

**Lawrence Wright** discusses his writings about Al-Qaeda and key points in Al-Qaeda's history.

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## The Speaker

Lawrence Wright is a *New Yorker* staff writer and author of Pulitzer Prize winning *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, as well as the one-man show, "My Trip to Al Qaeda."

## Review Questions

**CHAPTER 1:** *Wright discusses the reasons he wrote "My Trip to Al-Qaeda" and his experiences in Egypt in the aftermath of 9/11.*

1. What do Wright's experiences in Cairo indicate about the post-9/11 environment there?

**CHAPTER 2:** *Wright discusses the decision to begin The Looming Tower with Sayyid Qutb, and the lasting impact of Qutb's beliefs.*

1. What makes Qutb's story an appropriate starting point in the telling of Al-Qaeda's history?
2. In what ways did Qutb set the stage for the formation of Al-Qaeda?

**CHAPTER 3:** *Wright describes the evolution of Qutb's philosophical justification of violence in Islamic movements.*

1. How was the concept of takfir used by Qutb to justify violence towards both Muslims and non-Muslims?
2. How did Qutb's publications help to legitimize Islamic commentary and declarations by non-clerics in the public sphere?

**CHAPTER 4:** *Wright talks about al-Zawahiri's emergence as a prominent Islamic radical.*

1. Describe some of the factors Wright mentions as contributing to a radical fervor in Egypt.
2. How does al-Zawahiri's role in radical Islamic movements evolve, and why?

**CHAPTER 5:** *Wright discusses Osama Bin Laden's standing in Saudi Arabia, and the effect the invasion of Kuwait had on Al-Qaeda.*

1. How did Bin Laden become what Wright describes as the "first celebrity" in Saudi Arabia?
2. Why does Wright say that the conflict in Kuwait was a turning point for Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda?

**CHAPTER 6:** *Wright summarizes the evolution of Al-Qaeda since its creation in 1988.*

1. Describe the original mission of Al-Qaeda.
2. What was Bin Laden's ultimate goal in attacking the United States, according to Wright?

**CHAPTER 7:** *Wright describes the plotting of 9/11.*

1. Describe the plot Wright calls the "seed" of the 9/11 plot, and how it evolved.
2. What does Wright theorize Mohammad Atta's role was in plotting 9/11?

## Key Figures and Vocabulary

### Sayyid Qutb

A member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Qutb was a prominent Islamist, and author of *Milestones*, which called for radical Muslims to overthrow impure governments. Qutb was executed by the Egyptian government in 1966.

### Jahiliyyah

The state of paganism that existed before the revelation of Islam. In the view of the writer Sayyid Qutb, impiety and western influence had brought about a widespread return to jahiliyyah in modern Muslim societies, justifying the overthrow of Muslim rulers.

### Takfir

Excommunication from the Islamic faith.

### Al-Jihad

A violent Islamic movement, also known as the Egyptian Islamic Jihad. Al-Jihad's original mission was to replace the Egyptian government with an Islamic state, but it has since expanded this mission to target the United States. The movement was behind the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981.

## Webcast: Exploring 9/11 – The World Before and After Supplementary Materials

**CHAPTER 8:** *Wright talks about how 9/11 and its aftermath have affected Al-Qaeda and its status today, as well as Dr. Fadl's changing role with respect to Al-Qaeda*

1. What factors contributed to the escape of some Al-Qaeda leaders from Afghanistan?
2. Describe Wright's assessment of Al-Qaeda today.
3. Why do Dr. Fadl's criticisms of Al-Qaeda pose a particular threat to the organization?
4. In what way does Wright suggest that debate of Al-Qaeda's ideology can be harmful to the organization, and why?

### Questions for Further Discussion

1. Why does Wright say that Greeley, Colorado might have been expected to be "the ideal spot" for Qutb? Why doesn't this turn out to be the case?
2. What does Wright mean when he says that the United States expected Pakistan to "close the back door" in the aftermath of 9/11, and why was this a mistake?  
(Note: For more on Pakistan, see the [Exploring 9/11 webcast featuring Hassan Abbas](#))
3. Wright says that the war on terror was more or less over after 2001. Discuss current events/news that support or dispute this claim.
4. What does Wright's description of the hijackers in the 9/11 attacks suggest about these terrorists?
5. Describe some of the formal affiliates of Al-Qaeda that Wright mentions. What are the larger implications of these partnerships and shadow groups?

### Recommended Resources

Wright, Lawrence. *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*. (Knopf, 2006)

#### Key Figures and Vocabulary (continued)

##### Ayman al-Zawahiri

Al-Qaeda's number 2 man and former leader of Al-Jihad, or the Egyptian Islamic Jihad.

##### Osama Bin Laden

Founder and leader of Al-Qaeda.

##### Ramzi Yousef

One of the planners of the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. Arrested in 1995, Yousef was brought to the United States and sentenced to life without parole.

##### Khalid Sheikh Mohammed

Ramzi Yousef's uncle, and member of Al-Qaeda. Mohammed was the main planner of the 9/11 attacks, and is currently in United States custody.

##### Mohammad Atta

Member of Al-Qaeda and ringleader of the 19 hijackers in the 9/11 attacks. Atta was aboard AA Flight 11, the first plane to hit the World Trade Center.

##### Dr. Fadl

Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, who goes by the name "Dr. Fadl," was one of the founding members of Al-Qaeda, and an old classmate of al-Zawahiri. He later recanted and has published works challenging the precepts of violent jihad.