

## PULLING THE RUG OUT FROM UNDER AL QAEDA

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*The Search for Al Qaeda. Its Leadership, Ideology, and Future*

Bruce Riedel

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Maybe it's his training as CIA analyst. Maybe it's his frustration as an adviser to three U.S. presidents during a time period which has seen the rapid worldwide rise of the terrorist threat. The fact is that it is hard to be more doom-laden on Pakistan and Afghanistan than Bruce Riedel, terrorism expert and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. Pakistan is the most dangerous place in the world, he writes, where "every nightmare of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – terrorism, nuclear proliferation, the danger of nuclear war, dictatorship, poverty and drugs – come together in one place."<sup>1</sup> After reading his book, it is hard to disagree. To this list, one can add the appalling educational system, which often pushes parents to send their children to the Pakistan's Islamic schools, the *madrassahs*, and the frail rule of law and corruption which "envelops Pakistan like a sheet of water."<sup>2</sup> On Afghanistan, Riedel is no less concerned. It is a failed state, undermined by a nepotistic and corrupt government with ineffective security forces, poor infrastructure and desperate socio-economic conditions. NATO could thus lose the battle to convince Afghans that they are better off under the western-backed administration than they would be with the Taliban.<sup>3</sup> Recent accusations of rigged elections do not help NATO's case. In this context, the Taliban, which were not defeated in 2001 but merely displaced to the Pakistani tribal areas, are regaining strength—thanks in part to the support of the Pakistani Inter-Services intelligence directorate (ISI).<sup>4</sup>

In Riedel's analysis, what ultimately links Afghanistan and Pakistan is the core interest of his book, Al Qaeda. The global *jihadist* movement was born in Pakistan at the time of the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. The Taliban, too, emerged in the Pakistani *madrassahs*, and "was nurtured by the country's intelligence service."<sup>5</sup> It was in Pakistan that Al Qaeda found refuge after the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan in late 2001, and it is from Pakistan that Al Qaeda continues its battle.

While most of Riedel's analysis has been presented elsewhere, he makes some fairly novel points in this book.<sup>6</sup> First of all, Afghanistan, he argues, is actually a centerpiece of the Al Qaeda's strategy. He suggests that the ultimate aim of the 9/11 attacks was "to lure the United States into an invasion first of Afghanistan and then of Iraq" and thus draw America into "bleeding wars" like the one that drove the Soviets out of Afghanistan. The other two objectives of Al Qaeda are "to build a safe haven in

Pakistan” and ultimately “to drive the United States from the Muslim world, destroy Israel, and create a *jihadist* caliphate” from Spain to Indonesia.<sup>7</sup>

The 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan should have destroyed Al Qaeda and the Taliban, Riedel claims, but the U.S. decision to invade Iraq diverted essential resources from the job of finding the Al Qaeda leadership. It follows that Riedel is in favor of increased NATO deployment in Afghanistan. “It is urgent for the United States to redirect its military and intelligence effort away from Iraq [...] and toward the Afghanistan-Pakistan border regions (where bin Laden and his henchmen are ensconced).”<sup>8</sup> To this point, Riedel also advocates a massive economic reconstruction program in the region, which he calls a “multilateral Marshall Plan for Afghanistan,” an effort that should be extended into Pakistan as well. Similarities with the Obama administration’s “Af-Pak strategy” should not come as a surprise. Riedel was tasked by President Obama with a review of the administration’s policies regarding Afghanistan and Pakistan last spring.

Riedel’s analysis, however, creates a problem for his argument. If enlarging the war in Afghanistan is exactly what Al Qaeda seeks, his recommendation to send more troops on the ground seems inconsistent. Perhaps he believes the United States and NATO will not “bleed to death” in Afghanistan like the Soviets. Indeed, they have not, though the final outcome remains to be seen.

The second important point that Riedel makes in his book is that solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is “an extremely useful strategy for pulling the rug out from under Al Qaeda.”<sup>9</sup> For Riedel “the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the central all-consuming issue for Al Qaeda,” its ideological backbone.<sup>10</sup> This is not an uncontroversial point, since many commentators have argued otherwise. The hate for America’s freedom and democracy did not motivate the attacks of 9/11, says Riedel; specific American policies did. For this reason, he argues, it is essential to undermine the narrative of Muslim oppression by settling the festering disputes over Palestine and Kashmir. Riedel does not shy away from proposing a grand strategy for peace in Middle East, to which the so-called Clinton parameters should serve as the basis of a deal. In this framework, the United States should lead in convening the parties and use all official leverage possible to secure an agreement. A similar leadership is envisioned for the United States in Kashmir, where “the United States has been reluctant to engage more actively ... in the light of India’s posture that outside intervention is unwarranted.”<sup>11</sup>

This really is a grand strategy. And Riedel is right—the Middle East does have to be treated as a set of interrelated crises. Hence, a solution to the Al Qaeda problem cannot be developed in a vacuum. Unfortunately, if the vision is there, the political strategy to implement it remains obscure. That the Israeli-Palestinian conflict feeds unrest and political violence in the Muslim world is hardly news. What makes Riedel think that the goals that have escaped the United States and the international community for more than half a century are now achievable is puzzling. In the current financial and political context, it is highly unlikely that the necessary political momentum can be created to implement such a strategy. Riedel’s recommendations for an orderly but prompt

withdrawal from Iraq, economic engagement in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and a clear mandate to the CIA director for a “global manhunt” against Al Qaeda leadership are more realistic.

Ultimately, what makes *The Search for Al Qaeda* a “must read” is its crisp, thorough analysis. In just over 200 pages, Riedel accomplishes something rare for subject matter experts—he resists the urge to inflate the number of words necessary for lay readers to grasp the arguments. He distills the necessary information, provides a sharp analysis of the situation, and delivers a grand strategy to address the issues. The political strategy needed to create the momentum for implementing Riedel’s grand strategy, however, remains to be written.

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<sup>1</sup> Riedel, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Green, “Pashtuns lose patience with the court of King Karzai,” *Financial Times*, September 5-6, 2009, p.7.

<sup>4</sup>See Seth Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires* (W.W. Norton and Company, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Riedel, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Two excellent books on Afghanistan and al Qaeda’s evolution, also acknowledged by Riedel, are Lawrence Wright, *Looming Tower* (Vintage, 2006) and Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars* (Penguin Press, 2004). In addition, Yosri Founda and Nick Fielding, *Masterminds of Terror* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2003), an expose of the 9/11 terrorist plot, and Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda* (New York: Berkley Books, 2002), a comprehensive study of the terrorist organization, can be cited.

<sup>7</sup> Riedel, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Riedel, 148.

<sup>9</sup> Riedel, 139.

<sup>10</sup> Riedel, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Riedel, 142.