

Bush turns Iraq into a big recruiting ground

William Dalrymple

On March 17, shortly after the Madrid bombings, Al-Qaeda made what is to date their only endorsement in an American presidential election. Throwing the weight of Osama Bin Laden behind the Republican candidacy, the organization declared that it hoped George Bush would win "because he acts with force rather than with wisdom or shrewdness," adding: "It is his religious fanaticism that will rouse our (Islamic) nation from its slumber".

Reading Gilles Kepel's important book, "The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West" it is easy to see why Al-Qaeda should be so enthusiastic about Bush. Bin Laden has always been open about his aims: By unleashing a clash of civilizations between Islam and the "Zionist-Crusaders" of the West, he hopes to provoke an American backlash strong enough to radicalize the Muslim world, topple pro-Western governments and so install a new Islamic caliphate. Bush has fulfilled Bin Laden's every hope. Through the invasion of secular Baathist Iraq, the abuses in Abu Ghraib, the mass murders in Fallujah, America, with Britain's obedient assistance, has turned Iraq into a jihadist playground while alienating all moderate Muslim opinion. We may have failed to capture Bin Laden, but we have succeeded in liberating the extremists, radicalizing the unaffiliated and making life more difficult than ever for our natural allies: Ordinary, decent, moderate Muslims.

Kepel writes with forensic clarity and an unrivalled grasp of detail; yet his deep knowledge of the subject over a long period allows him to present the wider picture. This concise, engaging and authoritative book should be required reading for anyone wishing to

understand what is happening in the Islamic world and the terrifyingly counterproductive nature of our response to it.

Not least of the virtues of Kepel's book is that it provides in translation a huge amount of Al-Qaeda source material, such as Ayman Al-Zawahiri's lengthy text *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, which lays out in full Al-Qaeda's political program. According to Al-Zawahiri, he and Bin Laden agreed that the

nature of Al-Qaeda was the reason that the US attempted to counter it with such unsuitable policies - so inadvertently turning itself into Al-Qaeda's most effective recruiting agency.

Kepel emphasizes the centrality of Palestine to this equation. From Bin Laden's first public statement, "A Declaration of War Against the Americans", issued in 1996, he announced he was fighting US foreign policy in

to unravel.

If Bin Laden was obsessed with Israel, it was no less the central concern of the neocons to whom President Bush turned in the aftermath of 9/11. Kepel lays out very clearly the methods the neocons used to hijack Bush's "war on terror" to pursue their own pre-existing agenda. This consisted of abandoning the Oslo Peace Accords and instead seeking security for Israel by eliminating the Arab regimes which threatened it - ironically a goal which the neocons shared with Al-Qaeda. Ideas originally produced in 1996 for a Likud think tank by Douglas Feith and Richard Perle under the title "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm", were later adapted in Washington for the neocon's "Project for the New American Century" (about which, alarmingly, Tony Blair recently professed ignorance: "What is it?" he asked the BBC). These ideas went on to become official US and, by default, British policies following 9/11.

The battle is now on for the hearts and minds of ordinary Muslims - a battle the US is catastrophically losing. The Islamists have proved surprisingly adept at PR and have used the Internet and the Arab satellite channels with great skill. In this battle, the way that Europe's million Muslims swing will prove crucial. If suspicion and Islamophobia drives them into the embrace of the militants, we are lost. Yet Kepel ends his book on a note of hope. Across Europe, a new generation of Muslims is becoming active in democratic politics.

Kepel hopes that with a fair wind, these European Muslims could yet "present a new face of Islam - reconciled with modernity - to the larger world."

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failure to mobilize the Muslim masses could only be reversed by an attack of the scale of 9/11, so convincing Muslims of the "irresistible power" of their movement.

Kepel argues that Al-Qaeda is not some structured multinational. Instead it barely exists: "Al-Qaeda was less a military base of operations than a database that connected jihadists around the world via the Internet." As Kepel shows, this failure to understand the

the Middle East. In *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner*, Al-Zawahiri emphasizes that it was the failure of Oslo, the eruption of the second intifada in the autumn of 2000, and the repressive campaign waged by Ariel Sharon that provided the opportunity Al-Qaeda had been waiting for: Here was the rallying cry that could unify the Muslim world. All that was needed was a massive strike, and the US system in the Middle East would begin