SINGLE ARTICLE
EXCERPTED

FROM VOLUME 8

SEE THE COMPLETE EDITION AT

WWW.SMALLWARSJOURNAL.COM

AL–QA'IDA AS RAID–BASE: TECHNIQUE FROM THE PAST?

By John W. Jandora

Since 9/11 the American public has come to know the name al-Qa'ida (popularly corrupted to al-Qaeda) as designating an international terrorist network run by Usama bin Ladin and other militant Islamist leaders. Many Americans also know that the word *qâ'ida* generally translates as *base*. However, there is considerable uncertainly about the exact meaning of that term as used by the militant jihadists. Depending on the context, Arabic *qâ'ida* can designate something physical, such as a structural base or operational base, or it can designate something conceptual, such as a fundamental or basic principle. The search for meaning in the name is impeded by the understandable desire of primary sources to conceal or distort information that might be incriminating. It is further impeded by inconsistencies in reporting, which result from journalistic speculations, errors in interpretation or translation, and attempts by officials or ex-officials to "talk around" classified information.

Bin Ladin himself, who has made numerous public statements, has not fully explained the significance of the term. In an October 2001 interview, he asserted that al-Qa'ida was bigger than any one leader or any specific organization. As for the name, it "is very old and came about quite independently of me. Brother Abu Ubaida al-Banshiri created a military base to train young men to fight against the Soviet empire."[1] In this comment, Bin Ladin was alluding to the Farouq training camp near Kandahar, which is where militant leaders met in 1988 and agreed to expand their jihad beyond Afghanistan. If this camp was initially the sole base for the new "mission," then it was unique among the dozen or more bases that accommodated foreign mujahideen (Arabic mujâhidîn, those who fight in jihad). So, it may originally have been "*the* base (*al-qâ'ida*)," but the bigger picture is that this term was linked with a registry (*sijill*) of fighters as well.[2] It is not known by whom or what process that particular roster was compiled. Saudi dissident Dr Saad al-Faqih credits Bin Ladin himself with starting the practice of registering the scores of Arab volunteers who passed through the transit houses in Pakistan. In any case, the register very likely accounted for competence and commitment to the cause, not resident status at the Farouq camp. Jihadists moved on from there. Several from Banshiri's "circle" left Afghanistan to promote their cause elsewhere, especially after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. Bin Ladin himself went to Saudi Arabia and then Sudan.

By the above reconstruction, it would seem that the word *qâ'ida* originally denoted one particular site. Nonetheless, by September 11, 2001 it denoted a whole network of camps and jihadist groups -- that is, the basis of a movement. The meaning of al-Qa'ida thus expanded over time. It first designated a physical site but came to symbolize a purpose and function as well, which suggests that the

---

[1] Usama bin Ladin, Messages *to the World: the Statements of Osama Bin Laden*, ed. Bruce Lawrence, trans. David Howarth (London and New York: Verso, 2005), p. 120.

[2] See "Hunting Bin Ladin," Frontline Interview; available from http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/binladen/interviews/al-fagih.html; Internet.

term has yet the connotation of instrument, or means (to an end).

With the emergence of the Taliban movement in the mid-1990s, the camps in Afghanistan regained importance for al-Qa'ida. In May 1996 Bin Ladin relocated from Sudan to Afghanistan to spare his host, the Khartoum regime, further pressure from the international community. After settling in Afghanistan for the second time, Bin Ladin re-established his influence among the "Arab Afghans" who had remained or returned there. He forged an alliance with the Taliban and helped them contend against the Northern Alliance. The Taliban captured Kabul in September 1996 and pushed their rivals into the northeast corner of the country. With Islamic rule imposed over the greater part of Afghanistan, the war against "unbelief" (in the righteous way of Islam) might be pursued elsewhere.

The numerous mujahideen camps that had emerged in the 1980s and '90s attracted both fighters and preachers from around the Arab and Islamic worlds. Over time, some camps closed, and some changed sponsorship. However, they collectively sustained an environment that justified war against infidels, which became the common cause despite differences of doctrine and primary enemy. Some jihadist leaders wanted to avoid innocent bloodshed; others held a broader view of culpability. Some saw the priority targets as the unjust regimes of their home countries; others saw them as the United States and Britain. The relevant point is that the camps had links to various groups in various countries. Thus, the al-Qa'ida network found itself with global reach and proceeded to act on that capability. Target sites extended to: Saudi Arabia (Khobar Towers, 1996; Riyadh, expat compounds, 2003; Khobar, compound, 2004);

East Africa (two U.S. Embassies, 1998; Mombasa, hotel, 2002); Yemen (USS Cole, 1990); America (World Trade Center/ Pentagon, 2001); Indonesia (Bali nightclub, 2002; Jakarta Marriott, 2003; Bali resorts, 2005); North Africa (Tunis, tourist area, 2003; Casablanca, "alien" communities, 2003); Turkey (Istanbul, foreign interests, 2003); Spain (Madrid, mass transit, 2004); England (London, mass transit, 2005); Jordan (Amman, hotel, 2005).[1]

From this perspective, al-Qa'ida is the start-point of a process that resulted in strike operations, many, but not all, of which were terrorist in nature. The function of the Farouq Camp and others like it was not to marshal units and train them for conventional battle group tactics, combined arms operations, or sustained deployments. Rather, the foreign mujahideen camps were essentially centers for individual skills and team training, where volunteers rotated in and out.[2] Some deployed as squads to support the native mujahideen in their operations. Others returned to their home countries upon completion of training, ready to serve at a later time. A select few were admitted into advanced level training courses. Eventually, the foreign mujahideen were organized into units and employed as such. This egress of fighters to strike enemies near and far might well be envisioned as the activity of a raid base.

The raid as a feature of jihad has its own history, symbolism, and literary treatment, which largely derived from the military contest

---

[1] The list is representative only. It includes major attacks commonly attributed to al-Qa'ida, although culpability is in many cases questionable. Attacks conducted within the region of South Asia are omitted.

[2] See Yossef Bodansky, *Bin Laden: the Man Who Declared War on America* (Rocklin, Calif.: Forum, 1999), pp. 21-22, 49-50 and Anonymous, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's Inc., 2002), pp. 98-102, 130-131.

at the Anatolian frontier (modern Turkey) between the Islamic and Byzantine states.[1] (The Muslims' incursion into Northern India generated a parallel situation, which has a smaller profile in history.) After the unsuccessful siege of Constantinople in 716-17 CE, Arab-led Muslim armies faced improved counter strategies and consequently ceased to make deep penetrations of Byzantine territory. Cross-border raiding became the prevalent military activity. The deeds of the Muslim border warriors became the substance of an emerging jihad lore, which assimilated the raid motif of older, Arab tribal tradition. Since pre-Islamic times, camel raiding was an important facet of Arabian society, as it served to adjust ratios of wealth and power. The tribes originally commemorated their most significant raids (and related skirmishes) in poems and oral tradition. However, this lore was eventually recorded in historical works, commentaries on poetry, and historical romances, which lent a vocabulary and set of themes to jihad lore. The border raid was called *ghazw* or *ghazya* (English razzia), as was the camel raid, and the border raider was called ghâzî (English ghazi), as was the camel raider. The word *ghâzî* was eventually applied to all frontier forces, irrespective of their military activity. The exploits of two famous early ghâzîs became the substance of folklore, as they were fictionalized, transposed in time, and forged into legends and an historical romance, of which segments are still commonly known in some parts of the Arab world.

In the course of history the ghazi ethos shifted from the Arabs and Arabized people to the Turks, who gradually became the dominant component among Islam's frontier forces and within the military in general.   The original legends of the border warriors were transformed into Turkish versions. At the Anatolian frontier, the Seljuk Turks and after them the Ottomans gained the reputation of ghazis par excellence, and they are even commemorated as such in modern Arabic historiography. As with the Ottoman sultans (1281-1922 CE), the Mughal rulers of India (1526-1857 CE) grafted the ghazi tradition onto their dynastic image.   It would seem that the Arabs in a sense bequeathed the symbolism of the ghazi to others, and so they refer to their warrior heroes now as *mujâhidîn*.[2] Despite this particular change, the Arab people continued to use the raid motif in speaking of martial endeavors. Indeed, such usage is found within the "circles" of al-Qa'ida.

Usama Bin Ladin lauds the 9/11 attackers in a recording that was aired by al-Jazirah TV on 26 December 2001. That statement concludes with a poem, whose final verse is:

> The fighters' winds blew, striking their towers and telling them:
> We will not cease our raids until you leave our fields."[3]

His later audiotape of 23 April 2006, which was posted to al-Jazirah.net, refers to the 9/11 bombing as the "Manhattan raid."[4] Similarly, Ayman al-Zawahiri's video broadcast by al-Jazirah TV on 01 September 2005 refers to the "blessed London raid" (07 July bombing) and

---

[1] discussion in John W. Jandora, *Militarism in Arab Society: An Historiographical and Bibliographical Sourcebook* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997), chap. 1.

[2] The term has, in modern times, been employed in a wide range of contexts, which, except for the case of the conflict in Afghanistan, are generally unknown in the West. Among variant uses, the name muhâjidîn has been confirmed on elite units or teams within the military and security forces of states as well as on the volunteers who fought in the first Arab-Israeli War.

[3] Bin Ladin, *Messages*, p. 157.

[4] 8English text, document FEA20060427022515, available from http//www.opensource.gov; Internet.

likens it to "the previous raids in New York and Madrid."[1]

Further concerning 9/11, investigators uncovered the so-called "Doomsday Document" of questionable authorship, which contains guidance for the hijackers. The second page begins with the sayings: "One of the Companions said, 'The messenger of God commanded that it (the Quran) be read before a raid, so we have read it, and have gained booty, and remained safe and sound.'" Juan Cole, who has analyzed the religious phraseology of the text, contends that the 9/11 hijackers were psychologically bent on reenacting sacred history. As the first Muslims struggled against the more powerful Meccans, " this hardy band of real Muslims . . . had no choice but to undertake a raid against this much superior foe."[2] Cole's point seems to be valid, although it is difficult to prove conclusively without testimonies. Still, there is ample evidence from Arab culture that raids undertaken to gain or recover goods count toward nobility, and raids undertaken in the cause of jihad count toward salvation.[3]

If the jihadist operatives see themselves as reenacting the deeds of the Prophet's Companions, might al-Qa'ida, the base of the new jihad, take some precedent from the early Islamic movement? The analogy seems plausible, but it founders on the question of function. Islamic salvation history indeed indicates that raid activity was a key part of the

military strategy of the Medinan (early Islamic) state. The famous *Kitâb al-Maghâzî*, which is the only extant sample of a whole genre of works on early Muslim campaigns (or raids -- the word *maghâzî* has either meaning), mentions over fifty raids in addition to the few famous battles and sieges of the Prophet Muhammad's time. It is noteworthy that this genre first appeared when border raiding was becoming the norm at the Anatolian frontier -- which was several decades after the events of interest. In any case, the writing has inspirational rather than instructional value.

Most of the accounts of "raids" are relatively vague, giving little more than dates, names of troop leaders and objective areas (sites), and quotes. They relate very little concerning operational aims, force composition, staging, movement, approach to target, and other technical military matters. There is no hint as to whether the raid forces departed from any particular staging area or areas. It is only for the later expeditions into the Byzantine and Sassanid domains that narratives mention Rabadha as the troop assembly point. The absence of fighting in some accounts suggests that the events commemorated were actually security (counter-raid) patrols and show-of-force operations. Such voids notwithstanding, it is possible to reconstruct the early Muslims' military strategy on the basis of the related circumstances of the expansion of the Medinan state. The Muslims conducted raids as a means of inhibiting adversaries and indirectly controlling territory. They demonstrated the power to police routes, which assured commercial vitality, and to enforce security zones around their settlements. The Muslims also conducted raids as a means of pressuring tribes to submit to their authority.

---

[1] English text, document GMP20050901535005, available from http//www.opensource.gov; Internet.

[2] Juan Cole, "Al-Qaeda's Doomsday Document and Psychological Manipulation," paper presented at "Genocide and Terrorism: Probing the Mind of the Perpetrator" (Yale Center for Genocide Studies, New Haven, April 9, 2003); available from http//:www.juancole.com/essays/qaeda.htm; Internet; accessed 25 April 2006.

[3] The second point is manifest in the above cited texts; on the first point, see the bibliographic listing in Jandora, *Militarism in Arab Society*, pp.14-15.

Al-Qa'ida does not fit the above pattern. It has not existed as a state-based or state-directed activity, although it enjoyed the support of the Taliban government when that regime controlled much of Afghanistan. It has otherwise depended on the acquiescence of non-state allies – first the Afghan Mujahideen groups, then the tribes of Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province. Thus, al-Qa'ida has had "guest" accommodation in a permissive or semi-permissive setting. It has not functioned as a base for territorial expansion of some state. It has, rather, functioned as a transfer facility, a place where operatives, funds, and tradecraft could be taken in and redirected. Its purpose has been to dispatch (or link with), direct, and support jihadist cells whose operations are widely dispersed. Al-Qa'ida may facilitate linkage between cells where they belong to different groups among the so-called affiliates. It may recommend certain targets or timing of attacks. However, relative independence of action seems to be the norm. This scheme of offense is depicted in the graphic at Figure 1.
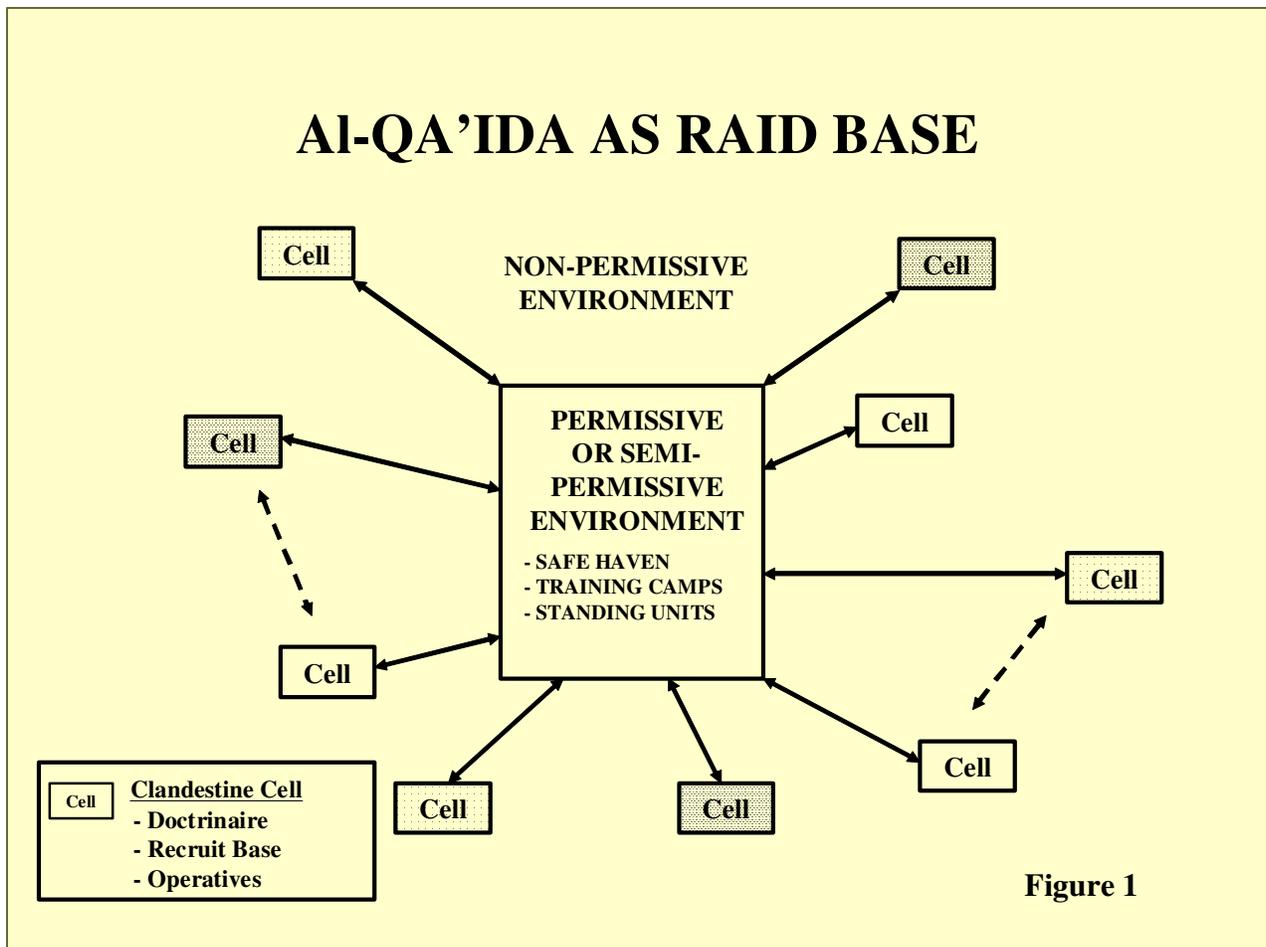
The terrorist nature of al-Qa'ida suggests another analogy. Among observers who condemn al-Qa'ida, some liken it to the "Assassin" phenomenon of the Crusade era, equating the two as "nests of terrorists."[1] The relevant history is that English Assassin derives from Arabic H̱ashshâshîn, which itself derives from legends concerning the militant Nizari

Ismailis.[2] This sect's emergence began with a dispute over succession to the Fatimid imamate in 1094 CE. When power brokers in Egypt dispossessed and murdered the designated heir Nizar, his supporters in eastern lands broke from the Cairo regime and established a new line of imams. Concurrently, these militants, whose main stronghold was at Alamut in northern Persia (Iran), took control of a number of castles and established the practice of assassinating elites -- rulers, officials, and religious dignitaries -- who opposed their version of Islam. In the early 12th century, Nizari missionaries began converting communities in northern Syria. They encountered difficulties, but the sect eventually gained bases to project power through assassination and subversion, as it had in Persia. The master of Masyaf, the main Nizari stronghold in Syria, became known in Crusader lore as "the Old Man of the Mountain."

The Nizari Ismailis in both their eastern and western domains assassinated scores of opponents over the course of several decades. They were feared and reviled by their opponents, who amplified that negative image in legend and history. Part of the legend was that "hitmen" were doped on hashish (hence, H̱ashshâshîn) so as to sustain resolve for an act of self-sacrifice; the assassin seldom escaped alive. Nizari militancy was eventually suppressed after the Mongols destroyed Alamut in 1256 CE and the Mamluks of Egypt seized Masyaf in 1270 CE. Much of the legend concerning the Nizaris is of questionable validity. Moreover, the comparison between al-Qa'ida and the "order of assassins" is likewise

---

[1] See, for example: Rick Ross, "Osama bin Laden and 'al Qaeda'" Cult Education and Recovery (November 2001); available from http://www.culteducation.com/binladen.html; Internet; accessed 11 May 2006; Steven Rowat, "Al-Qaeda and the New Assassins: Thoughts on Reading Maalouf," (2001) available from http://rowatworks.com/Essays/maalouf.html; Internet; accessed 11 May 2006; and "The Assassins: the World's First Terrorists," On Point (December 10, 2001); available from http://www.onpointradio.org/shows/2001/12/20011210_b_main.asp; Internet; accessed 11 May 2006.

[2] For a full account of Nizari militancy, see Bernard Lewis, *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam* (New York: Basic Books, 1968) and Marshal G. S. Hodgson, *The Order of Assassins* (New York: AMS, 1980). See also Farhad Daftary, *The Assassin Legends: Myths of the Isma'ilis* (London: I. B. Taurus & Co. Ltd., 1994).

Al-QA'IDA AS RAID BASE

Cell

**NON-PERMISSIVE
ENVIRONMENT**

Cell

Cell

Cell

**PERMISSIVE
OR SEMI-
PERMISSIVE
ENVIRONMENT**

- SAFE HAVEN
- TRAINING CAMPS
- STANDING UNITS

Cell

Cell

Cell

Cell | **Clandestine Cell**
- Doctrinaire
- Recruit Base
- Operatives

Cell

Cell

Cell

Figure 1

debatable on several points. The militant Sunni founders of al-Qa'idi would never claim to emulate radical Shi'a, nor would they want or need to. Al-Qa'idi lacks the doctrinal cohesion of the Nizari Ismailis, whereas its target set is not restricted to individual elites but extends to institutions and public facilities as well. Lastly, al-Qa'ida does not govern the populated settlements around its strongholds, as was the case with the Nizaris.

Neither of the above cases seems to be a precedent for al-Qa'ida, especially since its leaders are not intent on territorial control at this time. There is, however, another possible precedent in an Arab technique of warfare that dates to the mid-tenth century (third Islamic century). It is an anomaly of history that this technique has been recorded not by the Arabs but by their Byzantine foes. An anonymous military treatise dated to that era discusses countermeasures to the Arabs' doctrine (my word) for wide-area raids, and that discussion allows for the following reconstruction.[1] The Muslim army crosses the frontier in march-order and proceeds toward some district worth plundering. The commander (amir) establishes the main camp at a site that ideally affords natural protection and access to water. The camp may or may not be protected by a *foulkon*. (This Byzantine technical term derives from Germanic *volk* and connotes the practice whereby armed tribes encamp within laagers.

---

[1] See George T. Dennis (ed. & trans.), *Three Byzantine Military Treatises* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1985), 143-239.

The text does not specify whether the Arabs' defensive perimeters are constructed of inter-locked shields, wagons, carts, stakes, or a combination thereof.) The amir sends out multiple columns to raid the surrounding villages. If a raid force's objective is too far from the main camp for safe retreat under duress, then that force will establish a *foulkon* at some intermediate site. The respective columns, if not intercepted and defeated, eventually return to the main camp and secure their plunder and captives. If another district is to be targeted, the entire army advances and repeats the above process, and, if not, it withdraws. The overall scheme is depicted at Figure 2.

In comparing the "raid" scheme of the Muslim border warriors with that of al-Qa'ida, we find some differences. Al-Qa'ida has a global, and therefore much farther, reach, while it "deploys" much smaller strike forces. Nonetheless, the two models have many similarities, the relevant factors being practice, function, purpose, and method. To start with practice, the significant point is adherence to common technique, despite diversity in force composition or leadership. The wide-area raid technique was employed by various regimes that ruled over the Islamic borderlands in Anatolia – Tulunids, Abbasids, Ikhshidids, and the Shi'i Hamdanids. These regimes assembled into their raid force diverse units and warrior bands. Similarly, in the present day, the "army" of al-Qa'ida is a composite of groups -- militant salafist, radical Wahhabist, and Takfirist mujahideen. The practice of jihad seems, in both cases, to generate some

HISTORIC WIDE-AREA RAIDING

"Foulkon"

Commander
Supplies   Tents
Guards Captives Booty

Figure 2
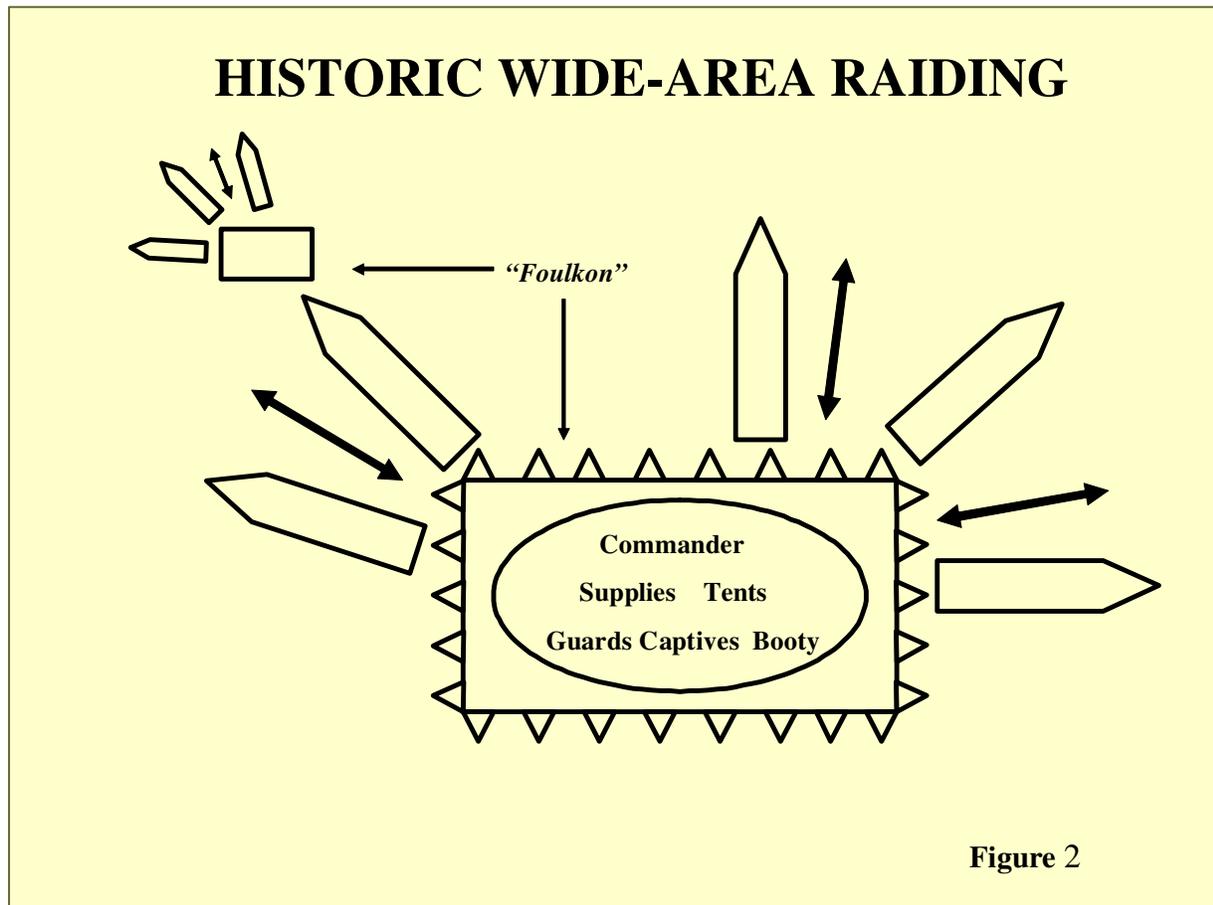
momentum of its own. As for analogy in function, in both raid schemes, the base serves to generate strike forces and to recover and re-deploy them, circumstances permitting.

In both cases, the purpose of the raiding is to attrite the enemy, while avoiding engagement on unfavorable terms. It is clear that the earlier wide-area raid technique evolved from the Muslims' acceptance of the Byzantines' military strengths and aimed at attrition of their staying power. The modern jihadists have likewise resorted to raids (terrorist strikes) since they cannot confront their enemies as military equals. As Bin Ladin said, "due to the imbalance of power between our armed forces and the enemy forces, a suitable means of fighting must be adopted, that is, using fast moving light forces that work under complete secrecy."[1] They seek to undermine the political will of the United States and its allies to uphold their Middle East policies. Lastly, the methods (or means) of the two models reflect similarity in several aspects. They both depend on base displacement, decentralization of command-and-control, dispersion of forces, and strikes by highly mobile light forces. In both cases, the dispersal of forces (which contrasts with the normative dictum of concentrating, or massing, forces) does make sense. Of further interest is that the Byzantine advice on countermeasures applies as well in the present time, as it includes: scouting, surveillance, intelligence, communication, coordination between main force and advance force(s), and ambush and bait-and-ambush techniques.

Thus, the analogy appears to be valid on a number of points. One might contend that al-

Qa'ida's strikes amount to strategic, not operational, warfare. However, that view is not entirely correct, for the difference is one of distance rather than capability. The reality is that the "global jihadists" do not presently have the doctrinal cohesion necessary for strategic direction of effort.

Again one might object that their doctrine is salafism. However, salafism is more of a mindset than a comprehensive doctrine. Several important tenets remain to be clarified before the "movement" becomes truly cohesive. Key issues are:

- What are the specific qualifications for the position of caliph?
- What are the rules for selecting or deposing the caliph?
- What is the relevance, if any, of the old dialectic theology, particularly the opposing points of the Ash'ari and Maturidi "schools."
- What is the definition for "lawful blood" regarding conflict within Islam?
- What is the definition for "lawful blood" regarding conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims?
- Which acts (sins) constitute apostasy?

In the final analysis, we do not know whether the leaders of al-Qa'ida somehow knew of and were consciously replicating the older, wide-area raid technique or were merely pursuing a "natural" or innate course of action, that is, adapting to the circumstances. To my knowledge, the raid scheme recorded by the Byzantines has not been recorded in Arabic historiography. The first two "military leaders" of al-Qa'ida, Abu Ubaida al-Banshiri and Abu Hafs al-Masri, have died without recording their inspiration. We are left with Bin Ladin's remarks concerning al-Qa'ida: "the situation is

---

[1] Excerpt from English text of Bin Ladin's "Declaration of Jihad," available from http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A4342-2001Sep21; Internet.

not as the West portrays it, that there exists an 'organization' with a specific name."[1] Those words may well be true, if "al–Qâ'ida" indeed signifies an entire scheme for the pursuit of jihad.   In any case, it is important to note that we can find explanations for the thought and behavior of the jihadists from inside their own culture. There is no need to seek explanations in Maoist or Guevarist insurgency theory or psychologic analyses of terrorism, as seems to be presently in vogue among security and defense analysts.
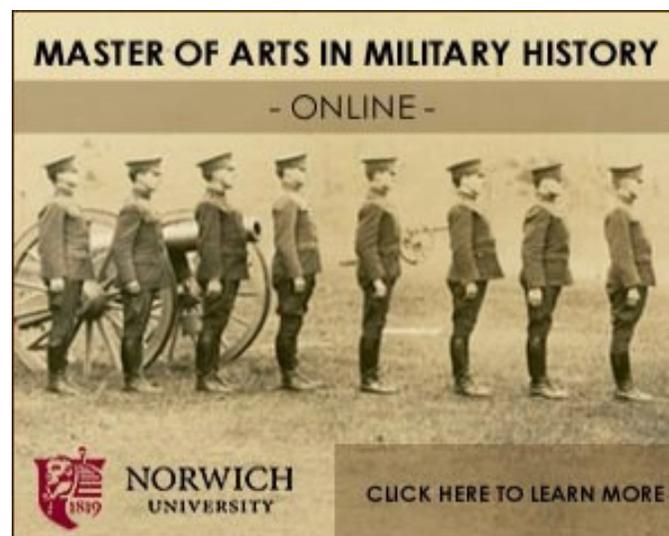
John W. Jandora is currently employed as a senior analyst with US Army Special Operations Command. He retired from the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve at the rank of colonel, with active service in the Vietnam and Gulf Wars. He holds a PhD from the University of Chicago, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations. He has resided and worked in Saudi Arabia for several years and has travelled extensively throughout the Near and Middle East. Dr Jandora is the author of The March From Medina: A Revisionist Study of the Arab Conquests (Kingston Press, 1990) and Militarism in Arab Society: An Historiographical and Bibliographical Sourcebook (Greenwood Press, 1997) as well as numerous scholarly articles on Middle Eastern affairs.

FORM FOR GUN DRILL

See this ad frequently, and many more, at Small Wars Council.
These cannoneers are nothing if not persistent.
We must be too.

---

[1] Bin Ladin, Messages, p. 119-120.