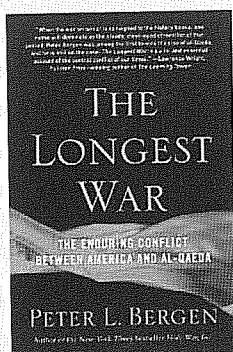## The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict Between America and Al-Qaeda

Author: Peter Bergen
Published by: Free Press, New York, 2011, 475pp.

The 9/11 Wars

Author: Jason Burke
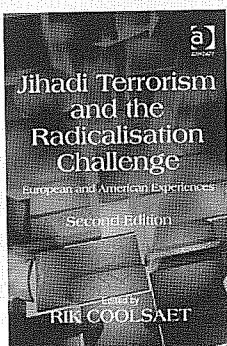Published by: Allen Lane (Penguin), London, 2011, 706pp.

Jihadi Terrorism and the Radicalisation Challenge: European and American Experiences
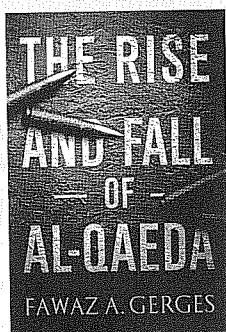
Edited by: Rick Coolsaet
Published by: Ashgate, Farnham (Surrey), 2011, 326pp.
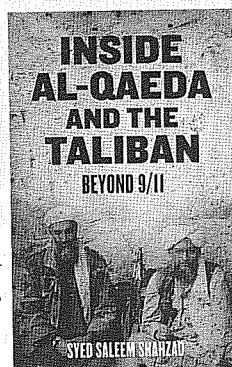
The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda

Author: Fawaz A. Gerges
Published by: Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, 259pp.

Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban: Beyond Bin Laden and 9/11

Author: Syed Saleem Shahzad
Published by: Pluto Press and Palgrave MacMillan, London, 2011, 260pp.

Reassessing 9/11

Anthony Smith reviews a selection of recent books looking at the 2001 attacks on the United States.

More than a decade after al-Qaeda's 11 September 2001 (9/11) attack on US soil that took the lives of nearly 3000 people, it becomes easier to reflect on what this event has meant for global politics. Many misconceptions, however, circulated at the time and it may still be the case that much of what is believed about this event and its aftermath is wrong.

Some recent studies on al-Qaeda offer us important insights. Books by three noted commentators on the subject — Peter Bergen (CNN journalist), Jason Burke (*Guardian* journalist), and Fawaz Gerges (London School of Economics) — are all excellent historical overviews, with Burke's larger volume covering the most ground. Belgium academic Rik Coolsaet's edited volume features essays on the theme of radicalisation, mostly referencing Western countries. Syed Saleem Shahzad, a journalist in Pakistan, who was tragically murdered, offers an alternative view on al-Qaeda and its strategy.

One theme that emerges strongly in the overview histories is that the al-Qaeda threat has receded (albeit not dissipated), despite a temporary revival of its fortunes during the initial years of the Iraq War, as suggested in Gerges's title *The Rise and Fall of Al-Qaeda*. Bergen notes that 9/11 was not the beginning of al-Qaeda's terrorism against the West, and to date this event represents its apex. Although other spectacular acts have been planned since, the pattern has been a steady decrease in capability. Talk of al-Qaeda splinter groups, the spread of the 'brand' to 'franchises', and occasional 'lone wolf' attacks probably contribute to growing public alarm. But to Coolsaet — who has in mind the fragmentation of Western Europe's left-wing terrorist groups in the 1970s before they faded from the scene — al-Qaeda's call, after bin Laden's death, for adherents

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Osama bin Laden
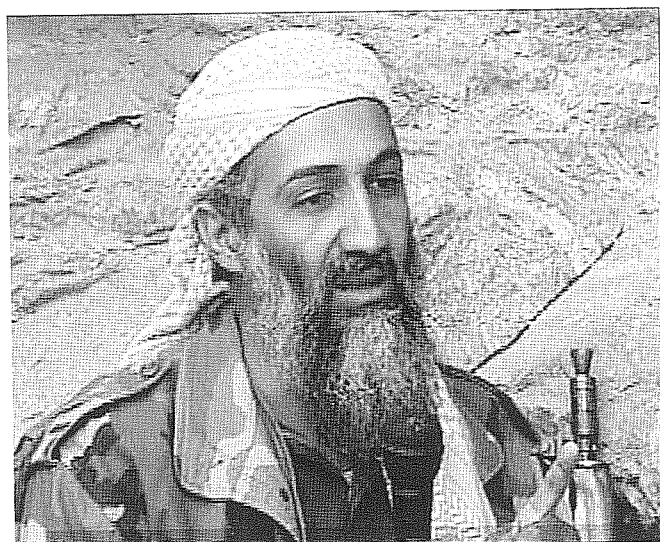
The 9/11 attack on the twin towers

to take revenge by launching spree attacks with small arms, is actually a sign of weakness not strength. (There have been no such successful revenge attacks, which probably further confirms Coolsaet's point.)

A question that many asked in the decade after 9/11 was why were there not many more terrorist events (particularly of the low-tech kind witnessed in Mumbai where gunmen just killed bystanders)? To Gerges, the most obvious answer is that Osama bin Laden mostly failed to convince the wider Muslim community of his goals and methods. Al-Qaeda, Gerges notes, was up to 4000 strong at its peak, but its numbers on the Afghanistan–Pakistan border regions are now less than 300. The original al-Qaeda cadre was devastated and the core group simply unable to replenish its numbers. These authors all note that Osama bin Laden's successor (and practically now the last man standing in al-Qaeda's core group), Ayman Zarawhiri, is a weak leader and does not command complete support.

A failure to understand the threat, according to Gerges, caused countries to over-estimate the problem, increase spend-

Sayyid Qutb

ing (and indebtedness), and generate, at least in the United States, a 'national security complex'. Gerges accuses the Bush administration of seeing al-Qaeda as a 'potent strategic adversary' rather than the fringe group that it was. Bergen's analysis tracks with this: the Bush administration raised al-Qaeda 'to the status of the strategic existential threat that the group craved to be'. Bergen ponders whether this caused the Bush administration to set aside issues of true strategic significance, particularly those in East Asia.

Perception failure

Further we can see there was a failure to understand the nature of the al-Qaeda threat, and even the fine grain of divisions within the Muslim world. Burke notes that Russian leader Putin told both Bush and Blair after 9/11 that al-Qaeda represented the same sort of 'Islamic fundamentalist' threat he faced in separatist Chechnya. Gerges, highlighting the distinction drawn in jihadist circles between the 'near enemy' (Arab despot regimes) and the 'far enemy' (the West), notes that bin Laden's strategic vision was fundamentally different to that of his mentors. Sayyid Qutb (the radical ideologue executed by Egyptian President Nasser), whose writings are prominent for al-Qaeda cadre, and Abdullah Azzam (leader of the Afghan Arabs who fought the Soviets), were part of a tradition that believed in revolution against the 'near enemy', not the West. Bin Laden, believing that US support for Arab leaders was the sole reason for the survival of these dictators, turned Qutb's logic on its head. (In fact, with spontaneous popular demonstrations removing dictators in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, and putting immense pressure on others, it is easy to see how this is an existential challenge to the bin Laden/al-Qaeda narrative of the all-powerful American puppet master.)

These ideological differences have proved important, particularly as bin Laden faced severe criticism from some leading militant theoreticians. As Gerges and others note, a major ideological body blow to al-Qaeda was inflicted by Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (or Dr Fadl), an influential intellectual in al-Qaeda and militant circles, who launched a blistering attack in 2007 on bin Laden and his then deputy Zarawhiri, as 'false prophets' on account of their particular form of chosen violence. Bergen's research highlights the fact that senior associates of bin Laden were even opposed to his determination to strike the West on 9/11 prior to the event itself.

Abdullah Azzam

To Bergen (and apparently to some of bin Laden's lieutenants), the al-Qaeda leader had become increasingly deluded about what he saw as the weakness of America. (Bergen notes that the United States had initially failed to respond militarily to the bombing of the USS *Cole*, which may have emboldened bin Laden.)
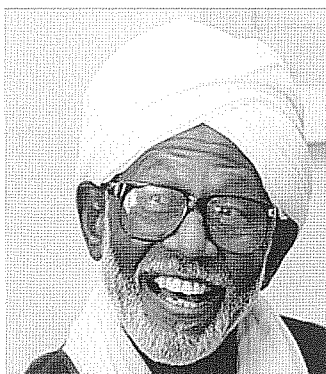

Sayyid Imam al-Sharif

USS Cole *after the attack*

Muslim condemnation

It is commonly believed in the West that Muslim leaders failed to condemn bin Laden's terrorism after 9/11, but this is not the case. Some Islamic clerics did use the opportunity to note some of America's foreign policy 'crimes', although as Burke notes this was by no means confined to the Muslim world. Not only did moderate Muslim leaders speak against al-Qaeda after 9/11, condemnations came from circles not noted for their love for the United States. Gerges offers some interesting, and probably not well known, examples: thousands of Iranians held candlelight vigils for the victims of 9/11 (President Khatami also spoke against al-Qaeda); and condemnations of the violence were forthcoming from al-Turabi (a prominent Sudanese Islamist), Fadlallah (the spiritual father of Lebanese

Hassan al-Turabi

Ramzi Yousef

Yusuf al-Qaradawi

Khalid Sheikh Mohammad

Hizballah) and Yusuf al-Qaradawi (an influential conservative Sunni theologian). Opposition to al-Qaeda, even from other militant groups, is still evident. Not only did al-Qaeda and Hamas leaders enter into an ideological war of words — al-Qaeda has objected to what it sees as signs of compromise towards Israel — but also Hamas for its part evidently tolerates no al-Qaeda presence in Gaza. Burke notes that Hamas executed 24 members of a group called Jund Ansar Allah, which espoused some form of 'binladenism', in Rafah in August 2009.

Furthermore, the Muslim Brotherhood movements across the Middle East have renounced violence and accepted democratic practice, something anathema to al-Qaeda. A failure to draw distinctions between Islamist movements leads Gerges to charge many policy-makers and commentators with a 'terrorism narrative', in which the West was under contact and imminent threat in some sort of clash of civilisations. Gerges takes exception to the erroneous belief repeated in some early literature that al-Qaeda spoke for a significant segment of Islam (perhaps best captured in the common Western misconception — based on precedence being given to the statements of militant voices within Islam — that jihad means 'holy war', when it literally means 'struggle' and has multiple interpretations). Gerges finds emblematic of monochromatic thinking a quotation from Newt Gingrich, Republican former speaker of the House of Representatives, regarding the proposal for an Islamic cultural centre (the so-called 'ground zero Mosque') in New York: 'Nazis don't have the right to put up a sign next to the Holocaust Museum in Washington.'
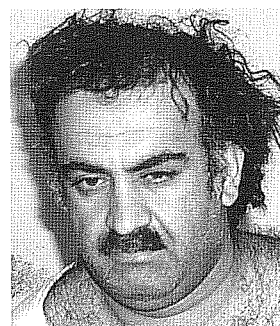
Conflated threats

This background may explain why there was a conflation of threats. Burke notes that the phase 'War on Terrorism' was chosen over 'War on Radical Islam', but on the evidence presented in these accounts the Bush administration may have conceived of this conflict as one well beyond that of the rank and file of al-Qaeda. In particular the administration grew fearful of a weapons of mass destruction threat, and the idea of

Laurie Mylroie

a possible nexus between rogue regimes and terrorist entities, which may have caused Bush to coin the expression 'Axis of Evil' (Iraq, Iran and North Korea) in the aftermath of 9/11. Bergen notes the role of academic (and conspiracist) Laurie Mylroie in successfully peddling the idea in the Bush administration that Ramzi Yousef (convicted for an earlier attempt to topple the World Trade Center) and Khalid Sheikh Mohammad (the so-called 9/11 'mastermind') were Iraqi agents. To Bergen the linkage between Iraq and al-Qaeda made concerns about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction all the more exigent, when both propositions were later found to be false. (Burke notes that British leader Blair, not necessarily taken in by suggestions of an al-Qaeda–Iraq tie up, nonetheless thought such a linkage remained a future threat.) To Bergen, who interviewed bin Laden in 1997, al-Qaeda's hatred for Saddam Hussein should have been evident to anyone who looked carefully enough.

The Iraq War, which had the obvious benefit of removing Saddam, when judged against the criterion of defeating al-Qaeda is seen in these retrospective accounts as an abject failure. Gerges calls this war a 'god-send' to al-Qaeda; to Bergen, the West 'snatched defeat from the jaws of victory'. Militancy — including in Western countries — got a massive, albeit temporary, boost on account of the Iraq War. Preparations for war in Iraq, something in the works soon after 9/11, generated an opportunity cost in Afghanistan, where the troop and aid footprints were far too small; Bergen believes this to be the result of holding back troops for Iraq and Bush's disinclination to engage in nation-building (Bergen also notes an exaggerated fear of Afghanistan as a 'graveyard of empires'). Many commentators now note that SEAL Team 6, which successfully executed the raid on bin Laden's compound in 2011, was deployed in Iraq until early 2009. The Iraq War also assisted al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in recruiting large numbers of foreign fighters to form the largest deployment of suicide bombers ever seen. Bergen notes that in contrast to Afghanistan, where the US-assisted overthrow of the Taliban in pursuit of al-Qaeda drew very few foreign fighters, the Iraq War could be more easily portrayed throughout the Islamic world in theological terms as a defensive jihad. In short, Iraq became

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi
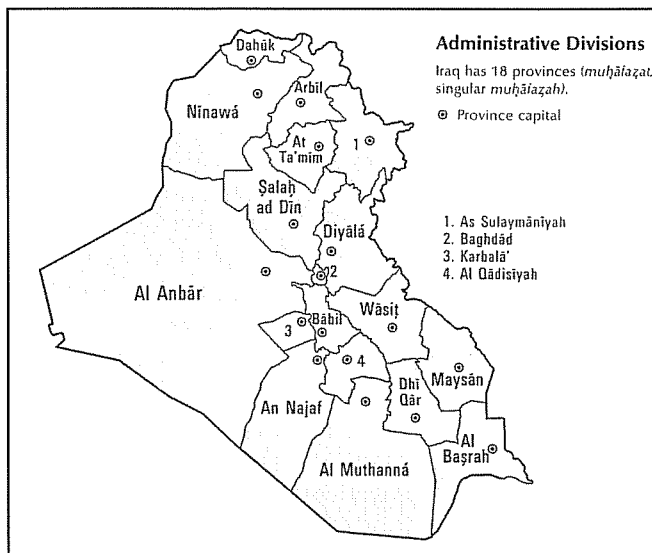
Iraq divisions

the recruitment tool that Afghanistan was not. Bergen rejects the so-called 'flypaper theory', that holds that the war in Iraq drew extant terrorists into the field of battle rather than — in Bush's own words — 'face them in our own streets'. Rather, this war created a new wave of radicalisation and threats within Western countries themselves.

Local unpopularity

But what helped decimate al-Qaeda in Iraq was its local unpopularity. Zarqawi, until his death in 2006, turned his violence towards Iraq's Shia majority, attempting to kill as many civilians as possible in order to spark a bitter civil war that would, in this Mephistophelean scheme, radicalise his fellow Sunnis. In committing these excesses Zarqawi proved uncontrollable to the al-Qaeda leadership he had, in theory, sworn allegiance to. (Gerges judges that public opinion turning against violent militancy had already been observed in Egypt and Algeria, and this also occurred in Iraq.) Bergen notes that by 2006 al-Qaeda in Iraq controlled Anbar province (a third of Iraq), setting up a stifling and ruthless Taliban-style rule that few Iraqi Sunnis could bear. Ultimately 100,000 Sunni insurgents switched sides — 'the Sunni Awakening' — and turned the tables on al-Qaeda in Iraq. This coincided with, as both Bergen and Burke delve into, the re-imaging of counter-insurgency doctrine (in Afghanistan too) whereby international forces, newly trained in cultural sensitivity, got out of their 'forward operating bases' and actively engaged with local populations. In sum, they belatedly switched from a focus on killing the enemy to engaging with, and protecting, the public.

If the Bush government is found wanting over both Iraq and Afghanistan, Bergen adds to this critique an excoriation of the administration for jettisoning America's core principles when it refused to honour the Geneva Convention and the UN Convention Against Torture. The convention stipulates that suspects cannot be handed over to authorities known to use torture or arbitrary execution. Yet suspects (some, Bergen notes, later found innocent) were delivered through a means euphemistically called 'extraordinary rendition' to places like Egypt, Yemen, Morocco and Algeria, but also to countries with awkward diplomatic histories with the United States,

such as Libya, Sudan and Syria. Bergen quotes jurist Philip Bobbit as calling this the policy of a crime family, not a great nation, and one that 'outsources our crimes'. Furthermore, Bergen assembles evidence that torture (to include what occurred within America's own institutions) was not only both unethical and damaging to America's reputation but also either useless or liable to throw up erroneous information (such as an al-Qaeda link to Iraq). Breakthroughs tended to occur more with militants who were persuaded to turn through legal interrogation methods and humanitarian approaches. Bergen quotes FBI director Robert Mueller as saying in 2008 that he did not believe anything useful had ever come from 'enhanced interrogation'. Because of the legal doctrine of 'the fruit of the poisonous tree', prosecution of Guantanamo inmates could now be a very difficult proposition.

Terrorist franchises

Of the many books and media commentaries that constitute an overview of the al-Qaeda phenomenon, few are able to come to grips with the localised nature of the so-called al-Qaeda 'franchises' outside of the core network in a number of countries, but Burke's *9/11 Wars* is a laudable exception. While al-Qaeda affiliates — of various kinds — have emerged in Yemen, Somalia and Algeria (although local alienation factors are at play here), this is not evidence of al-Qaeda's 'protean indestructibility'. Burke quite importantly considers the places where al-Qaeda linked militants have failed to kick start viable affiliates, including Morocco, Libya and Saudi Arabia. Even in Indonesia, the late Noordin Top's terrorism and self-identification with al-Qaeda's ideology have not amounted to a substantive movement.

Coolsaet's edited volume, focused on radicalisation, provides another important piece of the puzzle. It used to be argued that Europe was a breeding ground for Islamic radicalisation, while Muslims in the United States were largely immune. Both assumptions were hyperbole, with small numbers of those radicalised in both places (albeit in higher concentrations in places like the United States and France).

Root causes

Coolsaet's volume puts the idea of 'root causes' of terrorism — once rejected by many US commentators as inappropriate in al-Qaeda's case — back on centre stage. Conceptions within Europe about terrorism draw heavily on experiences within living memory of leftist terrorism in the 1970s, and the parallels are more compelling than might be immediately obvious. Leena Malkki (University of Helsinki) notes the obvious differences between al-Qaeda and a group like West Germany's Red Army Faction (RAF; or the 'Baader-Meinhof Gang') — such as the RAF's rejection of organised religion, and al-Qaeda's inclination to maximise civilian casualties. But this should not obscure the similarities. Leftist terrorism in Europe (and in the United States) was an outgrowth of the globalised nature of what might be termed the 'spirit' of 1968, inspired by revolutionary movements in Latin America, and radicalised by international causes, notably the Vietnam War and the (enduring) Palestinian situation. The RAF also thought of itself as opposing fascism in the form of the West German state (in imagined contrast to their parents' quiescence towards Hitler), and polling showed the group enjoyed sympathy from a quarter of all German youth.
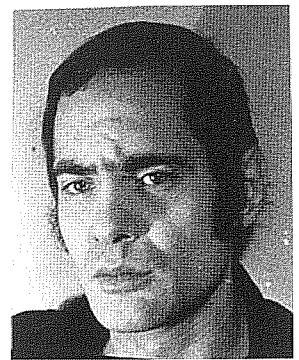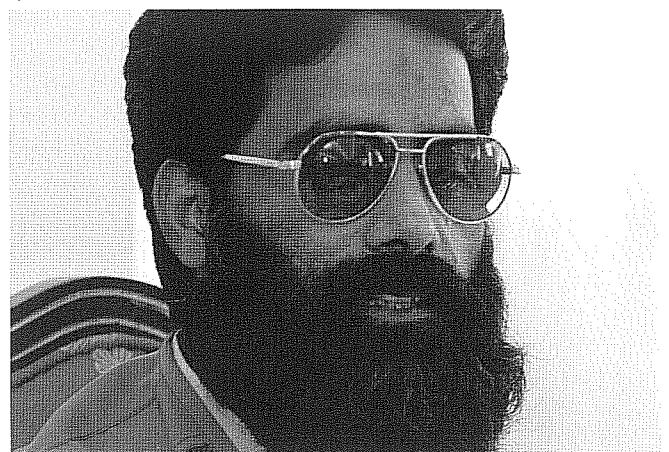
Although Europe's left-wing terrorist groups are commonly thought of as specific to each country, there was a wider sense of solidarity, and functioning links between them. For example, Rode Jeugh (a militant group in the Netherlands) had links to the RAF groups in Greece and Portugal, and actively assisted the IRA. Leftist terrorist groups also had a strong sense of martyrdom; RAF leaders Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof (along with some of their associates) were to kill themselves in their jail cells to inspire others and to embarrass the German authorities (many at the time suspected these were extra-judicial killings). Self-sacrifice and a global struggle (identity politics) are two themes of that time period that also feature prominently

Andreas Baader

Ulrike Meinhof

with al-Qaeda: noted French academic Oliver Roy argues in his chapter in Coolsaet's volume that radicalised individuals who would have once turned to the ultra left might now turn to militant Islam. (Reflecting on earlier waves of terrorism, anarchism, fascist and right wing terror in the 1920s and 1930s, ultra-leftist terrorism in the 1970s, and ethno-nationalist militancy over many decades in Europe, it is sobering to think that none have actually completely burned out.)

Important overview

Former CIA forensic psychiatrist and NYPD scholar-in-residence Marc Sageman, known for his ground-breaking work on radicalisation based on hundreds of interviews with militants, has an important overview chapter in Coolsaet's volume. Sageman notes that the term 'radicalisation' itself requires some unpacking; only a very small number of those who espouse violence ultimately turn to it — a dilemma for law enforcement. What Sageman stresses is that there is no common profile of an individual that turns to political violence, as this phenomenon cuts across personality types and demographics
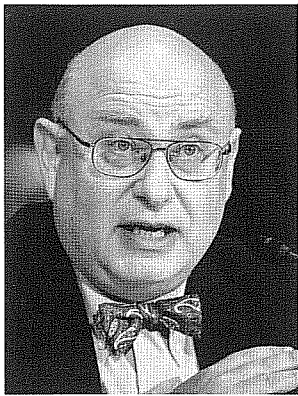
Ilyas Kashmiri

Marc Sageman

(albeit with young people being over-represented) — and counter-intuitively very few militants could be said to be insane or 'brain washed'. There are numerous examples now of 'bottom up' radicalisation, often within a group context, where self-starters attempt to initiate contact with al-Qaeda (and few examples of the reverse), although the internet provides ready access to a wider community once initial steps are taken.

Religious belief and political ideology may be weak or inconsistent for radicalised individuals. But for Sageman, who stresses the importance of group cohesion and commitment, those who form violent interpretations of Islam (often in rejection of both their parents' moderate form of Islam as well as a protest against wider society) have come to accept a narrative that posits the West as at war against Islam, the evidence for which they see in Chechnya, Bosnia–Herzegovina, Iraq and Palestine. As Gerges warns, it is too easy to see this phenomenon as simply the product of an 'irrational hatred of the West' — an analysis that fails to grapple with wider causes of radicalisation. As contributors to Coolsaet's volume ask, if the Islamic faith is the sole explanation for violence, why has that been manifest in anti-Western terrorism only in recent times? Coolsaet, on the basis of the European experience, draws the conclusion that the pull for individuals towards Islamic extremism has to do with the crucial intersection between personal experience of alienation and the embedding of that experience in a global struggle.

Alternative view

For an insight into an alternative view, and one informed by the milieu in Pakistan, Shahzad's *Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban*, relative to the other literature surveyed here, seems to dive down a completely different rabbit hole. Shahzad, with access to some leading jihadist figures, concludes that al-Qaeda is utilising other extremist entities (including Taliban movements in both Afghanistan and Pakistan) to draw in and tie down Western forces. Rather than a miscalculation by bin Laden about US resolve, al-Qaeda is cleverly exhausting the West in this view. The problem with Shahzad's account — which sees international involvement in the region as imperialism — is a seeming readiness to accept what extremist figures have claimed as post-facto strategic justification. Shahzad does not appear to openly side with al-Qaeda's worldview, but certainly lauds some of its main leaders — Zarawhiri is 'not an ordinary man but a half-century long movement', while Ilyas Kashmiri (who Shahzad interviewed) is supposedly one of the most effective, dangerous and successful 'guerrilla' leaders in the world. Ilyas Kashmiri (who was reportedly killed soon after bin Laden) may be the source of Shahzad's conclusion (although frustratingly this volume contains not a single reference, making it hard to verify anything much) that the attack on Mumbai was about generating another stand-off between India and Pakistan, thereby ending Islamabad's operations against militants in the tribal areas. Shahzad also summarises al-Qaeda's *takfir* ideology

on the basis of his interviews, namely its willingness to declare nominal Muslims outside the faith; this author claims that extremists believe this sort of apostasy applies to the majority of all Muslims worldwide. This may account for why Muslims have constituted the largest number of victims during the violence caused by al-Qaeda and its fellow travellers; Shahzad quotes an extremist figure as stating that if people have not joined the struggle then they have essentially chosen to be part of the problem.

Hosni Mubarak

Turning to the Arab Spring, these books were either written before it occurred or when it had just started. Bergen has noted in interviews since the publication of his book that the Arab Spring has been a fundamental challenge to the al-Qaeda vision. Subsequent electoral wins by the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist political parties in Egypt, and the rise of Islamist political forces in neighbouring Libya, have been viewed with alarm by some Western commentators who appear to prefer the old regimes. But political change in the Middle East ought to be seen in a different light. Egypt's President Mubarak, to take a leading example, was an ambiguous friend, at best, to the West (and to Israel — under Mubarak Egyptian state media was allowed to peddle anti-Semitism, including a televised series of the fraudulent Protocols of the Elders of Zion). Gerges notes: 'America must realize that Middle Eastern dictators have not only brought ruin to their societies, they have fuelled anti-American and anti-Western sentiments there.' In other words, America took the blame for human rights abuses and unfair conditions in these societies, while these regimes simultaneously allowed Occidentalist and anti-Semitic stereotyping to occur in official media outlets and through schools. Even if Western democratic societies can be the scene of terrorist violence on account of their relative freedom and openness that militants can exploit, the weight of radicalisation within the Islamic world has actually occurred in the despotic and blinkered conditions Gerges outlines above.