

Re-Reading al-Qaeda Writings of Yusuf al-Ayiri

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Most works deal with al-Qaeda as a terrorist organization. When these works deal occasionally with al-Qaeda's intellectual background they mostly draw an eschatological ideology that represents history as a cosmic war between good and evil; a metaphysical struggle between the forces of darkness and light.¹ This type of analyses is especially prominent in post-Structuralist writings on al-Qaeda.

According to Jean Baudrillard, 9/11 had shelved concrete politics: "we are far beyond ideology and politics now ... the aim is ... to radicalize the world by sacrifice."² Faisal Devji pursues this line further. His main argument is that a transnational jihad has replaced politics and intentionality. "These are [global] movements whose practices are ethical rather than political in nature because they have been transformed into gestures of risk and duty rather than acts of instrumentality³ [...] One implication of treating holy war as an individual duty (*farz kifaya*), like prayer, is that it becomes spiritualized and finally puts the jihad beyond the pragmatism of political life."⁴

However brilliant these post-Structural insights are, the problem is that in as far as they analyse ideology, they focus only on the top figures, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, and their extreme expressions of globalization, as represented in their speeches, video's, and ad hoc writings and actions. The above authors refrain from studying the more concrete relations between the separate branches of al-Qaeda, the background of their members, their often much more elaborate writings, and their (sometimes) intensive relations with local Muslim political movements. In a way they play into the hands of these leaders by helping them to become mythical heroes who float in empty transnational space.

Only a cursory look at the life and times of the first leader of al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula, Yusuf al-Ayiri, shows that at least this group defies this type of analysis. To be sure, the rhetoric of Bin Laden's civilizational

war is not absent, and in true al-Qaeda style, jihad is regarded as the alpha and omega of Muslim doctrine. But on the whole his programme is imminent-ly political. In fact, purposeful politics—including, its analysis, strategic planning, and mobilization of followers for concrete goals—form the very core of Yusuf al-Ayiri's writings. Intention rather than ethics is the stuff of his writings. Politics are instruments for a specific goal, not explicitly stated as the establishment of an Islamic state, but at least as the destruction of the power of the United States and Israel and the spread of Islam and the Salafi programme (*manhaj*) over the world. Although these goals may not be realistic, they should still be seen as an explicit political agenda. Moreover, it is clear that while Yusuf al-Ayiri was active in al-Qaeda, he was also involved in the Sahwa (awakening) move-

ment, the Saudi Salafi reform movement of the 90s, and always regarded himself as part of that movement.

Yusuf bin Salih bin Fahd al-Ayiri (or Uyayri), born in 1973 in Damam, is a typical member of the Saudi youth who were influenced by the Jihadi youth culture that sprang up in the 1990s under influence of the Sahwa movement. He did not finish his secondary school and left for Afghanistan when he was 18 years old. There he was trained in one of the training camps, al-Faruq, where he himself later became a trainer. He was also for a short while a bodyguard of Osama bin Laden, with whom he travelled to the Sudan in 1994, and was involved in most of the jihadi fronts of the time, many of which he visited: Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, the

Second generation activists such as Yusuf al-Ayiri are now far more important than Osama bin Laden. They are regarded as true role models, the few who defend ideals and want to change "reality." The author argues that to understand the appeal of al-Qaeda related groups, we should look not only at their globally communicated doctrines and ideals, but also analyse how these messages are, often locally, connected to political programmes and activism.

Philippines, and Afghanistan under the Taliban. After the bomb attack in 1996 on the American base at Khobar in Saudi Arabia, he was arrested and tortured in prison. But when he was released two years later he continued his transnational jihadi activities, and was asked by Osama bin Laden to organize the al-Qaeda branch in Saudi Arabia. During the next years he was both a prolific writer, establishing an Islamic research centre, running al-Qaeda's website al-

Nida, as well as recruiting the leaders of the different cells who would later become famous from the mug shots of wanted persons that the Saudi government published after the bomb attacks in Riyadh in 2003. Although Yusuf al-Ayiri was killed in a shoot out in Turba/Hail at the end of May, just after the first bomb attack in Riyadh on 12 May 2003, by what later became known as al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula, his immediate influence reached out to the famous online magazine *Sawt al-Jihad* and beyond. Since his death, he has become a role model for many of the young Jihadi Salafis, embodying the ideal of an independent 'alim-thinker-Jihadi cum political activist, whose death, because of his rooted as well as his transnational background, was a political statement. He was especially honoured by the Jihadi's in Iraq, who in the beginning of the Sunni insurgency often referred to his works and martyrship. But also in the Netherlands, those who probably will stand trial in the Piranha case regard him as a hero, together with one of the subsequent leaders of al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula, Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin.

Rationalism

What immediately strikes the reader of the works of Ayiri is their scope, depth, and length.⁵ Between 1998, when he was released from prison until his death, he managed to publish hundreds of pages on topics ranging from open letters to the two leaders of the Sahwa movement in Saudi Arabia, Salman al-Awda and Safar al-Hawali, to a work on Islamic "modernist" opponents, to several political analyses of the American presence in the Middle East, the jihad in Chechnya, the Abu Sayyaf group in Philippines, and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Some of these works were written only months before he was killed, even after publication of the wanted List of 19, with his mug shot as number ten. In contrast to the usual image of the Jihadi as a myopic ideologue, and a mystical pedant who is alienated from his surroundings, from his work Ayiri comes across as a well-informed, clear-headed, and down to earth analyst. For instance, in his work on the United States in Saudi Arabia he refers to Nixon's memoirs, delves into the Carter and Bush doctrines, and gives a coherent analysis of the American policy in the region. The same applies to his analysis of Iraq, predicting—correctly—a long war just before he himself was killed, or Chechnya, combining his first hand knowledge with historical facts and a clear analysis of the political situation. Although it is doubtful whether he has read all the books he mentions in his work against the "modernists," the array of especially Egyptian writers he castigates is impressive, ranging from Muhammad 'Abduh to Fahmi Huwaydi.

Despite his typical Salafi rejection of rationalism, Ayiri work stands out for the rational and argued quality of his arguments and analysis. In fact, one of Ayiri's overriding concerns is with reality (*al-waq'i*). For instance, in the case of the "martyrship operations," carried out by Chechen women against Russian troops, or the case of Moscow Theatre hostage affair, Ayiri only briefly goes into notion of martyrship and its rewards in heaven. By far the largest part of these writings is taken up with the (chilling) rational analysis of the costs and benefits of such actions, legitimating them because their benefits—vast damage to the

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enemy, psychological disarray, greater awareness for the cause abroad—far outweigh the costs to the mujahidin, who will go to heaven anyway. The same applies to the 9/11 Operation. In accordance with al-Qaeda ideology, the massive killing of innocent Muslims in, for instance, Palestine, Iraq (sanctions) is compared to the limited numbers of deaths in the WTC and Pentagon attacks. The difference with other works, is that Ayiri tries to make a much more political and lengthy and reasoned argument for the attacks, while vehemently attacking American double standards and hypocrisy, which have led to the decline of the Islamic ummah. Despite the presence of the “cosmic” dimension, the analysis focuses on economic, political, as well as cultural factors leading to this war of life and death between the forces of evil, the unbelievers (*kuffar*), and good, the vanguard of Muslims, consisting of the mujahidin.

Activism

However, like all activists, Ayiri is not driven by the search for pure knowledge, whether religious or secular, despite his stress on the necessity of analysing “reality.” His goal is to translate political knowledge and analysis into action, and action into knowledge, almost in the Marxist notion of Praxis. Both are dependent on each other: In the present crisis, knowledge without action is worthless, while action without knowledge is irresponsible and can lead to even greater decline. In that sense concrete political action and not globalized ethics acquires an epistemological dimension, for truth (*haqq*) can only be discerned in action, which is jihad, and this in turn is dependent on individual experiences in very different specific geographic and political circumstances. Only the mujahidin as the vanguard can have true knowledge for they have acquired this unique experience. In this activist sense Jihadi Salafism is truly transformative. The true believer is not just working for God but working in concrete history “for” God, and transforming “reality.” Needless to say, the correct belief (*aqida*) is of course a crucial lynchpin in this process: for believing without action is *irja'*, while acting without a proper belief makes one a hypocrite (*munafiq*). It is in this action and knowledge embodied in jihad that the vanguard, the “victorious group” manifests itself, and sets itself apart from those who are not only weak, but are also theologically misguided and factually misinformed. Sacrifice is therefore neither a goal in itself nor the ultimate legitimation, as post-Structuralists maintain, but sacrifice as a contribution to a concrete victory of Islam over its adversaries. Purity of intention (*ikhlas al-niyya*), such a crucial element in Salafi thinking, is an essential ethical principle, but the action itself is conditional on its practical results. In the end, action must be to the benefit of the “interest (*maslaha*) of the religion,” which can be measured in rational terms.

Local context

Besides throwing new light on the political theory of al-Qaeda, Yusuf al-Ayiri's writings also provide some new insights into al-Qaeda as organization. Although most researchers stress its de-centralized, globalized, networked character, only a few see it as part of a larger Saudi social movement.

Yusuf al-Ayiri writings give a more detailed view of the relations between his group of Jihadi youth and the elder Sahwa shaykhs and their movement. In several writings of Ayiri on the Sahwa movement, among which are two open letters to Safar al-Hawali and Salman al-Awda, it is clear that he feels his group as still part of the movement, while on the other hand he also tries to acquire an independent position and attempts to establish his own religious authority. For instance, in his open letter to Safar al-Hawali he thanks him for educating the youth of the Sahwa, but accuses him of having abandoned his previous ideas after his release from prison in 1999 when he started to attack the jihad and the mujahi-



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din.⁶ Ayiri is especially angered by al-Hawali's accusation that the mujahidin do not have a manhaj. In response, he states that the mujahidin are in fact the only Muslims with a programme. But as important: “they are the only ones who say and do what they believe in.” Only they are “only afraid of God.” In his “advice” to Salman al-Awda he is even more vehement.⁷ He accuses him of “submitting to reality” and therefore “mitigating” and “destabilizing” his manhaj, which will finally lead to “compromise” and “dilution” of the *aqida*, tenet of faith. Even after the Sahwa shaykhs condemned 9/11 and half-heartedly supported opposition against the Americans in Iraq in 2003, Yusuf al-Ayiri did not cut off all his relations with them.⁸ Nor does he rule out other forms of resistance against the Saudi government, such as demonstrations. Instead, to demonstrate his own moral and political superiority, he calls them mere “intellectuals”; they are only interested in “raising consciousness” of the impending US invasion of Iraq and do not call for “practical plans.”

That Yusuf al-Ayiri never intended to wage an armed struggle against the Saudi Arabian state is clear from his last writing after he was added to the List of 19.⁹ In it he warns the general public that the state is rounding up the Jihadis for the benefit of the United States. He concludes that the mujahidin “have not reached this phase voluntarily, but have been forced on this path by measures of the intelligence services.”

Second generation activists as Yusuf al-Ayiri are now far more important than Osama bin Laden or Ayman al-Zawahiri. It is their message that comes across in the countless websites that publish his as well as the works of other young Jihadi Salafis. They are regarded as true role models, the few who defend ideals and want to change “reality,” and pay for the cause with their lives. Their writings embody a new political activism of young thinkers whose religious authority is based on both their religious and their factual political knowledge, reinforced by their claim that only they are independent and pure in their intentions and only they are incorruptible, unswayable, and principled. This transforms them into a much more powerful force than the old al-Qaeda gang.

A combo picture grabbed from a video posted on internet by the Global Islamic Media Center (GIMC), 23 June 2006

Notes

1. Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* (London, 2003), 26.
2. Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (London, 2002), 10.
3. Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad. Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (London, 2005), 11.
4. Ibid., 34.
5. All of Ayiri's works can be found on the www.tawhed.ws website of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, or www.ozoo0.tk.
6. *Risala maftuha ila shaykh Safar al-Hawali. 23 Sha'ban 1422 H.*
7. *Munasiha Salman al-Awda ba'd taghyir manajih*, 15 August 2000.
8. *Hamla al-'alamiyya li-muqawama al-'udwan*, April 2003.
9. *Risala min Yusuf al-'Ayiri, ahad al-matlubin al-tisa' 'ashar ila umum al-muslimin*, May 2003.

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