban positions, a video of Bin Laden sitting on a rocky outcrop was broadcast on Al-Jazeera. On the tape, Bin Laden said, “What America is tasting now is something insignificant compared to what we have tasted for scores of years. The Islamic world has been tasting this humiliation and this degradation for 80 years... Neither America nor the people who live in it will dream of security before we live in it in Palestine, and not before the infidel armies leave the land of Muhammad.” So in his first statement following 9/11, Bin Laden emphasised the “humiliation” of the Muslim world and the negative effect of US policies in the middle east. In this sense, Bin Laden seems to agree with Bernard Lewis. Indeed, Bin Laden often talks about the “humiliation” suffered by Muslims at the hands of the west. For Bin Laden, the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement that carved up the Ottoman empire between the French and British has the same resonance that the 1919 treaty of Versailles did for Hitler. It must be avenged and reversed.

7. *The spread of communications technology.* The humiliation felt by some Muslims is amplified by the communications revolution. The umma, the global community of Muslims, is far more aware of conflicts around the Islamic world—and the role of the west in some of those conflicts—than was the case a decade ago. The creation of Al-Jazeera in 1996 coincided with Bin Laden’s first call for a holy war against the US. Since then Arabic satellite channels and jihadist websites have proliferated, sensitising Muslims to the oppression of their co-religionists in Kashmir, Palestine, the Balkans and so on. These grievances have fuelled the spread of al Qaeda’s ideology and underpinned the rage of the 9/11 hijackers.

6. *Authoritarian middle east regimes helped incubate the militants.* Sayyid Qutb, the Lenin of the militant jihadist movement, and later Ayman al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden’s number two, were radicalised by their time in the jails of Cairo. It is no accident that so many members of al Qaeda have been Egyptians and Saudis.

5. *The alienation of Muslim immigrants in the west.* Three of the four 9/11 pilots and two key planners, Ramzi bin al Shibh and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, became more militant while living in the west. Perceived discrimination, alienation and homesickness seem to have turned them all in a more radical direction. This is true for other anti-western terrorists. Swati Pandey and I have examined the biographies of 79 terrorists responsible for five of the worst recent anti-western terrorist attacks. We found that one in four of these terrorists had attended colleges in the west.

4. US foreign policies in the middle east, in particular its support of Israel. By Bin Laden's own account, this is why al Qaeda is attacking America. His critique has never been cultural; he never mentions Madonna, Hollywood, homosexuality or drugs in his diatribes. US support for Israel, especially the support it gave to Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon in 1982, first triggered Bin Laden's anti-Americanism, which during the 1980s took the form of urging a boycott of US goods. He was later outraged by the "defiling" export of 500,000 US troops to Saudi Arabia after Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

3. Bin Laden is an astute tactical leader and rational political actor fighting a deeply felt religious war against the west. Like others before him, Bin Laden has made a rational choice to adopt terrorism as a shortcut to transforming the political landscape. It is clear from the 9/11 commission report that Bin Laden intervened to make two key decisions that ensured the success of the attacks. The first was to appoint Mohammed Atta to be the lead hijacker; Atta would carry out his responsibilities with grim efficiency. The second was to rein in Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's plans for ten planes to crash into targets in Asia and on the east coast of America simultaneously. That number of attacks would have been hard to synchronise and might not have succeeded.

2. 9/11 was the collateral damage of a clash within Islam. The view that 9/11 was the result of a conflict within the Muslim world was brilliantly articulated in early 2002 by middle east scholar Michael Scott Doran in a Foreign Affairs essay, "Somebody Else's Civil War." Doran argued that Bin Laden's followers "consider themselves an island of true believers surrounded by a sea of iniquity and think that the future of religion itself, and therefore the world depends on them and their battle." In particular, Egyptians in al Qaeda, such as Ayman al-Zawahiri, hold this view, inheriting it from Sayyid Qutb, who believed that most of the modern middle east is living in a state of pagan ignorance. The Egyptian jihadists believed that they should overthrow the "near enemy"—middle east regimes run by "apostate" rulers. Bin Laden took the next step, urging Zawahiri that the root of the problem was not the "near enemy" but the "far enemy," the US, which propped up the status quo in the middle east.

1. The 9/11 attacks were the fruit of Bin Laden's flawed strategic reasoning. Bin Laden's total dominance of al Qaeda meant the organisation was hostage to his strategic vision. His analysis of US foreign policy was based on the US withdrawal from Lebanon in 1983, after the attack on the barracks that killed 241 American servicemen, and from Somalia in 1993 after 18 US soldiers were killed in Mogadishu. From these retreats, Bin Laden concluded that the US was a paper tiger, capable of withstanding only a few strikes before it would withdraw, leaving client regimes in the middle east vulnerable. But the US response to 9/11 was to destroy the Taliban regime and decimate al Qaeda. Although 9/11 was a tactical success for al Qaeda, it actually threatened the organisation's future.

Some of the harshest critics of the 9/11 attacks have been al Qaeda insiders such as Abd-Al-Halim Adl, who in June 2002 wrote to the 9/11 operational commander, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, saying: "Today we must completely halt all external actions until we sit down and consider the disaster we caused. The east Asia, Europe, America, horn of Africa, Yemen, Gulf, and Morocco groups have fallen."

To conclude, 9/11 was collateral damage in a civil war within the world of political Islam. On one side there are those, like Bin Laden, who want to install Taliban-style theocracies from Indonesia to Morocco. On the other side there is a silent majority of Muslims who are prepared to deal with the west, who do not see the Taliban as a workable model for modern Islamic states, and who reject violence. Bin Laden adopted a war against "the far enemy" in order to hasten the demise of the "near enemy" regimes in the middle east. And he used 9/11 to advance that cause. That effort has, so far, largely failed.

Yet Bin Laden and his attacks on the US have shaped an ideological movement that will outlive him. Binladenism has drawn tremendous energy from the war in Iraq, and will probably gain further adherents from the conflict in Lebanon. Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak was prescient when he warned in 2003 that the Iraq war would spawn "100 new Bin Ladens." It is that new generation of militants that is Bin Laden's legacy.