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THE ESSENCE OF AL QAEDA: AN INTERVIEW WITH SAAD AL-FAQIH

By Mahan Abedin

Dr. al-Faqih heads the Saudi opposition group, Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA), and is a widely acknowledged expert on al Qaeda. Terrorism Monitor Special Correspondent Mahan Abedin conducted this interview in London on January 23, 2004.

TM: The first thing I want to ask you is what exactly you understand by the name al-Qaeda?

SF: For the last 2-3 years it has been taken for granted that al-Qaeda is an organization headed by Bin Laden and conducts plans and projects to challenge the United States in the whole world. Even Bin Laden's followers are using this term now. Now until recently this term was used only by America and people who just replicated America. This term was not used by the organization which is supposed to be al-Qaeda. They used to run their business without allocating it a name—they might call themselves al-Mujahedeen from time to time but thought they did not need a specific name for their actions. Only recently when it became unavoidable to define itself politically and militarily they found themselves obliged to use this term. If you go back to their literature the first time they used the name al-Qaeda was through Suleiman Abu Ghaith after September 11th.

TM: So it is only a point of reference? It is not supposed to define any coherent organization?

SF: No, I am talking about the term al-Qaeda. This term is mostly used by the Americans. Otherwise the organization is real. It has its own structures, its strategies and its plans, but the term al-Qaeda was not used by them or their supporters. Then al-Qaeda people needed a few years to accept calling themselves by this name. The word al-Qaeda was originally used by Bin Laden's core followers to refer to a documentation system in the late 1980's.

TM: Before this term became consolidated how did these people refer to themselves, as Mujahedeen, as Islamic ideologues?

SF: They do not have any literature that referred to them as an organization. They always referred to Mujahedden or Jihad. At times they used Arab Afghans. The interesting thing is that this is the culture in Saudi Arabia--you do not need to name organizations. So people are not aware there are organizations until it becomes really necessary. I'll give you an example; at the moment there are many peaceful underground organizations in Saudi Arabia, they have never named themselves and they have never published any literature on behalf of their organization.

TM: Is it because they want to avoid surveillance and censure?

SF: To some extent. But it is just natural given the secretive nature of Saudi Arabian society.

TM: Is this part of Islamic psychology as well insofar as Islam counsels discretion?

SF: No it is not! The call for Islam itself is public. And the call for Jihad and Amr Bel Maarouf are public.[1] Only minute organizational details are supposed to be kept secret.

TM: You said something interesting in an interview with Frontline back in 1999—and you just repeated it here—namely that al-Qaeda originated from a documentation system in the Bait al-Ansar guesthouse back in the 1980's.[2]

SF: The term yes, but the organisation's history is much more interesting than that!

TM: Your analysis of the emergence of al-Qaeda is different from widely held notions that Bin Laden and Atef effectively christened the organisation in 1989. How significant do you think the events of 1989 were?

SF: Maybe in terms of structural organization this event was significant. But in terms of the historical significance of the al-Qaeda phenomenon the most important turning points were when the Americans went to Saudi Arabia and when Bin Laden met Zawahiri again in late 1997....

TM: Late 1997?

SF: Well I think they met many times in Sudan. But in late 1997 they decided to form a completely new strategy based on global and cosmic confrontation with America....

TM: What do you mean by "cosmic"?

SF: Global and full scale confrontation! They decided to conduct their actions relying not on their own resources but by manipulating those of their enemies. In short they decided to convert their enemy into a powerful tool for their own use.

TM: And how were they going to do that?

SF: Let us start from the beginning. When Bin Laden started Jihad in Afghanistan he was a simple and motivated Muslim who wanted to assist his brother Muslims in Afghanistan. Of course he started learning about international politics and the balance of power between the Americans and the Soviets at that time. But he was too preoccupied with the military situation. Some of his followers have said that he was predicting a future confrontation with America....

TM: Even at that early stage?

SF: Yes! The period in the 1980's was largely taken up by confrontation with the Soviet army. When the Royal family invited the American forces to Saudi Arabia or when the Americans decided to come—however you like to put it—Bin Laden was shocked. He had fought in Afghanistan to keep the Russians out while now the most sacred Islamic country was being invaded by the Americans as he saw it. Now if he wanted to be consistent he would now have to fight the Americans. Bin Laden was stunned and shocked by the betrayal of the regime, the religious establishment and the scholars. No one seemed to take it seriously that half a million American infidels are in the middle of the Arabian Peninsula. This had a profound impact on Bin Laden's thinking and view of the world. He came to the conclusion that the cause of Islam could no longer be promoted through the exploitation of schisms between states. He had to choose other means. His plan then was to leave Saudi Arabia. At first he went back to Afghanistan to try to mediate between the warring Mujahedeen factions. He failed and in fact he was almost assassinated....

TM: This is 1992 when the Mujahedeen factions had just taken Kabul?

SF: Yes! Then Bin Laden went to Sudan. In Sudan he was aware that the regime there was not

very strong....

TM: I want to clarify something on the Sudan. Did Bin Laden go there with the belief that the Sudanese were implementing an Islamic State? Remember there was a lot of excitement about Sudan back then amongst Sunni Islamists everywhere. Sudan was being aggressively marketed as an emerging Islamist regime.

SF: No! He was aware they were keen to become closer to Islam but I don't think he thought they were implementing real Islam in the Sudan. The Salafis in Saudi Arabia have a lot of reservation on Hassan al-Turabi....

TM: They think he is a real maverick, don't they?

SF: (laughs) Yes! He was aware of Turabi's pragmatism. Bin Laden's interest at that time was shelter rather than patronage or adoption. He thought they would give him shelter. And he also wanted to help the Sudanese with his own expertise in construction. At that time the Saudi regime was not treating him with hostility. Many Hijazi merchants would go to Sudan and consult with Bin Laden. Bin Laden encouraged people to invest in Sudanese commerce and finance. But he did not promote Islamic causes in Sudan.

TM: Did Bin Laden ever participate in the fighting in southern Sudan?

SF: No, he did not, but he was involved in a plan for Jihad in south Yemen. This started even before the Gulf war, before the Americans came to Saudi Arabia.

TM: What else did Bin Laden do in Sudan?

SF: He did not do anything substantive in Sudan. He left for Afghanistan because he felt insecure in Sudan. When he went to Afghanistan he felt he had no limitations. At that time he knew he was confronting America because the U.S. had invaded his country. He had no clear strategy save arousing Muslim anger against the occupation of Arabia. Bin Laden issued a 12 page statement in 1996 after he left Sudan and by that time he had masterminded 2 operations in Saudi Arabia, one in 1995 and the other in 1996.

TM: Were those operations definitely linked to Bin Laden?

SF: Not directly but the perpetrators were linked to Bin Laden.

TM: At that time there was some suggestion that the bombings--especially Khobar in June 1996-- were masterminded by Iran and its Shia allies in the Arabian Peninsula.

SF: That is the common belief, and even now the official indictment incriminates Shias and Iranians. But we believe that they were elements linked to Bin Laden.

TM: Then Bin Laden did have a clear strategy back in the mid 1990's. This was to bomb the Americans out of the Arabian Peninsula.

SF: It was not very complex. It was just to bomb American installations in Saudi Arabia. The Americans understood the significance of Bin Laden's calls for the infidels to leave the country and that is why their response was low profile. If you go back and trace American statements you will not find any statement of significance about Bin Laden. This did not change until May 1998 when Zawahiri appeared on the scene and changed Bin Laden's strategy. When Zawahiri came to Afghanistan....

TM: Where was he before?

SF: I don't know! Maybe he was in Sudan. Then they decided that this idea of confronting the Americans in the Arabian Peninsula is not going to produce anything. Zawahiri impressed upon Bin Laden the importance of understanding the American mentality. The American mentality is a cowboy mentality-- if you confront them with their identity theoretically and practically they will react in an extreme manner. In other words, America with all its resources and establishments will shrink into a cowboy when irritated successfully. They will then elevate you and this will satisfy the Muslim longing for a leader who can successfully challenge the West. Zawahiri advised Bin Laden to forget about the 12 page statement as nobody had read it and instead issue a short statement identifying every American as a target. Even though this was controversial from an Islamic perspective, Zawahiri argued on pragmatic grounds that it had to be sanctioned. The statement in February 1998, which was only 3 or 4 lines, effectively sanctioned shedding the blood of every American.

TM: It seems that Zawahiri had a huge transformative effect on Bin Laden.

SF: Yes! If Bin Laden had persisted in solely attacking U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia he would

have shared the destiny of those groups in South America and Africa that nobody cares to remember anymore. This challenge to American identity itself was a result of a huge transformation.

TM: Yet there are substantive differences between the two men. Bin Laden is essentially a military commander, whereas Zawahiri is a strategic thinker, an ideologue....

SF: He is a doctor (laughs). Bin Laden is a man who sacrificed his wealth for his beliefs. Bin Laden has a long history, whereas Zawahiri has a short one. Bin Laden also had charisma, an organisation and followers. What he lacked was a strategy and that was provided by Zawahiri.

TM: But none of them are intellectuals in a very strict sense of the word, are they?

SF: Zawahiri is! He is not a deep intellectual but he is a thinker. He has written a few books. The most famous was the "Bitter Harvest" which critically analyses the Muslim Brotherhood. He has extremist views but nevertheless displays an ability to analyse and assess issues and events strategically. His strategy worked for Bin Laden. In May 1998 Sandy Berger appeared on ABC and depicted Bin Laden as a huge entity. Nobody in the U.S. administration had done this before. Berger said Bin Laden has the capacity and the will to translate his threats into action. Zawahiri then counselled Bin Lade to attack an American symbol. And of course the best symbols were the embassies. And the busiest embassy in Africa was in Kenya which served 12 other U.S. embassies in the region. The purpose of the attack was not to inflict human casualties on the U.S. but to assault a potent symbol of America. In other words, they wanted every American to feel that they had been assaulted.

TM: But that attack caused huge resentment against al-Qaeda both inside Kenya and the world outside.

SF: Interestingly most of the Kenyans killed were Muslims. This was ultimately a side issue for al-Qaeda. Zawahiri had prophesised correctly—the Americans over-reacted by bombing Afghanistan and Sudan and consequently shifted the focus of blame away from al-Qaeda. If the Americans had not over-reacted to that attack they would have won a great moral victory. Clinton himself identified Bin Laden as the enemy and, in effect, delivered a hero to the Muslims. Before the embassy attacks only a few intellectuals and people with scholastic and practical interests in Jihad remembered Bin Laden but after the attack Bin Laden was transformed into a popular hero. The Americans thereafter persisted in turning Bin Laden into

an obsession. The immediate effect of this was that thousands of Muslims travelled to Afghanistan. I was told that before the Kenya and Tanzania bombings hardly one or two people from the Arab countries would make their way to Afghanistan in any given month but after the bombings almost ten people would make their way there on a daily basis....

TM: To do what?

SF: To join in Jihad....

TM: Jihad against whom? The United Front (Northern Alliance)?

SF: No against America....

TM: But in reality those Arabs ended up being co-opted by the Taleban in their war against other Afghan factions....

SF: They were not heavily involved in internal Afghan fighting. After the Taleban conquered Kabul Bin Laden decided to send a battalion of his men to defend a single front immediately north of Kabul. They were only 50 strong but they were able to withstand the attacks of the Taleban's enemies.

TM: Was there an infrastructure in place to absorb all these people—to train, feed and accommodate them?

SF: Yes there was! Anyway this was the recruitment stage. The next stage involved initiating a full scale polarization between Muslims and America. Therefore, even if al-Qaeda disappears there would be a huge interest in fighting the U.S. and its allies. This underpinned the planning of the 9/11 attacks. The purpose was not to kill thousands of people. Nobody saw the attacks as an assault against buildings and people, almost everyone saw it as a symbolic action. And everybody is agreed that the world changed after 9/11. The way the attacks were orchestrated had a lot to do with this—those young boys came with nothing and only relied on their will, secrecy, devotion and great perseverance. How on earth could 19 young men with nail cutters wreak such humiliation on the sole Super Power of the world? The answer is linked to the "asymmetrical warfare" that I will address later. The 9/11 attacks forced America into a cosmic battle with Muslims. Of course America claims it is waging war against terrorism but actually Muslims perceive this war as an unprecedented assault on Islam. Ultimately the real issue here

is the perception of Muslims and the vast majority of Muslims around the world feel besieged by America.

TM: But has there not been friction between Muslims and America before 9/11? And is it not the case that the 9/11 attacks merely accentuated a polarization that has long been in the making?

SF: I agree! But it was covered with a false facade. There was talk of addressing the imbalance, dialogue of civilizations....

TM: But the same arguments go on today, they have not been suspended....

SF: I am alluding to perceptions. I am not talking about what Americans are doing in real terms.

TM: Were all the implications of the 9/11 attacks anticipated by al-Qaeda?

SF: Yes.

TM: You see a lot of people would argue that America's global standing has been enhanced by the 9/11 attacks. The U.S. now controls areas or at least wields considerable influence in ways that it did not exercise prior to 9/11.

SF: I agree! But you have to differentiate between the direct consolidation of material power which consists of bases, and enhanced military power and ideological strength. Now strategically I think America has not only lost but it is likely to vanish. It has started a campaign which has forced the majority of Muslims against it. But of course tactically it has scored major gains. A lot of these so-called strategic analysts mistake these tactical gains for strategic leverage. The point is that these people are not strategic analysts because they never bring the historical, ideological and social dimensions into their calculations. They only consider political and military factors.

TM: Therefore 9/11 from your perspective could be seen in the future as the beginning of the end of America?

SF: Yes! I think America has fallen into a trap. It is acting as PR for Bin Laden.

TM: You are saying that America has over-stretched itself?

SF: America has the material resources to extend its influence everywhere but it lacks the ideological and moral fiber to sustain this kind of domination.

TM: Why not? American culture is becoming increasingly universal. America, in any single year, exports hundreds of billions of dollars of cultural products to all corners of the globe.

SF: This is the problem with your understanding of culture. You are trying to calculate culture.

TM: Quantifying it...

SF: Yes! Culture is too precious to be quantified. We have to admit that power in the world is wielded by Western capitalism and secularism which tends to dominate by force. Its leadership is in America. Conversely Islam is power-less from a conventional perspective. However Islam has the devotion and a rich stable text, and I am referring here to the Sunni text and not the Shia

TM: What do you mean by text?

SF: The basic body of literature, the Koran and the Sunna. These authentic texts of Islam are extremely rich and powerful. It can challenge Western Secularism and Capitalism effectively. Now going back to the notion of "asymmetrical warfare", in this scenario material power is confronting spiritual and ideological power. The first people who predicted the coming of asymmetrical warfare were ironically the Americans themselves.

TM: Indeed! Presumably this is why the Americans are taking this threat extremely seriously.

SF: Yes, but their actions hitherto have augmented al-Qaeda. The Americans tend to deal with things in a quantifiable manner and they do not appreciate the full strategic significance of Islamic ideology and spirituality.

TM: Do you think it was this preoccupation with gaining strategic leverage that ultimately informed the U.S. invasion of Iraq?

SF: Of course there was a list of reasons behind that invasion. But the real important point is that the invasion of Iraq must have even surprised Zawahiri and Bin Laden. It was so advanced in the making in relation to the strategic trap that Zawahiri wove for the Americans back in 1998. It was a gift from the heavens for al-Qaeda.

TM: We will discuss Iraq later. Can you shed some light on al-Qaeda's ideology? In simple terms are they Wahhabis or Salafis, and which of the four Sunni schools of Islam underpins their characteristics?

SF: They are Salafis in an Aqeedah sense.[3] This is because the core of al-Qaeda hails from Saudi Arabia. But from a Mazhab perspective al-Qaeda's members hail from all four denominations.[4]

TM: Therefore they have multiple identities. There is a religious identity which is not uniform in al-Qaeda. But the ideological identity, Salafism, is universal within the organization.

SF: Yes! Al-Qaeda is not bothered about the religious denomination of its members but it moulds them according to the Salafi world view. It accommodates all the Mazhabs of Sunnism but of course it does not accept Shias. One thing to note about al-Qaeda is that they do not discuss Aqeedah in depth except on issues relating to Jihad. Al-Qaeda is also very careful not to confront other Muslims and Islamic groups. Before joining al-Qaeda Zawahiri did criticize the Muslim Brotherhood but after joining forces with Bin Laden this criticism stopped. Al-Qaeda does not even criticize Shias openly. The culture within the organization stipulates its followers to exclusively focus on Jihad.

TM: But then Salafism is a broad spectrum, is it not?

SF: Yes it is! There are seven strains in Salafism. There are Salafi groups that are close to the Saudi regime and on the other end of the spectrum there is al-Qaeda.

TM: Do the Taleban share the same ideological roots of al-Qaeda?

SF: No! Their only overlap with al-Qaeda is devotion to Jihad. The Taleban never had internationalist ambitions. There were a few amongst them that wanted to help the Islamic movements in countries like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan but they never became a dominant faction within the movement. And of course they did not develop al-Qaeda style anti-

Americanism. The Taleban are pure Hanafis and owing to the backwardness of Afghanistan the people there tend to understand and practice Islam through a fixed Mazhab.

TM: There is also the tribal element.

SF: Yes!

TM: I want to discuss the aftermath of 9/11 and how al-Qaeda has tried to cope with the U.S. onslaught. Sheikh Hamza al-Masri is on record as saying that the U.S.-led war against the Taleban dismantled al-Qaeda structurally but invigorated it morally. Do you concur with this analysis?

SF: What is the meaning of structurally?

TM: Organizational coherence. The war that dislodged al-Qaeda from Afghanistan essentially destroyed their organization. Do you agree with this?

SF: Nobody is fully aware of the human resources of al-Qaeda. They lost many of their cadres at all levels.

TM: Surely losing their main base of operations and so many high quality people must have been a huge blow to al-Qaeda.

SF: But these were calculated losses. They even anticipated a nuclear strike on Afghanistan. But they thought it was a price well worth paying.

TM: What were the gains for al-Qaeda?

SF: There were two gains. Firstly they have changed the environment of most of the Muslim world in favor of Jihad. Secondly despite all the propaganda and security measures against them, al-Qaeda continues to recruit members and supporters.

TM: Apart from this, what conscious strategies has al-Qaeda adopted to survive in the post-9/11 world?

SF: Al-Qaeda is a very interesting organization. They do not believe in the party structure, they

see themselves as a college where people enroll, graduate and then go their separate ways. But they are encouraged to establish their own satellite networks which ultimately link in with al-Qaeda. This is why al-Qaeda is very resilient and can never be destroyed.

TM: In some ways their operational strategy and methodologies today do not differ sharply from the ones they adopted pre-9/11.

SF: You are right. But the brain that planned and executed the 9/11 attacks should be intelligent and sophisticated enough to plan the next step and in turn anticipate the likely U.S. response. If you take this to its proper conclusion, you are forced to conclude that what the Americans say today about a [nother] possible 9/11 style attack is true.

TM: Do you anticipate another attack equalling or even exceeding 9/11?

SF: The explanation that I have just provided would suggest that there will be an attack exceeding 9/11.

TM: When will it happen?

SF: Some people close to al-Qaeda claimed that it was supposed to happen a few weeks after the attacks on Afghanistan to embarrass the Americans. Apparently logistical reasons forced the cancellation of these attacks. Later on when al-Qaeda concluded that the U.S. was set on invading Iraq plans were allegedly made to attack after the commencement of the U.S. invasion. Were these gossip or credible information? We don't know! There are certainly ample reasons to conclude that al-Qaeda is planning an unexpected major strike inside the American mainland.

TM: What has happened to the core of al-Qaeda that survived the U.S.-led war against the Taliban? Do they remain in Afghanistan, Pakistan or the Afghan-Pakistan border or do you think they have returned to their countries of origin?

SF: The core is still in Afghanistan and Pakistan as they would not be safe anywhere else. There are some on the run in Saudi Arabia. Some like al-Uyiri and al-Dandani have been killed. They were both senior al-Qaeda cadres.

TM: Were these two previously based in Afghanistan?

SF: Yes, al-Uyiri was previously in Afghanistan.

TM: Do you know much about the organizational structure of al-Qaeda?

SF: They reduce the details of the organization as much as possible....

TM: Surely they must have a chain of command.

SF: They have a chain of command. But they allow the peripheral organizations plenty of flexibility.

TM: How does al-Qaeda inter-connect with the wider Saudi opposition, including the peaceful organizations?

SF: They don't!

TM: But there were cases back in the 1990's involving Western journalists and researchers wanting to access Bin Laden. They had to go through intermediaries and fixers here in London.

SF: There are no structural and organizational links between al-Qaeda and other groups opposed to the Saudi regime.

TM: What about ideological affinity.

SF: Not even that. There is however an inevitable overlap. But you must bear in mind that with the prevailing political and security mood here in the West there is great pressure to distance oneself from al-Qaeda. Therefore Saudi oppositionists are not keen to be associated with al-Qaeda.

TM: Now I want to discuss al-Qaeda's relationship with Iran. You said in an interview in 2002 that al-Qaeda finds it easy to operate in Iran. Is this because the Iranian government lacks the resources to deal with such a sophisticated network or is it the case that they are turning a blind eye to the activities of an organization whose cardinal goal is to strike at America?

SF: I don't think I used the word "operate". I think that despite their huge differences, in

particular the Shia-Sunni split; both sides recognized they had common interests in opposing America. Before 9/11 many Saudis used Iran to access Afghanistan.

TM: You mean they used Iran as a transit route?

SF: Yes, they preferred to go through Iran rather than Pakistan. The Iranians kept a blind eye to this.

TM: How would you characterize Iranian-al-Qaeda relations post 9/11?

SF: There are many rumors but it is difficult to establish the facts.

TM: The relationship between them is very complex, isn't it? There is intense animosity between them. There have been suggestions that back in 1994 the Iranian government identified al-Qaeda as its primary security threat. They came to the conclusion that the threat from al-Qaeda now exceeded that of the Mojahedin-e-Khalq.

SF: This is not true. Al-Qaeda has never considered making trouble in Iran....

TM: But Sunni extremist organizations with loose links to al-Qaeda have targeted Iran. I refer specifically to the June 1994 bombing of the Imam Reza shrine in Mashahd.

SF: That had nothing to do with al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda has never considered targeting the Iranian government. You might be surprised to learn that Bin Laden was considering back in the mid 1990's to invite Iran and China to join him in an alliance against America.

TM: Sounds like a very unlikely alliance!

SF: Possibly.

TM: Do you think there is any credence to reports suggesting that senior al-Qaeda members like Saif al-Adel, Suleiman Abu Ghaith and even Bin Laden's son Saad are currently under detention in Iran?

SF: I tried to check the veracity of this information, but nothing emerged at the end of the day.

TM: I have a couple of questions on Zawahiri. Some who have researched Ayman al-Zawahiri claim that there is some evidence he may have been recruited by the Russian Intelligence Services.

SF: This is rubbish! Al-Qaeda has done the opposite—they have penetrated Russian intelligence. There has been interest on the part of al-Qaeda to recruit Russian Muslims.

TM: That is different. Do you think al-Qaeda has the skills and the resources to penetrate Russian institutions?

SF: They can with money. And they have done it.

TM: They have penetrated the Russian security establishment?

SF: Yes!

TM: For what purpose?

SF: I don't know. Probably to acquire some advanced technology.

TM: What about information?

SF: The Russians would not have useful information for them. They want weapons of mass destruction. Al-Qaeda tried hard in the mid 1990's to acquire these weapons from the Russians because they knew they were cheap. They tried to contact senior Russian military officers.

TM: This is very interesting. Were they after nuclear weapons?

SF: I don't know.

TM: How would you characterize the overall relationship between al-Qaeda and Russia? Is there no commonality of interests?

SF: No! Al-Qaeda does not trust Russia. They see the current establishment in Russia led by Putin as heavily influenced by America.

TM: Where is Zawahiri?

SF: He is with Bin Laden. There was a video of them both several months ago.

TM: But that video could have been taken any time.

SF: No! Apparently it was recent.

TM: Where are they?

SF: The mountains between Afghanistan and Pakistan is the most likely location. It is not only difficult terrain but the culture prevents people from handing them over.

TM: What are the connections between al-Qaeda and the Chechen Jihad?

SF: The connections are not structural. Contacts revolve around the exchange of information and experience. The Chechen Mujahedeen have a completely independent command.

TM: But do you think some of the Saudis who travelled to Chechnya to take part in the Chechen wars, could have had links to al-Qaeda?

SF: They may have been trained by al-Qaeda.

TM: But they went there as freelancers?

SF: Yes. It is not correct to regard the Chechen Arabs as a branch of al-Qaeda.

TM: That famous Saudi, Khatab, was he not linked to al-Qaeda?

SF: He was trained in Afghanistan but he was not linked to al-Qaeda.

TM: What would stop someone like him from being incorporated into al-Qaeda?

SF: There is enough work to do in Chechnya! Also when the first Chechen war erupted there was not much activity in al-Qaeda.

TM: I have a few questions on Iraq. You say that the invasion of Iraq serves al-Qaeda's interests. How is this so?

SF: Firstly, it is proof that America is not merely interested in revenge for 9/11—it shows that America wants to besiege Muslims. Second, it has highlighted the quisling status of Arab regimes. Thirdly, Iraq is an ideal place to pin down and attack the Americans.

TM: Iraq is clearly a target-rich environment. But the evidence suggests that the vast majority of attacks have been carried out by Baathist remnants rather than al-Qaeda.

SF: I don't accept this.

TM: But this is what the Americans themselves say.

SF: They don't want to give any credit to al-Qaeda. They refer to foreign personnel. From an American perspective it is not good for people to see that after an intensive two year campaign al-Qaeda is still a ubiquitous threat. Also let me say a few things about the Baathists. Even in their heyday back in the 1960's and 1970's Baathists could only fight to seize power. And they can only make something of themselves when in power. They do not have the resilience or the motivation for Jihad style conflicts. Now today Baathists, Communists and Socialists have virtually disappeared. There are only two forces remaining: Islam and Western Liberalism.

TM: But look at where the resistance is strong in Iraq, the so-called "Sunni Triangle" where Arab Nationalism claims historical roots.

SF: It is not to do with Arab Nationalism; it is to do with being Sunnis. The Shias historically have not been Jihadis. Iran and Hezbollah examples are an exception.

TM: But the Shias also want to see the Americans leave.

SF: But they are reluctant to engage in Jihad against the Americans. Once the Americans are forced out of Iraq the Shias will, again, end up as losers in the historical power game in that country.

TM: What about this notion that al-Qaeda is joining up with Baath remnants to frustrate American plans in Iraq?

SF: There is no basis to that. Al-Qaeda allegedly sent a few hundred fighters to Iraq before the war and instructed them to lie low. Those non-Iraqi Arabs who were killed during the war had nothing to do with al-Qaeda. The al-Qaeda elements allegedly made contact with non-Baathist forces in the regime. They settled in and acclimatized to the environment.

TM: Interesting! Do you think there is any credence to the allegations that al-Qaeda affiliated people in Syria are facilitating the influx of fighters into Iraq?

SF: I don't know. But I doubt it since these allegations are part of an extensive psychological war against the Syrian regime.

TM: I have a few questions about the future. How will the patterns of Islamic terrorism against the West evolve in the coming years?

SF: This question can be answered both from an historical perspective and a more practical-oriented one. From a historical perspective there is likely to be more polarization.

TM: Do you conceptualize this polarization along the lines of Huntington's clash of civilizations?

SF: Yes! I have always said Huntington is right. This clash of civilizations is inevitable. The Western and Islamic civilizations are both powerful and self-confident. They both believe others should embrace them. There can never be some sort of balance, there has to be a clash. Huntington's conclusion was that the West will dominate, but of course I disagree with that.

TM: How will this clash climax?

SF: If another attack in America materializes, the American social structure is simply not powerful enough to withstand it. There is also the argument that no matter how strong your society is, you can not absorb a series of devastating attacks.

TM: How do you think the Americans will react to a series of 9/11 style attacks? Will this kind of extreme provocation elicit a nuclear response from the U.S.?

SF: This could be one of the reactions. The more likely reaction is the so-called Monroe principle which served America well prior to the First World War.

TM: You are talking about the policy of isolationism.

SF: Yes! The point about a nuclear response is that the U.S. has nowhere to detonate it. It has Afghanistan under its control; it has occupied Iraq and has influence in Saudi Arabia. So where will it strike? Mecca? There is nowhere! Therefore the other argument is more credible. There are people in the U.S. who argue that there are fundamental things wrong with the war against terrorism. They say let's sit down and talk loudly....

TM: There is a problem with this as al-Qaeda is not exactly offering roundtable talks!

SF: No! I did not mean al-Qaeda. I meant Americans talking amongst themselves. There are many people in America who want to tackle the matter in a much more intelligent manner but they have been silenced by this pervasive McCarthyism. There are people that are very tired with this cowboy attitude. Once the next attack occurs they are likely to say that Bush has had two years of this cosmic battle against terrorism and we ended up with an even bigger attack. Now is the time to try a different approach. Now of course the right wingers, the Zionists and the arms lobby will refuse to give ground and then a clash inside America is likely to ensue.

TM: What you are saying is that another attack equalling or exceeding 9/11 will trigger an internal clash inside America.

SF: Yes! America does not have a well established society like Europe.

TM: The fear in the West, particularly here in Europe is that another 9/11 style attack will have grave consequences for individual freedoms.

SF: But this will be an achievement for Bin Laden. Once the West begins compromising on its core values al-Qaeda will have scored a major victory.

TM: Going back to the isolationist policy, do you really think America will be able to relinquish its role in the world?

SF: The only other option is a catastrophic nuclear strike and we have already seen that this will not be practical.

TM: Do you envisage any scenarios in which America may make concessions in its foreign policy?

SF: Only in defeat!

TM: Do you think the recent bombings in Saudi Arabia constituted a serious mistake by al-Qaeda insofar as they alienated its core constituency inside the country?

SF: Yes, they were a mistake.

TM: Can they recover from these mistakes?

SF: Of course, they were tactical rather than strategic mistakes. Although Bin Laden probably gave the green light for the May bombing, the attacks themselves were not planned by al-Qaeda. They were planned and executed by one of its local affiliates.

TM: Finally, you have often said Bin Laden is alive--apart from that video released in September what makes you so confident?

SF: In his last statement he alluded to the capture of Saddam.

TM: Although the U.S. government itself concedes that these audio tapes are probably genuine, they still do not constitute unassailable proof. Why can't al-Qaeda dispel the uncertainty regarding Bin Laden's fate?

SF: They don't care. Al-Qaeda has very interesting features. Firstly they are not a conventional organization. Secondly they are a trans-national network. Thirdly they don't rely on state sponsorship. Fourthly, and most interestingly, they do not believe in showing reaction. Irrespective of the attacks wrought on it, al-Qaeda does not show reaction. They believe they should always wield the initiative. They decide when and where to attack. This links in with the fifth feature which stipulates staging attacks only after exhaustive preparation. If the preparation has not been exhaustive, the attack is likely to be cancelled. And I am talking about al-Qaeda proper here and not the peripheral groups. These features make al-Qaeda truly unique.

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Notes:

1. Amr Bel Maarouf, or "Enjoining the Good" is a tenet of Islam. Devout Muslims argue that in an Islamic society all believers should take it upon themselves to "enjoin the good and dispel the wrong".
 2. The Bait al-Ansar or "Dwelling of the Partisans" was a guesthouse established by Bin Laden in the 1980's in Peshawar for Arab volunteers wanting to travel to Afghanistan.
 3. Aqeedah roughly translates into "ideology"
 4. Mazhab or "religion" refers here to the four denominations or "religions" of Sunni Islam.
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