OPINION

Does Al-Qaida exist?

Since the 11 September attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, Al-Qaida has been represented as a monolithic organisation with an almost global reach. However, some observers believe Al-Qaida is little more than an idea connecting the largely independent actions of a loose network of organisations and individuals. Peter Marsden traces the history of Al-Qaida and concludes that while the global organisation of popular belief does not exist, the US-led 'war on terror' may be the catalyst that turns the myth of Al-Qaida into reality.

The US air strikes on Afghanistan of August 1998 brought to world attention the names of Al-Qaida and its reported leader, Osama bin Laden. The latter was presented as orchestrating a global campaign of terrorist activity from a network of terrorist training camps in Afghanistan. Thereafter, his profile continued to rise until, by the time of the US elections in early 2001, he was already identified as the primary target of US defence policy. When the World Trade Centre was the object of the major terrorist attack of 11 September 2001, the US President immediately issued a public accusation that Osama bin Laden was responsible for the attack. This was used to justify the subsequent US-led military intervention in Afghanistan and the establishment of US military bases in Afghanistan to facilitate a search for Taliban and Al-Qaida forces.

The reality is much more complex. Al-Qaida was the name of an organisation set up in Peshawar, Pakistan to process volunteers from other parts of the Islamic world who wanted to fight alongside the Mujahidin in the jihad against the Soviet occupying forces. The volunteers processed by Al-Qaida were sent to military training camps operated, with US support, by one or other of the Mujahidin parties. Osama bin Laden was mandated by the Saudi Government to set up this office. Al-Qaida was not, therefore, a political movement.

However, there were organisations participating in the jihad which did advocate violence against the West and they formed part of a network of radical Islamic organisations based in Pakistan which espoused a multiplicity of political objectives. It should be stressed, however, that those who argued for violence against Western targets were a minority.

This minority grew in size over the course of the 1990s in response to specific actions of the international community and, in particular, of the US Government the first of these, the Gulf War of 1991, led to the stationing of US troops on Saudi soil. This provoked outrage throughout the Islamic world because the US presence was seen as a violation of the Islamic holy places.

Osama bin Laden joined forces with certain radical leaders in the Sudan to campaign for the removal of US forces from Saudi Arabia. His activities resulted in his expulsion from the Sudan, as a result of US pressure on the government, and he took refuge in Afghanistan. There he maintained a low profile until the US air strikes on Afghanistan of August 1998 made him into an internationally-known figure. The US government demanded that the Taliban hand him over to face justice as a key suspect in the terrorist attacks on the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam of that month. The Taliban, who had, up to that point, had very little contact with Osama bin Laden, were forced to offer him protection. To have done otherwise would have lost them their support base amongst the students of Islamic madrasahs in Pakistan and amongst particular radical Islamic parties in Pakistan.

From here on, both Osama bin Laden and the Taliban took on enormous symbolic importance as defenders of the Islamic world against the West.

The political environment in Afghanistan became progressively more radical. The Taliban attracted large numbers of volunteers from other parts of the Islamic world to fight alongside them as they sought to complete their conquest of Afghanistan in order to create an Islamic state. The volunteers received military training in the camps set up for the Afghan jihad, and some joined one or other of the groups that advocated violence against the West. Many returned from Afghanistan, to their countries of origin or settlement, inspired by the sense of solidarity they had felt with other volunteers in Afghanistan and, also, in some cases, inspired by the political messages they had heard.

We have, therefore, an international network of people who have fought in Afghanistan, some of whom have since opted to engage in terrorist activity against Western targets as a result. This network is referred to as Al-Qaida but it is no more than a loose network. The literature I have read on Al-Qaida provides no evidence that Al-Qaida is the global organisation that it has been portrayed to be, able to orchestrate terrorist acts world-wide. The risk is that actions by the US Government which deeply offend Islamic opinion, such as the recent US-led military intervention in Iraq, will strengthen communication within the network to the point where greater collaboration will create greater effectiveness and the myth of Al-Qaida may become a reality.

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The views expressed in this article are entirely his own.