

## **Does Al-Qaeda Still Matter?**

by *Immanuel Wallerstein*



On the eleventh anniversary of what has come to be known as 9/11, al-Qaeda remains a subject still repeatedly discussed, both in the United States (and the pan-European world in general) and in the Middle East. The main emphasis in the United States is usually how its power is being effectively contained by military action of many kinds, and therefore it is a declining menace. The main emphasis in the Middle East seems to be the opposite, that it has

survived everything that has been done to decapitate it and that it continues to represent an important menace to all the other political forces in the region.

Everything about its history and its relations to governments and movements has been controversial. There is little agreement even on the facts concerning the most important events. Let us start with 9/11 itself. First of all, we have to distinguish three moments in time: the six months or so before 9/11; the day itself; and the year or so following 9/11.

The latest plausible narrative concerning the six months or so before 9/11 seems to indicate that the CIA and other intelligence agencies in the United States were warning the president and his security advisors that al-Qaeda was preparing some lethal attack.

They were ignored. Why? It seems that the neo-cons in the U.S. administration - who were a considerable cabal, including Vice-President Dick Cheney and the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld - denied its plausibility on the grounds that al-Qaeda was not competent to represent a major threat. The neo-cons said that the intelligence agencies were incorrectly giving credence to what was mere bluster, whose objective was to divert attention from the real threat to the United States, which were Saddam Hussein and his alleged weapons of mass destruction.

There are a certain number of left critics who suggest that such a debate within the U.S. administration never took place. Their explanation is that 9/11 was really planned by the U.S. government itself as a way of mobilizing public opinion for a war in Iraq. This is of course a conspiracy theory. I have nothing per se against conspiracy theories. There are constant real conspiracies all the time.

But I have never found this one the least bit plausible. The argument is based on the inherent improbability that an organization like al-Qaeda could amass the technical skills

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and tactical planning necessary to arrange the attacks and explosions. This is of course the same argument about al-Qaeda that the neo-cons gave in the other narrative.

Frankly, I think, and have always thought, that this argument is profoundly racist. It implies that those "fanatical fellows in the Third World" can't be that clever. Well they can, and I believe were. In any case, al-Qaeda has been boasting about it ever since. And there is no government today, either in the pan-European world or the Middle East, which is ready to gamble on the supposed technical incompetence of al-Qaeda. The next point in time is the day itself. Here I am much more inclined to credit the conspiracy theory. There is too much that is dubious about the U.S. government's response to the attacks. Airplanes to counter the attacks were launched much too late. President George W. Bush seems to have been kept out of the information loop for too long, making Cheney de facto the decision-maker. Rumsfeld seems to have prepared almost instantly a procedure to link Saddam Hussein, most implausibly, to the attacks.

In short, the neo-cons were taking advantage of the attacks for their long-desired and long-planned war on Iraq. In the year following 9/11, they carried the day in the U.S. administration and effectively throttled all dissenting voices. They got their wars, first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq. The whole world, including the United States, is still suffering today the consequences of these unjustified and unjustifiable wars.

What then happened to al-Qaeda? It seems that, in the beginning, al-Qaeda was a small structure, tightly controlled by Osama bin Laden. First, the attacks of 9/11 and then the U.S.-launched wars greatly increased its prestige in the Muslim world and attracted persons to join the structure. It also attracted other organizations to pledge allegiance to al-Qaeda and re-label themselves, without however really submitting to some central discipline.

The United States and its allies did indeed begin to kill off many leading cadres of al-Qaeda, including eventually Osama himself. But al-Qaeda has shown itself thus far to be a hydra-headed monster, constantly renewing the fallen cadres. And it also seems that the central forces of al-Qaeda were never able to constitute a world network, as opposed to being a symbol of deep resentment and an aspiration for a reconstituted caliphate.

The so-called Arab spring has created a new opening for al-Qaeda. It has weakened the legitimacy of every ruler of an Arab state without exception. The question becomes what political forces will then come to power. This has led to prolonged struggles within each of these states, some of which are more bloody than others.

The strongest opposition to al-Qaeda today is not the United States but other political forces within these states. We are only at the beginning phase of these political struggles. The attack of Salafist forces on the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi, leading to the death of the U.S. ambassador, may only be the beginning of this resurgence. It is far too early to say that al-Qaeda is no longer relevant.