

Book Review
By
Sajid Aziz

Jason Burke, *The New Threat from Islamic Militancy* (London: Bodley Head, 2015) pp. 281

"But actual 'popular support from the Muslim masses' depends on a community's conviction that the extremists are the only people who can protect its economic, social and cultural well-being. This was made much easier if the communities believed they were facing an existential threat which the militants were uniquely qualified to counter."

Jason Burke's travels in Muslim world, his accessibility to militant groups, his journalistic background and extensive research make him one of the authentic voices on Islamic militancy. He is the South Asia Correspondent for the Guardian newspaper and has been working on Islamic militancy for decades. Besides *The New Threat From Islamic Militancy*, his latest book, Burke has authored three books: *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*, *On the Road to Kandahar: Travels Through the Conflict in Islamic World* and *9/11 Wars*.

Deconstructing certain myths and misconceptions regarding militant organizations, which reduce them to monolithic entities with static approaches, Burke's main thesis is that Islamic militancy is a dynamic phenomenon, adapting to changing circumstances. In order to neutralize and ultimately defeat radical Islamic groups, it is incumbent on policy makers and security and intelligence authorities to acknowledge this fact and understand the social, political and ideological causes that motivate individuals and groups to commit terrorist acts.

According to Jason Burke, there are currently three broad categories of Islamic militancy in the world. The first category includes major groups like al-Qaeda and Islamic State (IS), which have united disparate and fractious groups into an organized force and structure. Besides sharing many commonalities between them, like their aspiration for a Caliphate, declaring current Muslim rulers as apostates and the liberation of Muslim lands from foreign occupation, al-Qaeda and IS, when looked at carefully, have very serious differences. Unlike al-Qaeda, IS does not adhere to the notion of 'Far Enemy,' at least its territorial control of parts

of Iraq and Syria shows that the 'Near Enemy' is its first priority. Abu Bakr Bagdadi does not recognize the leadership of Aymen al-Zawahiri and considers his organization's actions as more of semiotic nature than of substance. Moreover, al-Qaeda has always considered the establishment of Caliphate as a long-term project, but IS after taking control of Mosul declared a Caliphate and selected Bagdadi as its leader.

The second category includes all those active militant groups that have an organized structure. Some of these groups have allegiance with either al-Qaeda or IS, while others are independent of them. There are four major groups that are affiliated with al-Qaeda: al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), al-Shabaab in Somalia, al-Qaeda in Magrib (AQIM), and Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. Though they have allegiance with al-Qaead, they enjoy regional and operational autonomy.

The third category includes what Burke calls 'inspired warriors', the radicalized individuals who are ready to commit acts of violence on individual basis for their supposed ideological and political reasons. The line between these groups is not very clear. There have been times when 'individual warriors' from Europe have received training and weapons from militant bases in Muslim states and gone back to their home countries to execute their plans.

These three strands of radical Islam guide his analysis throughout the book. The most important aspect of the book is that the author contextualizes the origins and motivations of these radical groups and individuals in the social, political and historical setting. Jason Burke argues that religion played an important role in resistance in Muslim world against European colonization. Hasan al-Banna of Egypt couched his resistance against British colonizers in religious idiom, while Deobandi Madrasa worked to protect the cultural values of Muslims in the Sub-continent. The subsequent experiments with Baa'thism, Socialism and Nationalism in the Muslim world in the post-colonial setting failed to deliver economic and political dividends. The changing demographics, increasing populations coupled with dwindling opportunities, provided conducive ground for militant ideology to flourish. This was the setting which Burke calls 'the origins of global jihad' that produced Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian who had fought against Israel in 1967 war and would later fight in Afghan Jihad against Soviet Union, Syed Qutb of Muslim Brotherhood and Farrar, who all propagated Jihad against the iniquities of the local rulers (the Near Enemy).

The subsequent geopolitical situation, in which Afghanistan was invaded by Soviet Union in 1979, brought together militants and jihadists all over the Muslim world. These veterans would later form the core of al-Qaeda and organize militant groups in their respective countries. The political vacuum, deinstitutionalization, and an essentially sectarianized post-war political government in Iraq combined to give birth to ISIS. IS also attracted thousands of young men and some women from all over the world to fight in Syria.

The book *The New Threat* is an important addition on the existing discourse on terrorism and contributes to our understanding of radical Islam. The author, by blending his research and field work and his experience of travelling in the Muslim world, presents a cogent argument in support of his thesis that Islamic militancy is an ever-evolving phenomenon and if we try to neutralize its threat, then a clear understanding of its motivations and adaptability should be required. But there are times when the author seems not to follow his own suggestion. For example, he attempts to build a continuum between the past and present Islamic movements without the nuance and subtlety that such an endeavor demands. It is one thing to derive lessons from history and link it to present events, but building a whole narrative by selectively quoting past and patching them with present to create a logically coherent argument is not helpful. Despite this, it is a serious book that does not rely on clichés and jargons to put across its point and it will help reader to go beyond headlines to understand the underlying factors about terrorism and radical Islamic groups.

*Sajid Aziz is a
CISS Research Assistant*