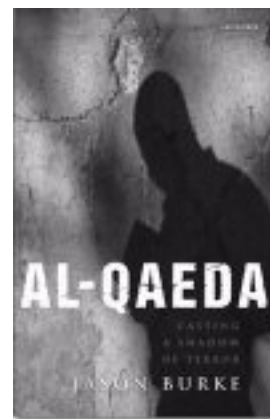


Al Qa'eda: Casting a Shadow of Terror

Jason Burke

Reviewed by Tony LeRay-Meyer



Jason Burke has produced a rare analysis of Al Qa'eda and Islamist militancy that allows the reader to consider the 'adversary' from the adversary's perspective. Burke seeks to deconstruct 'Al Qa'eda' and challenges what he describes as the prevailing Al Qa'eda-centric focus of the 'War on Terror'. Burke poignantly argues that the real threat is more 'diverse, dynamic, and protean and profoundly difficult to characterise'. The book is essential reading for those seeking to understand the phenomenon of Al Qa'eda, and more broadly the reality of the threat from Islamist terrorism.

Burke, Chief Reporter for London's *The Observer*, based this one-volume work on his experiences reporting from Afghanistan and Pakistan in the four years leading up to the fall of the Taliban in 2001. He uses extensive interviews and a comprehensive use of documentary evidence to support his research. The book is well organised into sixteen chapters. The first two chapters introduce a number of key concepts that are central to a critical analysis of Al Qa'eda. Chapters 3–8 consider the history of Osama Bin Laden. The final six chapters closely analyse Al Qa'eda and its operations between 1996 and 2001, before drawing conclusions about the reality of the actual threat today.

As one of the first Western journalists to enter Kabul after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, and to observe what he refers to as the tragedy of the Battle of Tora Bora, Burke asked himself—why? Why had it come to this? Why did September 11 occur? The answer to this, he felt, would provide a more accurate insight into who 'they' are and what is evolving, rather than a more linear and conventional focus on 'how' did it happen, 'how' many of 'them' are there or how many are left to capture or kill. Burke maintains that the reality of Islamist terrorism transcends Al Qa'eda. His stark logic is compelling as many of the post-9/11 books have not provided this perspective.

The basic premise of Burke's analysis is to question whether Al Qa'eda was and is a coherent organisation or a network of networks controlling and directing transnational Islamist terrorism. He concludes that Al Qa'eda usually operated at the margins of the real threat of Islamic terrorism. Many of the acts attributed to Al Qa'eda, such as the East Africa bombing in 1998 or the 'Millenium Plot' in 1999, were conceived and attempted by individuals or groups outside the aegis of the inner

hardcore grouping of Al Qa'eda. Osama Bin Laden was and is by no means the master controller. Consequently the jihadi-salafist Al Qa'eda world view acts more as a formula than a network, a function not an entity. 'Islamic militancy is a broad based, multivalent, diverse movement. It goes far beyond the deeds or words of one man or one small organisation'. There is no 'network of networks' nor are there 'tentacles of terror', as each applies a degree of central control that Burke believes simply does not exist.

Burke's analysis is complex and detailed, as are ostensibly much of the Al Qa'eda genre published to date. In contrast to many, however, he references his narratives and arguments extensively and has made wide use of primary interviews. There are some weaknesses in the evidence provided, especially in the degree of corroboration, the use of unidentified interviewees and even some unsubstantiated statements. However, on balance, he has made a genuine attempt to provide credible and comprehensive referencing to support his analysis. Although at first this book is not easily read, you should not be distracted by its detail. Whether Burke is describing the nature and evolution of political Islamism in Pakistan, the operations of the terrorist training camps in Afghanistan, or the planning and execution of the Millennium plot in 1999, his analysis is persuasive and thought provoking.

The most contentious aspect of his book is likely to be his conclusions on Western responses to Islamist terrorism. Burke considers the West's response was initiated without a thorough appreciation of the problem or the adversary. If Burke is correct—that Western responses are wrongly based on an Al Qa'eda-centric strategy—then these responses fail to deal with the actual threat beyond the existence of 'Al Qa'eda' or Osama Bin Laden.

The value of this book is not whether you agree with his conclusions but in his attempts to understand the reality of the threat from Islamist terrorism. Burke sought to find an answer to 'why' and then in turn 'who'. Even if his arguments are contentious or disputed, Burke has achieved his aim. He provides a unique contribution to the ever-growing and not always informed commentary on the nature of Islamist terrorism. ♦

Jason Burke, *'Al-Qa'eda: Casting a Shadow of Terror'*, I.B. Taurus, London, 2003, casebound and jacketed, 292pp, RRP \$39.80.