

# Countering Al Qaeda: An Interview with Dr. Rohan Gunaratna

*Interviewed by John Whisenhunt, Editor*

*IO Sphere sat down with Dr. Gunaratna during his February 2006 seminar in San Antonio. He is a widely-recognized expert on Al Qaeda, and its evolution from a radical group to an Islamic extremist movement. His seminar drew attendees from across the U.S. Combatant Commands, state and local governments, and local universities..*



*Dr. Rohan Gunaratna (PBS.org)*

**IO Sphere:** Thank you very much for your time today.

**Dr. Gunaratna:** You are very welcome. It is a pleasure to be here.

**IO Sphere:** We are all trying to find a way to create and distribute a unified policy message. What groups or governments, or groups within government, do you find are most successful in spreading a unified theme or message? Who would be a good model?

**Dr. Gunaratna:** No one country can create a message that can find universal resonance. From their own experience, governmental and non-governmental organizations can share best practices in the fight against terrorism and extremism. Because the threat is multidimensional, our response must be multi-pronged, multi-agency, multijurisdictional and multinational. Although government has primary responsibility to spread the message, religious institutions, schools, community organizations, private security industry, academia... they all have a responsibility. So I don't think there will be any one particular individual or agency.

Because the terrorists are working together, we have no option but to cooperate and collaborate. We must learn from the enemy. For instance, Al Qaeda popularized the theme "war against the Jews and the Crusaders." In February 1998, Usama Bin Laden issued a fatwah (a religious opinion) stating that it is the "duty of every good Muslim to wage Jihad." Although church and state are separate in the US, I think it is important to counter this. Unfortunately, in the western world, there is no principal strategist to counter the message of Al Qaeda statements or ideologues. Among the Jihad groups Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri, the deputy leader of Al Qaeda, has emerged as a strategist of the jihad movement. But, on the Western side I haven't come across a principle strategist opposing these Jihad groups. This is a weakness to highlight. We must create a

central authority, somebody iconic, to constantly spread the message!

**IO Sphere:** Based on your discussions here, do you think there is some aspect of what the West or the U.S. is doing that we can capitalize on... that we can build on?

**Dr. Gunaratna:** America's biggest strength, and also its biggest weakness, has been technology. America has progressed so much because of technology. For instance, you have removed some of the key leaders of AQ using the Predator (Unmanned Aerial Vehicle). In January of 2006, you neutralized Abu Khabab Al Masri (aka Midhat Mursi), one of the key explosives leaders of AQ. In December of 2005, you killed the operations leader of AQ, Abu Hamza Rabia. In November of 2001, the Predator killed Muhammed Atef (aka Abu Hafs), the military commander of AQ. But again, you always think technology has the total answer. I think that on the operational counterterrorism side, you are so good, because technologically you are so good. But now you need to invest in strategic counterterrorism. Yesterday I mentioned six aspects of strategic counterterrorism (Figure 1). One is

## Aspects of Strategic Counterterrorism

Ideological  
Educational  
Media Response  
Financial  
Legislative  
Developmental

*Figure 1.*

ideological response, another is educational response, three is media response, four is financial response, five is legislative response, and six is developmental response. By using operational terrorism you can destroy terrorist groups; you can take out leaders – they will be replaced. But by investing in ideological response, you can change the environment and the minds of the people. America’s fascination with technology to fight future wars is a mental trap. The weapons you have developed are of marginal use to fight the real wars of today and tomorrow.

***IO Sphere:** One of the things you mention in your testimony to the 9-11 Commission (in 2001) was AQ being in a period of transition. How have things changed since then? With this lack of strategic focus, are we still in a position to exploit some of AQ’s evolution?*

**Dr. Gunaratna:** The threat posed by the global jihad movement has replaced the threat posed by Al Qaeda. As a result of US led coalition actions, the AQ group led by Bin Laden has become very weak. But AQ as a movement has become very strong: this idea that there must be attacks not only against local enemies - the “false” Muslim governments - but the “distant” enemy, the global enemy, the U.S. This idea has found acceptance among many local Jihad groups. So AQ has transformed very significantly, and I think it is important that the enemy is different from the one you had at 9-11. Today there are several AQs you must fight. And in that fight you need to have a much deeper understanding of the distinctions between these groups, in order for you to fight this campaign successfully. So you need to train specialists – not generalists – and the American way is to train generalists. I think the only way to fight this campaign is to train specialists.

***IO Sphere:** We currently have a limited number of international training opportunities in the U.S. military colleges. Is there potential to develop specialists there?*

**Dr. Gunaratna** I think the U.S. must open their doors for more Muslim officers from Middle-Eastern and Asian Muslim countries, to come and train, and to study in the United States. It is true that a very small number of those who come and study in your country will become extremists, but the vast majority of them will support the U.S., and think positively of the U.S. I think that you must step up your recruitment and open your doors for more Muslims. Like, General Mushariff – an ideal case. And I think there are some countries that violate human rights, but just because they do that you should not sever your ties with those militaries. You cut your ties with the Indonesian military, now there’s a huge terrorist problem.

The Indonesian military is so poorly informed of the terrorist threat. But imagine you didn’t do that – you had continued to work with them, tried to reform them, and told them not to commit human rights violations. And you had trained them even better – then they would not do it (commit violations). Similarly, you have cut your ties with the Myanmar (former Burma) military. That’s a mistake. You must reestablish ties, and make them better people. Similarly, I think you must send more officers to study in the Muslim world. It’s a huge experience for them.

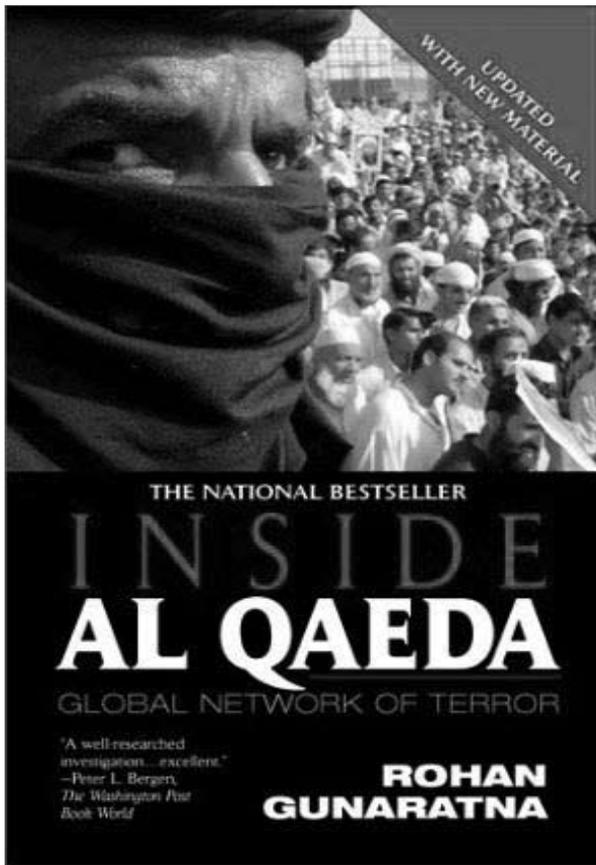
I will tell you my own experience. My first visit (to the U.S.) was in 1989-90. I came via the State Department International Visitor Program. The U.S. Embassy in Sri Lanka asked me “What would you like to see?” And I said “I want to visit the biggest library in the world – the U.S. Library of Congress.” So I went there, to the South Asia section, and there was a librarian, who I asked “Do you have this book?” Then he showed me a computer and said “You can do a computer search.” So I said “I’m sorry, but I do not know how to use a computer.” So that was the first time for me to use a computer. When I went back to Sri Lanka I bought an inexpensive South Korean Kaypro computer, and I learned. And using that computer I wrote two books. So you can see how travel to the U.S. was so important. And during that visit I met Professor Steve

Cohen at the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana – a brilliant guy – he’s the leading American South Asian specialist, even to this day. He wrote his thesis on the Indian and Pakistani armies, and later I came to

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work with him in 1994. So you can have short visits - I only spent one month in the U.S.- but those are very important. I think they can influence and change people very significantly. And the group I traveled to the U.S. with, we created a group called SANOCR (South Asian Network On Conflict Research). It operated for about 10 years. But those people I came with, they were all South Asians, and we still keep in touch. So, I think it is very important to open those doors.

And you can do that, because you have a huge infrastructure... you can influence. Look at (Pakistani President Pervez) Musharraf, how he’s helping you. Over 25% of the detainees in Guantanamo, at Camps X-Ray and Delta, are from Pakistan. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, 9-11 mastermind, was captured in Pakistan; Abu Zubaydah captured in Pakistan; Ramzi Binalshibh, 9-11 logistician captured in Pakistani; Mustafa Ahmed Al Hawsawi, the international accountant of AQ, captured in Pakistan. All of this because the Pakistanis are working closely with American agencies, and because of Musharraf. So, you will have so many benefits by inviting military officers, even from countries with which you have difficult relations.



**IO Sphere:** You mentioned that we need to work with the more moderate clerics. Can that be done by the U.S. Muslim community? Would it have to be an exclusively Muslim-to-Muslim approach?

**Dr. Gunaratna:** Firstly you're fighting an idea: global Jihad is an ideology. You can use your operational tools to some extent, but to be effective you have to create an alternative ideology or counter the existing one. How do you do that? You don't have the weapons – the clerics are the weapons! You have to reach out to them and work with them. If you can't do that, you must reach out to organizations that have the linkages to the clerics. Certainly you can use some American clerics, and certainly some in the Middle East and Asia. You should use whoever you can to create that alternative ideology and counter the existing ideology.

**IO Sphere:** Do you think there are some groups who are waiting for an

invitation to help the U.S., but we simply have not asked them?

**Dr. Gunaratna** I think your focus has been on the short term capabilities to fight terrorism and extremism. Now you must develop the long term/long range capabilities that will have a strategic impact. That is why SOCOM (U.S. Special Operations Command) and

STRATCOM (U.S. Strategic Command) are so important.

**IO Sphere:** Do you have any closing thoughts you'd like to share with our readers?

**Dr. Gunaratna:** Yes. President Bush formed a coalition willing to fight against AQ and its associated groups in October 2001. What is important to note is Al Qaeda formed their coalition, "The World Islamic Front For Jihad Against the Jews and the Crusaders," in February 1998. So today, AQ is working with 30-40 different groups. But you must understand Al Qaeda formed its alliance two years before 9-11. At least belatedly, now there is a coalition among states, European allies, and friends in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East to fight against terrorism. The success of the U.S. against terrorism is to a large extent in the future, based on maintaining that coalition, and expanding that coalition. Terrorism cannot be fought by one single country. I see America's biggest strength will be to build even deeper bridges to the Muslim world: not just to the Muslim states, but the Muslim communities, and the Muslim Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO). Without working closely with the Muslim world, and the Arab world, it would be very difficult to fight extremism in the future. So this is the challenge for American political and military leaders. 🌀

