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The real conspiracy behind 9/11

Martin Amis examines the horrific coincidences that enabled Osama bin Laden's progress from down-and-out cave dweller to the chief symbol of Islamist terrorism

THE LOOMING TOWER Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11

by Lawrence Wright

Allen Lane, £20; 470pp

READERS SHOULD prepare themselves for a festival of gullibility. Asked in a recent survey to explain their presence in Iraq, 85 per cent of American soldiers said that the "main mission" was "to retaliate for Saddam's role" in the September 11 attacks.

About two thirds of American civilians, it's true, share that misapprehension; but it is implausible that frontline troops are so incuriously risking their lives.

This near-consensus on the question cannot be due to ignorance. It comes from the same wishfulness that fortifies the majority belief among Muslims that September 11 was the work of Mossad.

Although few Americans think that the Israelis did it, nearly half (42 per cent) think that the Americans did. This means that the average American is more distrustful of Washington than the average Pakistani (in Pakistan a mere 41 per cent consider that the attacks were not carried out by Arab terrorists — as against 59 per cent of Turks and Egyptians and 65 per cent of Indonesians).

American sceptics hold that the collapse of the twin towers was caused by expert demolition. They hold that the explosion at the Pentagon was consistent, not with a crashed 757 but with a cruise missile. In other words, Washington wounded itself.

Psychiatrists call it fabrication. The rest of us call it conspiracy theory — or the masochistic lust for chicanery and compound deceit. Fabrication may more simply be the failure to assimilate; and we concede that September 11 will perhaps never be wholly assimilable. The first question to be asked of the fabulist is *cui bono?* And the answer would be, "Well, the Administration, which could then accrue the power . . . to march on Baghdad". We are arriving at an axiom in long-term thinking about international terrorism: the real danger lies not in what it inflicts but in what it provokes. Thus by far the gravest consequence of September 11 to date is Iraq.

The American death toll in the war will soon exceed the death toll in the original attack; and for the Iraqi people that figure is exceeded every three weeks.

Nor are the losses merely actuarial: they are also to be seen in our weakened hold on the high ground of morality and reason. It is as if September 11 entrained a net increase in suggestibility, and at every level. At the top, a President guided a) by blithe adventurists and b) by intimations from the Almighty. At the bottom, a citizenry haunted by rudderless suspicions. The fact is that America didn't wound itself in September 2001, as the fabulists claim. It did that in March 2003 and thereafter.

The Looming Tower, Lawrence Wright's tough-minded and cussedly persistent narrative opens with portraits of the triumvirate of developed Islamism: Sayyid Qutb, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden. Almost at once, the question arises: should we be solaced or additionally galled by the poverty of the human material now so ferociously ranged against us? In these pages we meet some formidable schemers and killers, such as Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, the author of "the planes operation" (since captured). As for the other players, there are nuances, there are shades of black; but the consistent profile is marked by intellectual vacuity, by a fanaticism that simply thirsts for the longest possible penal code, and, most basically, by a chaotically adolescent — or even juvenile — indifference to reality. These men are fabulists crazed with blood and death; reality for them is just something you have to manoeuvre around in order to destroy it.

Qutb (1906-66), an Egyptian writer and civil servant, does duty as the first framer of Islamism. And you wonder about the condition of the Muslim imagination, in that it was so easily "captured" by this almost endearingly comical figure: an entanglement of drives and urges, draped in piety and hauteur. His fate at the hands of Nasser was not at all comical; and Qutb's martyrdom was his controlled historical timebomb.

At any rate, Islamism owes to him the twin dreams of planetary domination and theocratic genocide. Zawahiri, Qutb's compatriot, gives further weight to the argument that international terrorism was born and raised in the prisons of Egypt.

A brutalised medic, Zawahiri was the leader and chief moralist of his own group, al-Jihad, where he deployed the doctrine or heresy (or tinkertoy sophistry) of *takfir*. As Wright explains: "The *takfiris* convinced themselves that salvation for all of humanity lay on the other side of moral territory that had always been the certain province of the damned. They would shoulder the risks to their eternal souls by assuming the divine authority of deciding who was a real Muslim and who was not, who should live and who should die."

This greatly expanded the population of the killable. Indeed, no armed doctrine in history has availed itself of a vaster target — anything and anyone. "Unfortunately," one of bin Laden's companions said, "his IQ was not that great."

The verdict stands. Bin Laden's contribution is his image, and nothing more: omniscidal nullity under a smiling halo of beatitude. His personal deformation remains mysterious. Zawahiri was jailed and tortured. Qutb was jailed, tortured and executed. Nobody traumatised bin Laden; unlike his mentors, he was not internally rewired by whips and electric cables. Alone among a shifting crew of one-eyed mullahs, tin-legged zealots, blind shiekhs and paralysed clerics, bin Laden was always intact.

Physically, that is. At the time of his Declaration of War against America (1996), bin Laden was mouldering in a cave in Tora Bora — stateless, penniless, and half-starved. His achievements were a

matter of myth, of fabulation; he was a funk-ridden and incompetent ex-jihadi (a mere pepperer of the Red Army); and he was a serial business flop.

In short, he was a terrorist financier who had run out of cash, and was now entirely at the mercy of the local Islamist power, the village-idiot vigilantes known as the Taleban.

Very soon, Zawahiri would be in a Russian jail, and bin Laden subsisting on stale bread and contaminated water. At this stage al-Qaeda's survival looked unlikely and its chances of mounting an operation the size of September 11 were infinitesimal. The "declaration" was little more than a deathbed whimper.

How then did the cornered troglodyte of 1996 become the radiant Mahdi of 2001? Bin Laden's notoriety was lucrative; in 1998 the Taleban leader Mullah Omar started taking bribes from Riyadh as a down payment for his extradition and delivery to the Americans. But Omar and Osama were soulmates — and business partners. That same summer, the embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania took place. In Nairobi, al-Qaeda killed 206 Africans and wounded 4,500 (150 were blinded by flying glass), plus a total of 12 Americans; the half-bungled attack in Dar es Salaam killed no Americans at all. Although Islamic reaction worldwide was unanimous disgust, it was, definingly, the American reaction that empowered bin Laden.

Of the 66 US cruise missiles fired at camps around Khost in Afghanistan, a number failed to detonate. According to Wright (his source is Russian Intelligence), "bin Laden sold the unexploded missiles to China for \$10 million".

In al-Qaeda's next attack, on the *USS Cole* in 2000, the symbolism was far more finely tuned: a futuristic fighting ship crippled by a dinghy. Established as the global champion of the anti-American cause, bin Laden was now the recipient of fresh recruits bearing Samsonite suitcases stuffed with petrodollars from awed admirers in the Gulf.

September 11 itself emerges as a chapter of hideous coincidences. In its early days the "planes operation" consisted of two monoglot "muscle" Saudis blundering around Los Angeles — incapable, it seemed, of asking the way to the nearest flight school.

All was set fair for yet another of al-Qaeda's ridiculous failures, on a par with the plan to assassinate the Pope in 1994 (abandoned soon after the purchase of the killers' cassocks). The spectacular attack, "the big one", was a non-starter until the fortuitous arrival in Kandahar of the "Hamburg contingent" (Atta et al): these men were superficially Westernised, and superficially rational: possessed by just the right kind of functioning insanity.

Negative coincidences also characterised the American end of the story. It is painful to follow the inter-agency malfunctions, resentments and pedantries that opened the door to disaster. The man who came closest to averting it, John O'Neill, quit the FBI in August 2001. He took up his new job on the 23rd: head of security at the World Trade Centre. He had 19 days to live.

Expert opinion in the West is now largely persuaded that al-Qaeda is more or less finished. The "base" — justly so called in the adjectival sense — has become, we hear, "a state of mind". And what is that state of mind? One convinced that it is possible simultaneously to be a random mass murderer and a good Muslim.

A death-brimmed bog of paranoia and credulity, it is the state of

mind of the armed fabulist. The conspiracy detected here is the infidel campaign to obliterate the faith. It all began with the retreat of the Turkish armies from Vienna and the confirmation of Islamic decline: the year was 1683 and the day was September 11.

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Read Ginny Dougary's exclusive interview with Martin Amis in The Times Magazine next week

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