

If you only get one book on al-Qaeda get...

Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam

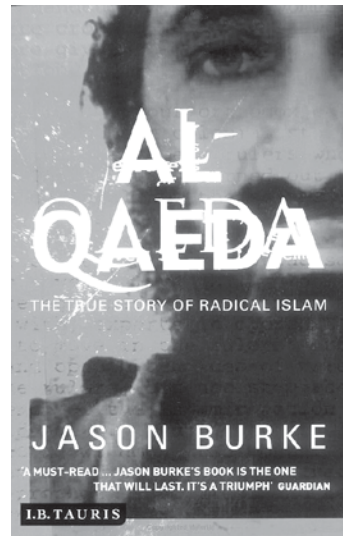
Jason Burke, £8.99, Paperback, 384 pages, Penguin Books, ISBN: 0141019123

Burke provides a wide-ranging and coherent description of the rise of radical Islam, and a persuasive analysis of how the conditions which the world is now facing have come into being. In doing so, he explodes a number of the myths which we are used to seeing in the media – including that of Osama Bin Laden as the evil genius whose capture will make everything right – and illustrates how the failure of governments around the world to act on the conditions which foster radicalism has contributed more to its rise than the actions of any individual or group.

Written after the attacks on the World Trade Centre and in Madrid, but before the London bombings this book has begun to explain to me why they happened. I am not an academic or expert on the Middle East, but found this book easy to follow and feel I have a much greater grasp of the issues having read it. And while this is not comfortable knowledge, it is better than the bewilderment I felt before.

As Burke says in his final paragraph "All terrorist violence, 'Islamic' or otherwise is unjustifiable, unforgivable, cowardly and contemptible. But just because we condemn does not mean we should not strive to comprehend. We need to keep asking, 'Why?' This book certainly helps in understanding the 'Why?'"

(From a review on Amazon.co.uk)



5 minutes on... al-Qaeda

Al-Qaeda is an armed Sunni Islamist organisation with the stated objective of eliminating non-Muslim influence in Muslim countries. The most prominent members of the group are adherents of an extreme and militant form of Wahhabism, the dominant flavour of Islam in Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

While Osama bin Laden is generally recognised as the group's leader, its operations are not centralised, with many independent cells existing in countries across the globe.

Al-Qaeda has been linked to multiple acts of terrorism against U.S. interests and is known for planning and executing the September 11 attacks on New York's World Trade Center and The Pentagon

Name's origin

The origin of the name al-Qaeda is disputed. It translates as 'the foundation', 'the base' or 'the database'.

Robin Cook claims that al-Qaeda was originally the computer file of the thousands of mujahideen, or 'holy warriors', who were recruited and trained to fight the Russians in Afghanistan.

Osama bin Laden stated in an October 2001 interview that the name derived from the name of a training camp.

Osama bin Laden

Osama bin Laden was born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on March 10, 1957. His father was a wealthy businessman with close ties to the Saudi royal family.

Bin Laden was raised as a devout Sunni Muslim. As a college student he studied civil engineering and business administration. He earned a degree in civil engineering and another in economics and public administration.

At university, bin Laden was influenced by several professors with strong ties to radical Muslim groups. Among them was Dr. Abdullah Yusuf Azzam. Azzam would later play a crucial role working with bin Laden in the Afghanistan resistance against the Russians.

After bin Laden graduated from the university in Jeddah, he went to fight in Afghanistan.

Osama Bin Laden is tall and thin. He has an olive complexion, is left-handed, and usually walks with a cane. He wears a plain white turban.

People who have met him say he is a soft-spoken, mild mannered man; charming, polite, and respectful.

Bin Laden has fathered at least 24 children by a number of wives.

Al-Qaeda's structure

For its most complex operations (such as the 9/11 attacks on the US) all participants, planning and funding are believed to have been directly provided by the core al-Qaeda organization. But in many attacks around the world where there appears to be an al-Qaeda connection, its precise role has been less easy to define.

Rather than handling these operations from conception to delivery, al-Qaeda acts as an international financial and logistical support network, channeling income obtained from a network of fund-raising activities to provide training capital and coordination for local radical groups. In many cases it is these local groups, only loosely affiliated to al-Qaeda, which undertake the attacks.

Al-Qaeda has been known to establish and foster new groups to further the radical Islamic interest in local conflicts. The Taliban in Afghanistan is thought to fall into this category, with the roots of the organization formed from radicalized students from the Afghan refugee camps at the time of the Russian occupation.

How many members does al-Qaeda possess?

Al-Qaeda has no clear structure, and this permits debate as to how many members make up the organization, from millions scattered across the globe, to a mere handful of people.

According to the much-disputed BBC documentary *The Power of Nightmares*, al-Qaeda is so weakly linked that it is hard to say it exists apart from Osama bin Laden and a small clique of close associates.

Internet activities

Al-Qaeda makes extensive use of the world wide web for organisational and publicity purposes, lowering the possibility of detection and censorship.

In December 2004, for example, bin Laden released an audio message by posting it directly to a website, rather than sending a copy to his usual channel, Al Jazeera (an Arabic-language television channel based in Doha, Qatar).

The al-Qaeda movement in Iraq regularly releases short videos publicising the activity of jihadist suicide bombers. The multimedia content includes guerrilla training clips, stills of victims about to be killed, testimonials of suicide bombers, and epic-themed videos encouraging participation in holy war through stylized portraits of mosques and stirring musical scores.