

**Fantasy or Foe? Contrasting two different understandings of Al Qaeda**Introduction

It has been almost eight years since Al Qaeda entered into the public consciousness in Western governmental, academic and public circles. The consensus understanding of the Islamist terrorist group is neatly summarised by government officials such as Charles Clarke, former UK Home Secretary: "Al Qaeda and its allies have no clear demands for the middle east. The only common thread in their approach is a violent and destructive opposition to democracy in any form"<sup>1</sup>. Senator John Kerry called them "barbarians"<sup>2</sup> who hate the Western civilization for its freedoms, liberalism and tolerant attitude towards women. Some few commentators and critics, however, have not been convinced by this portrayal of Al Qaeda. In this essay I will discuss, compare and contrast two sources which offer a counterpoint to the 'omnipotent enemy of civilization' viewpoint, since discourses around a movement can in turn shape and change it<sup>3</sup>.

The first source is a BBC2 documentary film produced by Adam Curtis entitled 'The Power of Nightmares'<sup>4 5</sup>, which draws parallels between the neoconservative movement and Al Qaeda.

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1 Clarke, C., Commons Hansard 26 October 2005, Volume 438, Column 235, accessed online at UK Parliament on 19/03/09 at <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/vo051026/debtext/51026-09.htm>

2 Goldberg, J., "The Unbraiding", The New Yorker 21 March 2005, accessed online at The New Yorker on 19/03/09 at [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/03/21/050321fa\\_fact](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/03/21/050321fa_fact)

3 Eschle, C. "Constructing 'The Anti-Globalisation Movement'", International Journal of Peace Studies 2004, Volume 9 Number 1, accessed online at George Mason University on 19/03/09 at [http://www.gmu.edu/academic/ijps/vol9\\_1/Eschle\\_91IJPS.pdf](http://www.gmu.edu/academic/ijps/vol9_1/Eschle_91IJPS.pdf)

4 Curtis, A., "The Power of Nightmares" (film), 2004, available online at <http://www.archive.org/details/ThePowerOfNightmares>

5 Transcripts available online at <http://www.daanspeak.com/TranscriptPowerOfNightmares1.html>  
<http://www.daanspeak.com/TranscriptPowerOfNightmares2.html>  
<http://www.daanspeak.com/TranscriptPowerOfNightmares3.html>

These transcripts seem to be largely accurate, but are neither produced nor guaranteed by this author or the

Although Curtis' description of the neoconservative movement is interesting, I shall not discuss it here except where relevant. Curtis' thesis is not that Al Qaeda does not exist, but that the threat of international terrorism has been widely *overestimated* or deliberately exaggerated: "Much of this threat is a fantasy... spread [by] governments... security services, and the international media". The second source is the book 'Imperial Hubris' written by Michael Scheuer, former CIA analyst and head of the bin Laden tracking unit. His argument is that Al Qaeda's threat to the United States has been routinely misunderstood and *underestimated* by government and intelligence officials, both before and after 11 September 2001. He accuses America's elected leaders and intelligence agency heads of "imperial hubris" and "moral cowardice". Clearly these two commentators cannot both be entirely correct, as their arguments are at least partially contradictory. There is, however, some common ground that I mean to identify. Furthermore, I intend to weigh the two sources and decide which more convincingly describes the phenomenon of Al Qaeda. I shall divide this description into three categories – origins, grievances and strength. I shall conclude that understanding the strengths and limitations of both sources gives a more convincing representation of Al Qaeda than either argument alone.

### Origins

Adam Curtis notes that the term 'Al Qaeda' was an invention of the FBI, and that the term was not used by members of Al Qaeda until after they realised it was the name they had been given. So right from its beginning, Al Qaeda is emphasised to be a group conceptualised and shaped by outsiders' perceptions. This theme of the 'other' being misconceived by external actors is returned to frequently. Curtis interviews Jason Burke, author of 'Al Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror'<sup>6</sup>, who pinpoints false evidence in the 1998 embassy bombings trial as the origin of "the first bin Laden myth" i.e. a global hierarchy of terrorists controlled by bin Laden producer of *The Power of Nightmares*. Not included is the transcript of an updated edition of the third section "in the wake of the Law Lords ruling in December that detaining foreign terrorist suspects without trial was illegal."

6 Burke, J., "Al Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror", I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2004

personally.

The ideological underpinnings of Al Qaeda are attributed largely to Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian Islamist who visited the United States in 1949 and became “disenchanted with America”. According to Curtis, “the very things that, on the surface, made the country look prosperous and happy, Qutb saw as signs of an inner corruption”. Islamists' grievance, then, is the “selfish individualism” of American society, and the extent to which this corruption has spread throughout the Muslim world. Qutb was influenced by neo-Marxist ideas of false consciousness and the revolutionary vanguard. Qutb's ideas directly inspired a young medical student, Dr. Al-Zawahiri to create a cell or group with the intention of implementing Qutb's vision.

Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Zawahiri led his radical followers to join the insurgency there. There he met and began working with Osama bin Laden. Curtis narrates that “CIA agents trained the mujaheddin in the techniques of assassination and terror” and “as Soviet troops left Afghanistan, both the Americans and the Islamists came to believe that they had not only won the battle for Afghanistan, they had also begun the downfall of the entire Evil Empire”. After this victory, more moderate Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood were outlawed and persecuted by the Algerian and Egyptian governments, which strengthened and seemed to vindicate Zawahiri and other violent radical groups. Nevertheless, radical Islamists failed to inspire the masses to revolt, as in the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The anti-American strategy of Al Qaeda, therefore, “was a strategy of desperation, born out of failure by a small group whose revolution had failed.”

Michael Scheuer, in his book 'Imperial Hubris', does not once mention Qutb or, indeed, recount the history of the Islamist movement. His reader will not get the impression that there are or have been any significant Islamist groups other than Al Qaeda. The Muslim Brotherhood is

mentioned once in passing and dismissed as “moderates”<sup>7</sup>. His focus is very much on bin Laden as an individual and as a spokesman for Al Qaeda.

### Grievances

To varying extents, both commentators see Bin Laden's group to be an expression of the conflict between Occidental liberalism and Oriental Islam, variations on 'orientalism' that Said criticised<sup>8</sup>, and children of Huntington's “clash of civilizations”<sup>9</sup> thesis. Scheuer, throughout the entire book, ascribes unitary attributes to “the Muslim World”. He defines religious devotion as part of a “shared Muslim mind-set”<sup>10</sup>, writes about the single and indivisible “Muslim view of U.S. actions” and says that the bin Laden problem is “shorthand for the broader U.S.-Muslim world confrontation”<sup>11</sup>. It seems to me that this is a grossly over-simplified world-view that causes him to misdiagnose Al Qaeda's strength and appeal to Muslims, as well as the proper response to deal with the group.

Curtis and Scheuer are agreed that Al Qaeda's grievance is Western intrusion into the Islamic world. However, they disagree on what in particular constitutes the attack. Ironically, of the two, it is Scheuer who less relies on Huntington's shaky theoretical foundations to explain Al Qaeda's grievances. Curtis' explanation of Islamist groups' grievance is that they are dismayed by Western individualist culture and are trying to promote varying kinds of Islamic collectivism. This may not be strictly untrue, but the motives that Curtis has attributed to bin Laden are not those than bin Laden, Al Qaeda's primary spokesman, claims to have! Scheuer's tight focus on

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7 Scheuer, M., “Imperial Hubris”, Potomac Books Inc., Washington D.C., 2005 Edition (first published 2004), pp. 5  
Hereinafter referred to merely as 'Imperial Hubris'.

8 Said, E. W., “Orientalism”, Penguin Modern Classics, London, 2003 Edition (first published 1978)

9 Huntington, S. P., “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order”, Free Press, 2002 Edition

10 Imperial Hubris pp. 5

11 Ibid. pp. x

bin Laden's prolific public statements, on the other hand, gives his argument credence.

Scheuer's oft-repeated argument is that "bin Laden is out to drastically alter U.S. and Western policies toward the Islamic world, not necessarily to destroy America, much less its freedoms and liberties"<sup>12</sup>, that "bin Laden may and probably does dislike [Western culture], but his hatred and war-making have nothing to do with our society, values and ideas. Bin Laden hates us ... because of our policies and actions in the Muslim world"<sup>13</sup>. Scheuer takes bin Laden at his word: "posing the rhetorical question 'Why are we waging jihad against you?' bin Laden responded: 'The answer to that question is very simple. Because you attacked us and continue to attack us'"<sup>14</sup>.

Scheuer lists Al Qaeda's grievances as

"U.S. support for Israel that keeps Palestinians in the Israelis' thrall.

U.S. and other Western troops on the Arabian Peninsula.

U.S. occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan.

U.S. support for Russia, India, and China against their Muslim militants.

U.S. pressure on Arab energy producers to keep oil prices low" and

"U.S. support for apostate, corrupt, and tyrannical Muslim governments"<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, Scheuer does not seek to deny the legitimacy of these grievances, acknowledging "bin Laden's indictment is pretty much factual... bin Laden is doctrinally correct in claiming that the proper Koran-based response for such attacks is a defensive jihad"<sup>16</sup>. These are all limited political and even territorial grievances, unrelated to an invasion of culture or ideas.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pp. xviii

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. pp. 158-159

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. pp. 130

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. pp. 241

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. pp. 130

Osama bin Laden himself, in a late 2007 video message, personally recommended that if American citizens “would like to know some of the reasons for your losing of your war against us, then read the book of Michael Scheuer in this regard”<sup>17</sup>. 'Imperial Hubris', then, carries a personal recommendation from the very man whom its author would like to see dead! Perhaps, then, such a recommendation should not be accepted uncritically<sup>18</sup>. However, while speculation over his motives is potentially unlimited, the simplest interpretation is that because bin Laden said it, he meant it too, and therefore Scheuer is mostly correct in his analysis of Al Qaeda's grievances.

Curtis' explanation of Al Qaeda's grievances is limited because it must necessarily either assume that bin Laden is seeking support for his hidden motive behind popular Muslim causes, or in some other way argue that Curtis knows better than bin Laden himself what Al Qaeda wants! To do this would be to fit the evidence retrospectively to reach a pre-determined conclusion.

The Palestinian question is notable by its absence from Curtis' analysis. Although Curtis narrates at one point that Zawahiri saw attempts by the Egyptian President to make peace with Israel “a complete betrayal” and one of the reasons behind his assassination, yet this is the only mention of Israel in the film. I do not mean to criticise Curtis for not making a film he never intended to make in the first place<sup>19</sup>, but nevertheless a history of Islamism without any

17 Bin Laden, O., “The Solution”, September 7 2007 Message, SITE Intelligence Group, accessed online at The Counterterrorism Foundation on 19/03/09 at <http://counterterrorismblog.org/site-resources/images/SITE-OBL-transcript.pdf>

18 Judis, J., “Osama's Book Club: Al Qaeda's Fall Reading Picks”, The New Republic 28 September 2007, accessed online at The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace on 19/03/09 at <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=19621&prog=zgp&proj=zusr>

19 Media Lens, “Adam Curtis Responds”, 7 December 2004, accessed online at Media Lens on 19/03/09 at [http://www.medialens.org/alerts/04/041207\\_Curtis\\_Response.html](http://www.medialens.org/alerts/04/041207_Curtis_Response.html)

mention of Israel is surely missing a vital chapter. In a later interview, Curtis defended this decision, replying that “If the Palestinian question was solved tomorrow, that would not alter the Islamist's [sic] aims or strategy at all... it is not their primary focus”<sup>20</sup>. This is little more than a repetition of his original argument, that what the United States or its vassals do in the middle east is not the primary grievance of Al Qaeda. It is difficult to agree that the perception that Israel continually persecutes Muslims with American support is not as important to Al Qaeda's recruitment or methods as the desire to inspire the Muslims of the middle east to reject atomising individualism. Again, this is Curtis' unconvincing assertion and largely incompatible with the statements of bin Laden.

Curtis' assessment of Al Qaeda's aims does not seem to align with the history of the Islamist movement as he himself describes it. The successful Afghan resistance was one of the Islamist movement's greatest successes. Yet Curtis can produce no Qutb-like figure who ever visited the Soviet Union and became disenchanted with its culture. Both the United States and the Soviet Union were attempting to gain influence over the Middle East region at that time, there being no clearer example of this than the Soviet invasion and American-armed insurgency itself. Hatred of Western culture cannot explain the spontaneous armed response to the Soviet invasion, nor the mujahideen's collaboration with the United States against the common enemy. It seems far more convincing that, as Scheuer puts it, “thousands of other non-Afghan Muslims went there to fight the Red Army not because the Soviets were atheists and communists – not because of what they were and thought ... The Soviets' presence and behavior, not their beliefs, triggered a victorious defensive jihad”<sup>21</sup>. Scheuer argues that the motives are unchanged. Curtis' assessment of the Islamist movement's aims and grievances might be more valid for the moderate Islamists – the same groups that he describes as having failed. The rhetoric of Al Qaeda, however, focuses on specific Western policies perceived to be

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20 Curtis, A., “Power of Nightmares re-awakened”, 24 January 2005, accessed online at BBC News on 19/03/09 at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4171213.stm>

21 Imperial Hubris pp. 10

anti-Muslim and proposes a defensive jihad in response.

### Strength

Curtis' main thesis in 'The Power of Nightmares' is that American neoconservatives, influenced by Leo Strauss, "took a failing movement which had lost mass support and began to reconstruct it into the image of a powerful network of evil, controlled from the centre by bin Laden from his lair in Afghanistan". This Platonic 'noble lie' would then unite the American people behind their leadership. 'The Power of Nightmares' is at its best when humorously dispelling alarmist neoconservative propaganda, whether directed at the Soviet Union or Al Qaeda. In the final third, for example, we see interview footage of U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld claiming Al Qaeda commanded a network of sophisticated underground bases, apparently based on no more evidence than an artist's sketch. Moments later, we see the commander of the British forces in Afghanistan, mocked by background music of 'Land of Hope And Glory', admitting that the Royal Marines had failed to capture or kill a single Al Qaeda agent. Finally, bin Laden is seen cheerfully waving, as if at his would-be captors.

Backed up by Jason Burke, Curtis makes a compelling argument that there is no formal organisation called Al Qaeda, but an idea. Scheuer shares this assessment: "command-and-control by al Qaeda does not exist... however, ... bin Laden's call for a worldwide jihad may be catching fire"<sup>22</sup>. Scheuer also has nothing kind to say of the neoconservative movement, which he defines as "intellectual arrogance... really warmed-over, still half-baked Wilsonianism. Neither philosophy has contact with reality"<sup>23</sup> and laments the international media's "larger-than-life" portrayal of bin Laden as "directing all Islamic groups"<sup>24</sup>. In this, they are agreed.

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22 Ibid. pp. 86-87

23 Ibid. pp. 266

24 Ibid. pp. 230

Where they disagree is over the threat or strength of that idea. Scheuer mentions the uncovering of Al Qaeda sleeper cells in the United States as evidence of both Al Qaeda's strength and the success of counter-intelligence<sup>25</sup>, but these very same cases are examined by Curtis and demonstrated to be flimsy at best. Since most charges against the accused were dropped, we may safely conclude that Curtis was right to question the evidence for the infiltration of American territory. There is an argument to be made that the U.S. response to September 11 has strengthened the enemy ("[Guantanamo Bay] is seen across the Muslim world as validation of bin Laden"<sup>26</sup>). Less clear, though, is any evidence that "Al Qaeda remains able not only to attack, but also to establish itself in places where it had little if any pre-11 September presence"<sup>27</sup> or that "Al Qaeda ... is thriving militarily"<sup>28</sup>. It is difficult to empirically verify these claims, especially with the confusion that both recognise over what activity is genuinely attributable to Al Qaeda. Scheuer's claims of strength are based on his assumption, bold to say the least, that "much of Islam is fighting us, and more is leaning that way"<sup>29</sup>.

### Conclusion

While Curtis provides a fairly comprehensive history of the Islamist movement, I have argued that it is flawed by its omission of Israel, and that the history of Afghanistan is incompatible with his later description of Al Qaeda's goals. Curtis makes an unconvincing case that Al Qaeda is motivated primarily by a hatred of Western individualism. Scheuer seems to have taken Huntington's "clash of civilizations" too seriously. Despite this, by focusing on bin Laden's stated aims, he far better explains Al Qaeda's grievances in limited political terms. Curtis and

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25 Ibid. pp. 80

26 Ibid. pp. 234

27 Ibid. pp. 77

28 Ibid. pp. 91

29 Ibid. pp. 250

Scheuer agree that Al Qaeda is not a hierarchical organisation, as commonly described by neoconservatives and the media, but a dangerous idea. However, they disagree on how threatening this idea is, a question that is admittedly hard to resolve. Curtis largely succeeds in his goal of providing an antidote to “the politics of fear” without denying Al Qaeda poses some threat. Scheuer seems to assume, rather than argue, that “bin Laden and al Qaeda are leading a popular, worldwide and increasingly powerful Islamic insurgency”<sup>30</sup>.

Both 'The Power of Nightmares' and 'Imperial Hubris', despite their flaws and limitations, are extremely interesting and enlightening discourses on Al Qaeda. I found that an open-minded critical analysis of both sources provided a synthesis more convincing and satisfactory than either could produce taken alone.

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30 Ibid. pp. 199

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