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The man who knew too much

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Who Killed Daniel Pearl?

By Bernard-Henri Lévy

The kidnapping and foul murder of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl in Karachi, Pakistan, in February, 2002, was a defining moment in the war against al-Qaeda. Pearl was decapitated while forced to utter, "My father is Jewish, my mother is Jewish, and I am a Jew." The horrific moment was forever etched on videotape by his murderers, and then posted on the Internet. His wife, Mariane Pearl, pregnant with their son, had tearfully pleaded with his captives on Pakistani television to spare his life, to no avail. Pearl was by all accounts a sensitive, cosmopolitan and intelligent journalist whose life touched those whose paths he crossed. Conventional wisdom had it that he was murdered for being an American and a Jew. He was. His brutal murder was the most concrete realization of violent anti-Semitic attitudes within the Islamic world. But Bernard-Henri Lévy, the prominent French talking head and bestselling public intellectual, sought to investigate his murder, sensing that there was more behind the tale. In this grim investigation, he explores the story that brought Pearl to Pakistan: alleged links between Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency and al-Qaeda. The author begins his journey with a visit to Pearl's parents in Los Angeles. Immigrants to the United States from Israel,

they display a fractured and fragile demeanour, weeping at the memory of their son. Judea Pearl, Daniel's father, is an eminent computer scientist. Ruth, his mother, is of Iraqi Sephardic descent. Lévy admits to shame at the torrent of emotions his inquiries have apparently unleashed. Slowly, a portrait emerges of a young man who loved his American and Jewish heritages. He and his French wife, Mariane, named their unborn child Adam, for John Quincy Adams, sixth president of the United States, who fought against slavery, and because it was a name that emphasized the interconnectedness of the Abrahamic faiths. Pearl also learned a smattering of Arabic, and thought little of the "clash of civilizations" thesis, which posits that future conflict will be principally between the Islamic and Western worlds. On the other side of the world, one figure was working assiduously to ensure such a clash would take place: Omar Sheikh, Pearl's British-born Pakistani kidnapper. This fanatical Islamist is a source of repellent fascination for Lévy. Omar Sheikh was born into a life of affluence and privilege. His father ran a prosperous import-export business. He studied at a private school on scholarship and was admitted into the prestigious London School of Economics, where he studied mathematics. His siblings studied at Oxford and Cambridge. He himself displayed no overt tendencies toward fundamentalist Jihadi Islam; in short, he was a most unlikely candidate for the job of terrorist ringleader. The bulk of this book, which reads like a Robert Ludlum espionage thriller, is a tracing of Sheikh's life into the heart of al-Qaeda darkness — in England, Bosnia, Afghanistan, India and Pakistan. Lévy is consumed by Omar Sheikh. He wishes to understand this enigmatic double life — especially the persona of a terrorist ringleader. He travels

to Pakistan, where much of the dangerous detective work takes place. Lévy's local "fixer" finds a man who promises to reveal some of those details in a Karachi park at dusk. His informant is a local police officer who interrogated Sheikh and who reveals that the terrorist "turned himself in" to a Brigadier Ijaz Shah for the Pearl kidnapping. Ijaz Shah, as it happens, is a close friend of Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, but more importantly, a high-ranking official in the ISI whose portfolio included handling Harkat ul-Mujahidin and Harkat ul-Jihadi-al-Islami, Islamist terrorist organizations that freelance for the state. Omar Sheikh, the officer reveals, is an ISI man, and has been for a long time. When the kidnapers' ringleader was eventually turned over to the Karachi police, who wanted to "work him over," the ISI prevented it, demanding to be present for the interrogations and, on occasion, actually interrupted questioning. Lévy finds this all very curious. He is attempting to unravel complex plots, plots within subplots, deceptions based upon deceptions, and at times is not sure whom to trust. While in Karachi, Lévy scrutinizes the building where Pearl was murdered. He establishes that the property is owned by the al-Rashid Trust, a fundamentalist NGO with ties to Islamist organizations and al-Qaeda, with which it shares offices and bank accounts. He notes, "Pearl was tortured and murdered in a house belonging to a fake charity organization that serves as a mask for Osama bin Laden." Lévy, a veritable Colombo, stops over in Dubai.. He is now on the money trail of al-Qaeda. His unnamed (intelligence) sources reveal that the Sept. 11 hijackers wired back unused funds to one Mustafa Ahmad in Dubai. Ahmad, on that fateful and bloody day, flew back to Karachi.. His real name is Shayk Saiid, also known as Omar Sheikh (a lieutenant of Osama bin Laden). An astonished Lévy finds this difficult

to believe. It seems too surreal. There were, however, he notes, reports in U.S. and Indian newspapers linking Pakistani military intelligence to the attack. The Wall Street Journal reported (on Oct. 10, 2001), "American authorities confirm the fact that \$100,000 was transferred to Mohammad Atta by Ahmad Umar Sheikh at the request of General Ahmad Mahmood." Next, Lévy revisits Afghanistan, where he has many high-ranking friends in the post-Taliban government. He meets with the governor of Kandahar and his intelligence head, and asks if Omar Sheikh had "attended" an al-Qaeda training camp. He had. Here Lévy has considerable luck, and the descent into the al-Qaeda maelstrom is fully revealed. Sheikh, it appears, was on the al-Qaeda fast track. He had been entrusted by bin Laden to manage al-Qaeda's financial business and money-laundering operations. By one account (Robert Anson in *Vanity Fair*), Daniel Pearl's murderer was the "favoured son" of bin Laden. In Kandahar, Omar Sheikh drove a Toyota, had a guard and led a high-profile life. After the Americans invaded Afghanistan, he returned to Lahore, Pakistan, where he lived the good life, making speeches and attending posh dinner parties — a most unusual repose for a wanted terrorist.

The central thesis of this book is that al-Qaeda is intertwined with the Pakistani military intelligence — or, as Lévy pithily observes: You look for the ISI, you find al-Qaeda; you look for al-Qaeda, you run into the ISI and "the implications are staggering." Lévy asks whether Pearl stumbled across any of this. Did he die because he was the man who knew too much? As but one example, Pearl was investigating al-Qaeda's attempts to obtain nuclear capabilities (one of Pakistan's top nuclear scientists had met with bin Laden). Moreover, commentators have described the ISI as an invisible

government within a government featuring a heavy concentration of Islamist sympathizers. If this is all true, then the broader implications are that the United States' partner in the war against terrorism is the very source of terrorism that it is fighting.

Another thread in the book, and in Pearl's murder, is the virulent anti-Semitism of al-Qaeda and other modern Islamist factions. Muslim anti-Semitism in its current guise is a relatively new phenomenon. It is, in part, a recrudescence of medieval anti-Judaic polemics, infused with the hate-speech and propaganda clichés of modern Western anti-Semitism that was imported into the Middle East under European colonial rule. It is also in large measure a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict having taken centre stage in the consciousness of the Muslim world, where the duelling protagonists have come to be viewed with a monotonic, racialized religious identity (a.k.a. the "powerless" Muslim versus the "powerful" Jew).

Into this smouldering cauldron of hatred add the final ingredient: Islamic fundamentalism, which views the West as an existential threat that must be forcibly expunged from Islamic lands. Fundamentalism is not simply the intellectually enfeebled idea of returning to a pristine imaginary past, but also the perversion and denial of more tolerant mediating traditions. One toxic result of Saudi Wahhabism (called Salafism by its devotees) has been a rise of Wahhabi-inspired intolerance toward Jews, Christians and Shiite Muslims. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Pakistan, as Lévy discovers.

Time and time again, the author finds his conversations with interlocutors punctuated with crude, conspiratorial anti-Semitic remarks and asides.

One memorable instance of the transmutation of Western anti-Semitism into Islamist "theology" appears in an article entitled Inside Jihad U., by

Jeffrey Goldberg of The New York Times. Samiul Haq is a mullah who runs the Haqqania madrassa, an ideological training ground for the Taliban. He also heads one of Pakistan's largest Islamist parties and is a senator. Haq informs Goldberg that "it was the Jews that crucified Christ." What the truly ignorant mullah said was Islamically incorrect. In orthodox Islamic theology, Jesus is not killed; instead, a substitute is placed on the cross..

The mullah's views appear to be a regurgitation of the anti-Semitic Christ-killer motif, an import from the Christian world that has percolated into the Islamic world thanks to Saudi Wahhabi missionary organizations which disseminate The Protocols of the Elders of Zion and other anti-Semitic tracts. This, needless to say, is a rupture with received tradition. Lévy perceptively notes that the radical Islam he saw in Pakistan was at odds with the more tolerant Islam he witnessed in Bosnia, and that of his devout Muslim friend Ahmed Shah Massoud, the Afghan resistance leader murdered by al-Qaeda.

In Lévy's estimation, the real enemy of the West was not Iraq, but Pakistan, and he hints that some "intervention" may be necessary. It is here, while considering the geopolitics of the subcontinent, that this study falters, as it demonstrates a marked inability to confront pathologies in the Indian subcontinent as a whole. Lévy warns that the odour of the apocalypse wafts from Islamabad to Karachi. No doubt it does, but it also drifts across the border from New Delhi to Islamabad. India has tested nuclear devices on its border with Pakistan and is governed by radical Hindu nationalist parties that mirror the prejudices of their neighbours. Hindu nationalist ideologues were also influenced by German fascist ideology. V..D. Savarkar, a noted Hindu nationalist ideologue, repeatedly compared Indian Muslims to German

Jewry.

These rancid ideas persist to this day and are a staple of the politics of Hindutva (Hindu supremacism), but are played down in statements to the Western media lest they offend allies in the fight against fundamentalism.

It is worth noting that Hindu nationalist ideologues played a pivotal role in fuelling anti-Muslim pogroms that killed as many as 2,000 people and left more than 100,000 homeless in the Indian state of Gujarat in March, 2002.

Pakistani fundamentalists and their sympathizers point to this as justification for their own depraved policies. All this eludes Lévy, who views India through a romanticized, saffron-tinted lens. Like a host of commentators before him, Lévy recalls that the West supported the Pakistani dictator General Zia ul-Haq, who overthrew the democratically elected government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1977. The man we supported then was someone who murdered freedom, rolled back women's rights, implemented a draconian Sharia legal system and oversaw the birthing of the militant madrassas, while receiving billions in U.S foreign aid. Similarly, today we support Gen. Musharraf. Like Zia, Musharraf has sidelined mainstream secular political parties (in fairness, Musharraf is, unlike Zia, a moderate). In their place, hard-line Islamist parties have been carefully cultivated (described within Pakistan as the Mullah-Military Alliance). There is thus taking place an invidious hollowing-out of Pakistani democracy, the constricting of secular civil society, accompanied by the rise of Jihadi Islam.

Lévy has written a powerful indictment of Pakistani Jihadi Islamists and their links to al-Qaeda and the Pakistani state. In so doing, he outlines the contours of a potentially frightful future that may yet unfold, and how one decent U.S. journalist was brutally murdered when he was ensnared in the

demon lair of al-Qaeda.