

# Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda: Reactionary Revolutionaries in the New Political Islam

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*With the events of September 11th, an unfamiliar terrorist organization known as Al-Qaeda announced its presence, its capabilities, and its willingness to engage in massive violence to the world. Americans, generally poorly informed on the history of the Middle East and blithely unaware of serious foreign threats in the post-Soviet era, were not well equipped to assess the threat. This essay, utilizing a critical analysis of Al-Qaeda's communiqués as well as the increasingly vast body of secondary literature, defines this new threat through an exploration of the sources of its animosity and proposes a more effective means of combating the threat, all while placing the issue in a larger historical context and filling the knowledge gap for non-specialists. Among the most notable findings is the realization that Al-Qaeda's core objective is a political one and a purely militaristic counterterrorist strategy will have a low probability of success. It may even worsen the situation by contributing to the public appearance of a clash of civilizations. Additionally, there are preliminary indications that the threat posed by Al-Qaeda, though significant, is ultimately self-destructive.*

Amidst the sadness and the tears, amidst the shock and the horror, amidst the rubble and the ruin, Americans of every stripe were left with the same burning questions on September 11, 2001. Who had done this, and why? In the next few days Americans would learn of Al-Qaeda, or “the base,” and *jihad*, or “struggle” (Ahmed 1999, 8), frequently used to connote a holy war, a war we did not even know we were fighting. They would learn about Osama bin Laden, a wealthy Arab terrorist with an ambitious vision, and *salafism*, the attempts to emulate the beliefs and behaviors of the first generation of Islam (Esposito 2002, 171). They would learn about the *umma* (Ahmed 1999, 8), the worldwide Muslim community, about *sharia* (Esposito 2002, 171), the Islamic code of law, and about the Caliph the bygone leader of the *umma* who ruled according to *sharia*'s precepts (Esposito 2002, 169). But the essential question still remained unanswered.

So Americans continued to try to understand why. That understanding, whether it came from their exposure to bin Laden's public statements or a perusal of the various pieces of media coverage and secondary literature on him, gave a sense of who had attacked them, what their goals were in doing so, and why they felt it needed to be done in the first place. In short, it gave clues as to what animated America's assailants.

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Although different theories abound, it seems clear that the faction of Islamic terrorists represented by Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda, while innovative in its methods, is nostalgic in its objectives. As an example of these general objectives, one might acknowledge the reactionary reverence with which bin Laden and Al-Qaeda regard the days of the Caliphate. Indeed, it is the lack of *sharia* in Muslim countries that often forms the first complaint of these dissidents. Because this represents a political opposition as much as a militaristic one, and because these groups' goal is a fundamental change in the political climate of the entire region, they are most accurately termed militants in the service of political Islam. It is with this understanding that we in the West must approach any evaluation of Al-Qaeda and its derivatives; their agitation has at its root the recreation of an international *umma* ruled by a Caliph and living under *sharia*.

Among the works that chronicle and analyze the development of the explosive relationship between political Islam and America, there are some that deserve special mention. The definitive texts for understanding the threats we face are *The Age of Sacred Terror* (2003) and *The Next Attack* (2005) by Dan Benjamin and Steven Simon, former director and senior director respectively of counterterrorism for the National Security Council. More specialized examinations of the history of radical Islam are offered by John Esposito and Bernard Lewis, two of the premier Western Islamic scholars, in *Unholy War: Terror in the Name of Islam* (2002) and *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (2003) respectively. Islamic scholars such as Akbar Ahmed offer primers on the ins and outs of the history of the Muslim world. Even bloggers have contributed their knowledge. Donald Sensing, who, in addition to holding a degree from the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University and a position as full-time Pastor in the United Methodist Church, was trained in counterterrorism during his time as an artillery officer in the United States Army. Online services, such as the Middle East Media Research Institute, offer translated communiqués, giving most Western readers access to primary sources otherwise unavailable. Finally, in publishing *The 9/11 Commission Report* (2004), the federal government allowed average Americans to follow step-by-step the volatile ingredients and epic miscommunications that led to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks.

Why political Islam? Why not militant Islam? Why not radical Islam? These are worthwhile questions deserving of an answer. It is certainly true that each of these terms describe an aspect of the extremist program. But a review of their objectives, as expressed through their communication with the world reveals them to be primarily political in nature. Moreover, in establishing a convenient lexicon, political Islam is the most useful term available to succinctly express the differences between the extremists and the much larger group of mainstream Muslims. For instance, militant Islam is an accurate term with regard to the radicals' established method. But, as Bernard Lewis makes clear in *The Crisis of Islam* (2003), it is by no means clear that the faction represented by Al-Qaeda is uniquely *salafist* in this regard. As Lewis (2003) observes, "Jihad is thus a religious obligation." Put differently, *jihad* is an integral part of Islam, and while not a duty of every Muslim like one of the five pillars, it is understood that it plays a role in every Muslim's life. Though not necessarily violent, it is understood that *jihad*

may perfectly well be so. The term ‘militant Islam’ fails to describe an end, however, and thus gives us no clue of the ultimate objectives other than violence. For this reason, it must be discarded as inadequate for our purposes. Similarly, radical Islam is a term that tells us a great deal about the extremists’ relationship to other Muslims, however, it tells us very little about the ways in which they are radical (even amongst extremist Muslims there is a great deal of diversity in their goals). Political Islam on the other hand informs of us a great deal. Indeed, contained within it are the senses of those two previously suggested labels, a radical militancy, plus the added benefit of a clear indication of those group’s objectives. Thus, considering the stated goals of bin Laden, the most accurate labeling of the movement he represents is that of political Islam.

This raises a separate problem of what language we should use to describe this movement. To the eyes of almost all Americans, bin Laden is a terrorist *sine qua non*. The indiscriminate way in which he struck out against the United States on September 11<sup>th</sup> is, and always will be, an unforgivable act. But in acknowledging that his is ultimately a political movement, the reunification of Islam with political governance, it opens up the debate to the possibility that while bin Laden is a terrorist to the West, in other eyes he is a freedom fighter. That is no doubt how he sees himself. Yet, to discuss him as a political figure would grant him the legitimacy he has yet to earn, even in the Muslim world, and would betray the fact that by Western (and increasingly Muslim) lights, his methods are those of a terrorist.

The story of how Osama bin Laden became the world’s most wanted man is also the story of how the U.S. created its own mortal enemy. In bin Laden’s radicalization, the seeds of Al-Qaeda, the standard-bearer of modern political Islam, were sown.

Saudi Arabia is the home of Wahabbism, one of the most draconian forms of Islam in existence today. Its doctrines emphasize strict adherence to all the lessons contained within the Koran, the holy book of Islam, and the *Sunnah*, the example of the Prophet and founder of Islam, Muhammad (Esposito 2002, 6). Wahabbism pervades civil society in Saudi Arabia and its teachings were likely crucial in bin Laden’s early development. In contrast to most of the siblings in his wealthy family (his father founded the largest construction firm in the Middle East), bin Laden did not head west for his university education. At King Abdulaziz University, he encountered Abdullah Azzam, a Jordanian follower of the Egyptian writer Sayyid Qutb who advocated “militant global jihad ideology and culture.”<sup>1</sup> Azzam would play the role of mentor to bin Laden, both at university and more especially in Afghanistan, following the Soviet invasion in 1979. And indeed, only by heading East did bin Laden find what he came to see as his true calling, for up until that point there is no evidence that he had sided with the increasingly radical tone of the Islamic opponents of the Saudi ruling regime (Esposito 2002, 9).

Afghanistan was a fractured country, divided ethnically between Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Hazaras and religiously with a Sunni majority and Shiite minority (Esposito 2002, 10). The Soviet invasion, however, united them against a common enemy in the religiously sanctioned practice of defensive

*jihād*. Bin Laden, along with thousands of Muslims worldwide, including Azzam, answered the call. Though bin Laden did not prove himself in combat initially, he endeared himself to Azzam by using his family's wealth and connections to act as a veritable quartermaster-cum-recruiter. The most valuable lesson bin Laden learned while in conflict, however, was the power of an efficient organization with a global network of contacts. Bin Laden used such a network to attract millions of dollars of support, as well as fresh recruits to the *jihād*. It was using this network that he and Dr. Azzam founded the "Bureau of Services," an early version of what would later become Al-Qaeda.<sup>2</sup>

Because of the way the conflict had been framed as a *jihād* in service of greater Islam, it was not surprising that combatants viewed the conflict as a struggle between the faithful, the *mujahideen*, and the atheistic Soviet Communists. With the United Soviet Socialist Republic's defeat and withdrawal in 1989, it seemed that at last the century of Islam's decline as a geopolitical force was at an end. The Iranian Revolution of 1979, though predominantly a Shiite country, presaged the inevitable return of Islam to its position of world pre-eminence. More crucial still, this victory seemed to validate the piety of the *mujahideen*. In short, thanks to the victory in Afghanistan, and particularly in contrast to the defeats of secular and nationalist regimes, such as Egypt and Syria, and against the most despised enemy in Islam, Israel, political Islam appeared to hold the key to the future. In this sense political Islam was revolutionary in its conservatism. This fit in perfectly with the notions of Abu al-Ala Maududi, a Deobandi (*salafist*) Muslim from Pakistan, who conceived of "Muslims' [as] the title of that 'International Revolutionary Party' organized by Islam to carry out its revolutionary program. 'Jihad' refers to the revolutionary struggle...to achieve this objective" (Benjamin and Simon 2003, 60). The *mujahideen* that had come of age in Afghanistan had had their religious fervor aroused. They would later become the revolutionary cadre for bin Laden's revolutionary agenda. The organization he would use to implement it was the former "Bureau of Services," now renamed Al-Qaeda.

That revolutionary agenda found a ready application as the *mujahideen* began heading home. They clamored to put their notion of political Islam into practice, and immediately came into conflict with the ruling regimes, from whom they felt alienated after their years in Afghanistan (Benjamin and Simon 2003, 105). Their religious fervor would soon find an outlet.

It was one of the great coincidences of history that in the same year that the Spanish *conquistadores* finished their *Reconquista*, their martial skills were immediately applicable to the colonization and proselytization of the New World, thereby maintaining and redirecting the religious fervor of these soldiers while avoiding the problems that a large, martially inclined, newly inactive male population can create for societies. That such a situation could in many ways repeat itself 500 years later is truly astonishing. Yet, this is almost precisely what happened following the withdrawal of the last Soviet troops in February of 1989. The great, atheist superpower that had united Muslims worldwide in a long, drawn-out, defensive *jihād* had suddenly disappeared. And, while grateful to Allah that He had given them victory and thus affirmatively signaled the revival of Islamic military prowess, there was

likely a question amongst the *mujahideen* of ‘what next?’ This question was answered a short 18 months later with the arrival of American soldiers on the Saudi Arabian peninsula to protect it from the possibility of an Iraqi takeover.

If one single event could be characterized as shifting bin Laden toward the side of the extremist bloc, it would surely be this event. Coming on top of the profound distance he already felt between the mandate given to the al-Sauds, the hereditary rulers of Saudi Arabia, and the way they actually ran the country, it is little surprise he reacted how he did. Nevertheless, “Let there not be two religions in Arabia” is a widely attributed decree of the Prophet and the housing of U.S. soldiers clearly violated this instruction. Exacerbating this infraction was the fact that bin Laden himself had offered to utilize the *mujahideen* to repel the threat posed by Saddam Hussein. Further compounding the blasphemy in the eyes of bin Laden was the American soldiers’ use of the Saudi bases as launch points for sorties against Saddam Hussein. In his eyes, the al-Sauds, in addition to permitting *kufur*, infidels, in Arabia, were aiding and abetting infidels’ attacks upon fellow Muslims. The al-Sauds thus had forfeited their sacred duty as “Custodians of the Land of Two Holy Places,” first by allowing other religions on the peninsula, but second by visibly demonstrating that they were not capable of protecting Mecca and Medina. He makes these arguments and more in the first of his communiqués.

Two of bin Laden’s most significant communiqués regarding the West have come in the form of a *fatwa*, a legal or doctrinal opinion, which, similar to a Supreme Court opinion in America, is binding upon the *umma* (Benjamin and Simon 2005, 67). *Fatwas* are typically issued by trained religious clerics and scholars, known as *mufti*, often at the behest of the government in power (Esposito 2002, 34). In this day and age, almost all such scholars, or *ulema*, are in the service of the government (Benjamin and Simon 2005, 67). This was the case with the profoundly influential thirteenth century scholar ibn Taymiyya’s classic *fatwa* justifying the use of jihad against the Muslim Tartar regime.

In theory, however, anyone can issue a *fatwa* because it does not become binding until it has been ratified. In the modern era, Bin Laden has used this loophole to great effect, exploiting the fact that the *ulema* had lost credibility and been labeled hypocrites as a result of their close association with the Saudi regime. In particular, he has issued *fatwas* on behalf of Al-Qaeda that radically redefine such central Islamic concepts as the limits of *jihad*. The principle of *salafism* and teachings of ibn Taymiyya have accelerated this trend, encouraging as they do an individual understanding of the sacred texts (Benjamin and Simon 2005, 66-67). Furthermore, it is debatable whether or not Islam is uniquely vulnerable to this type of problem, not possessing a clear hierarchical structure nor a considered orthodoxy like Catholicism. Whatever their effect on traditional Islamic jurisprudence, these pre-September 11<sup>th</sup> *fatwas* are critically important steps taken by bin Laden in justifying his actions and representing his motives and objectives.

In 1996, bin Laden issued his first public *fatwa*, “Declaration of War” demanding the removal of all American forces from Saudi Arabia, or as he calls it, the “Land of the Two Holy Places.” Though it specifically is in reference to the presence of American soldiers on Saudi soil, in its long rambling entirety bin Laden lays out a host of reasons that justifies his declaration of war. Thus the *fatwa* is doubly valuable, informing us not only of his specific objections, but allowing us to peek into his thought processes and construct a profile of his world view.

In terms of the content, he makes a number of interesting statements after first removing all doubt as to the cause of this *fatwa*: “The latest and the greatest of these aggressions...is the occupation of the land of the two Holy Places...by the armies of the American Crusaders and their allies.”<sup>3</sup> Bin Laden follows this pronouncement with a summary of the current state of Islam and the *umma*, with special attention being paid to Saudi Arabia. Interestingly, he expounds a great deal on the poverty and deprivation within Saudi Arabia, remarking ironically at one time that “People wonder whether we are the largest oil exporting country?!”<sup>4</sup> From economic matters bin Laden proceeds to political ones, making perhaps his most revolutionary statement yet: “Through its course of actions the regime has torn off its legitimacy.”<sup>5</sup> The war has officially been extended to the Americans as well as the al-Sauds. The regime confirmed their fate by abandoning *sharia*, allowing American soldiers to “occupy” (with the connotation of an invasion), and then ignoring or even jailing the many rightly guided scholars who offered their collective opinions as to how to fix this iniquitous situation with the “Memorandum of Advice.” To bin Laden, the fact that these scholars were treated in such a way, despite their clearly peaceful intentions, is thus a sign that the Saudi government is only an agent of the American one. This association invalidates their divine mandate, as it does for all other Arab governments who act in too close coordination with the United States. These complaints parallel the legal reasoning of ibn Taymiyya who reasoned *jihad* against Muslims is acceptable if they are apostates. The al-Sauds are now apostates. To wage *jihad* against them is now one’s duty. (Benjamin and Simon 2003, 49-50).

Bin Laden, looking for parallels in all of Islamic history, sees in this plan a repeat of the division of the Arab world into separate countries as happened following the World Wars. In this way, he has linked the new enemy with the old and suggested that fighting America now is no different from the fight against colonials earlier.<sup>6</sup> This is a shrewd comment, for it gives Muslims not so deeply invested as he a reason to resent Americans as the heirs of the colonizers whom many Muslims believe are responsible for their immiseration. Significantly, bin Laden then reaches out to Shiites through the teachings of ibn Taymiyya:

If it is not possible to push back the enemy except by the collective movement of the Muslim people, then there is a duty on the Muslims to ignore the minor differences among themselves....Under such circumstances, to push the enemy the greatest *kufir* out of the country is a prime duty. No other duty after Belief is more important.<sup>7</sup>

At this point, the *fatwa* changes in tone. While not completely changing its audience it moves from laying out the case for *jihad* against the United States into lessons and advice for Muslims who wish to aid in the fight. To this end, bin Laden does such things as chastise Muslims against engaging in internecine warfare as it would weaken the cause, recommend a strategy of guerrilla warfare, exhort *jihadis* to focus exclusively on the Americans, and perhaps most surprisingly suggest an economic boycott of all American goods.<sup>8</sup>

The final portion of the *fatwa* represents another shift in subject matter, this one devoted to insulting and humiliating President Clinton and Defense Secretary William Perry while simultaneously lauding the virtuous qualities of the *jihadis*. This portion of the *fatwa* contains two of the most significant elements of bin Laden's message. The first explains the certainty of bin Laden in political Islam's ultimate victory, the still famous phrase, "These youths love death as you love life."<sup>9</sup> Islam can never lose, because her warriors can and will fight to the bitter end. The second is his assertion that fighting the Americans is one's duty, not one's choice.<sup>10</sup> Bin Laden is echoing his earlier calls that all minor squabbles must be put aside in the service of this cause. Ironically, bin Laden's language here is channeling no one so much as Pope Urban II in his address at Clermont, calling upon all true Christians to go and defend the faith.<sup>11</sup>

The language of bin Laden reveals quite clearly his conceptions of the natural order of things. The first thing we notice is the overt religious language in a legal opinion, reminding us of the confluence and inseparability of religion and politics in his world view. Second, we notice the term "Zionist-Crusaders", indicating just how anciently these grievances are felt. Moreover, these are terms with clear religious connotations, starkly outlining his belief in a religious war, despite the fact that the Americans entered Saudi Arabia on a purely political mission. Equally interesting is the way he that he makes common cause with all Muslims, referring to each crime against individual countries as crimes against his "Muslim brothers," "the Muslim people," or the "*umma*."<sup>12</sup> This passage makes clear that bin Laden identifies as a Muslim first. Westerners should not be surprised, however, for as Pastor Donald Sensing points out, the failure of Arab nationalism, though due in part to economic privation and political repression, is explainable, particularly outside of Egypt, by understanding that the first societal organizing principle amongst Arabs is Islam and the second is the tribe.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, to bin Laden, and most Muslims, there is a literal nation of Islam, as expressed by the term Dar-al Islam. Finally, bin Laden's characterization of the Dar-al Islam as victims of an unending stream of injustice, iniquity, and aggression at the hands of the Dar-al Harb (the non-Muslim countries) indicates his defensive mental framework. This defensive mindset explains why he believes engaging in *jihad* is a matter of duty and not choice.

In 1998, with the issuance of his second *fatwa*, "Jihad against Jews and Crusaders," bin Laden along with his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri and other leaders of political Islam, expanded the war against Americans from merely pushing them out of Saudi Arabia to fighting them everywhere they are

found. Much pithier than the first *fatwa*, though imbued with similar religious imagery and language, bin Laden neatly lays out his argument as to why “the ruling to kill the Americans and their allies -- civilians and military -- is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it.”<sup>14</sup> Outlining three grievances, America’s continued presence in Saudi Arabia, the sanctions and air attacks launched against Iraq, and the United States’ status as tool of the state of Israel, he concludes that these events cannot be construed as anything other than a declaration of war by the United States. But more crucial still are the implications inherent in this declaration: “And *ulema* have throughout Islamic history unanimously agreed that the *jihad* is an individual duty if the enemy destroys the Muslim countries.”<sup>15</sup> Certainly there is nothing surprising in this statement, but the belligerent way in which bin Laden applies this verdict is interesting as compared to the Soviet invasion, where the *mujahideen* labored under the same interpretation. This is partly no doubt a result of the United States’ status as the sole superpower -- as such it can be held responsible for violence in Kosovo, the Philippines, Somalia, and everywhere there is a conflict. This application speaks to a theme of bin Laden’s communiqués: the constant expansion of the fields of *jihad* beyond their traditional boundaries. First, it was merely against American soldiers in the Land of the Holy Places. Next, fight the Americans wherever they are found, including the sanctioned targeting of civilians, a position repudiated by most Muslim scholars (Benjamin and Simon 2005, 66).<sup>16</sup> Finally, in his last public pronouncement before September 11, 2001, he declared that Al-Qaeda was seeking Weapons of Mass Destruction and viewed their acquisition and use as a religious duty, far outstripping whatever forms of resistance had been shown earlier.<sup>17</sup>

Extracting from these statements a brief summary of the grievances of bin Laden as well as his goals should prove quite instructive. First, his most significant complaint is entrance of Western (read Christian) soldiers into Saudi Arabia, implying that the Saudis could not defend themselves. Second, he rails against the use of Saudi Arabian bases in combination with international sanctions that have caused the death of, he claims, over one million Iraqis. Third, he bemoans the continued violence against Muslims across the borderlands of the Islamic world, be it the Philippines, Kosovo, Thailand, Chechnya, Somalia, or many others. Fourth, he objects to the close cooperation of the United States with Israel. Fifth, he views the United States and the West as responsible for the immiseration of the Arab world and in particular objects to the selling of oil, the people’s wealth, to Western countries. With the exception of his exploration of American economic injustices, he consistently emphasizes the religious dimension of even political acts, focusing on how they have wronged Muslims as a nation, not the members of any one state.

His goals are straightforwardly outlined in his *fatwas* of 1996 and 1998. He wishes to drive the Americans, and non-Muslims generally, from Saudi Arabia first and then the rest of the Islamic world. Next, he wants to replace the Saudi government with one that has not abandoned *sharia*, or in other words, a pure Islamic government. Finally, he wants to recreate the nation of Islam, the *umma* as it existed

under the Caliphate. Bearing these grievances and goals in mind, we can more knowledgeably evaluate the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks.

Though responsibility for September 11<sup>th</sup> was immediately laid at the feet of Al-Qaeda by Western intelligence agencies, there was no statement by Al-Qaeda explaining it until October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2001. In it, bin Laden speaks simply and briefly of the events in question:

What the United States tastes today is a very small thing compared to what we have tasted for tens of years....Its sons are being killed, its blood is being shed, its holy places are being attacked, and it is not being ruled according to what God has decreed. Despite this, nobody cares.<sup>18</sup>

Contained in this short passage is the full explanation in bin Laden's view of why "what happened to America was something natural, an expected event" as well as his statement of the problems that need to be fixed.<sup>19</sup> The terrorist attacks in bin Laden's mind were divinely sanctioned retribution for the litany of abuses and humiliations inflicted upon Muslims over the last eighty years.

Answering why Al-Qaeda attacked New York and Washington while important in spotlighting important grievances to the Middle East, still does not really illuminate what strategic purpose the terrorist attacks on the United States served. That is, how has September 11<sup>th</sup> moved Al-Qaeda closer to realizing even the first of its four primary goals? In effect, what was the point?

What most Westerners could not really comprehend was that September 11<sup>th</sup> to bin Laden was the point at which the twain met. In giving the go-ahead to Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's plan, bin Laden believed he could exact revenge while at the same time achieve his first strategic objective: the withdrawal of all U.S. forces in the Muslim world. Thus, violence was itself the point.

There is a simple calculus at work in bin Laden's mind regarding the use of violence to achieve his ends against the United States. He believes that the United States is weak and will run if bloodied, or even fail to stand up for itself in the first place. In many ways his belief is borne out by history. In 1979-80, the United States failed to act forcefully and decisively to rescue the hostages against the newly installed Islamic Khomeini theocracy. The hostages languished in captivity for over 444 days until Ronald Reagan, who had the reputation of a hard-liner himself, was elected. In 1983, 241 servicemen were killed in a terrorist attack in Beirut while helping to mediate in the Lebanese civil war. President Reagan then pulled out of the country. Then, almost 10 years later, in 1993, during the humanitarian mission-cum-police action, the Battle of Mogadishu occurred in which 18 Army Rangers and 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain division soldiers were killed and 84 were wounded during a gun battle through the streets of the city. Four days later President Clinton announced that American troops would leave Somalia. Once again, violence had precipitated the removal of American troops from a Muslim country. To bin Laden, a pattern had emerged. There existed a clear-cut formula for victory. Engage in enough violence and the U.S. will withdraw. Grasping this equation, we can then easily see the role

that September 11<sup>th</sup> was to play. It was not about disabling America's economy, though bin Laden had demonstrated a keen understanding of economic warfare in his 1996 *fatwa*. It was not a purposeless expression of violence, power and show, as some surmise. Rather, its purpose was the violence itself, the more public and the more shocking the better.

Lee Harris marks the centrality of the violence to the pinnacle event well in his essay "Al-Qaeda's Fantasy Ideology" (2002). While he argues that the violence served no political purpose, a mistaken view in light of the discussion above, he understands that September 11<sup>th</sup> was an expression of the philosopher William James' "Will to Believe," whereby the strength of one's belief causes the desired change in the world, in this case that acting with enough violence would bring about American disengagement from the Middle East.<sup>20</sup> The war in Iraq has put on clear display Al-Qaeda's focus on violence as the means and end to the point that Pastor Sensing has labeled Al-Qaeda a "death cult."<sup>21</sup>

There are two sides to every story, of course, and the one told by bin Laden regarding his motivations is no different. More precisely, while we have little reason to doubt bin Laden with regard to his goals, there is wisdom in reconsidering the accuracy of his belief that the United States is culpable for the full range of misery present in Muslim countries today. Barry Rubin, director of the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center and Senior Fellow of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, sees a different explanation for the source of anti-Americanism. In an essay entitled "The Truth about U.S. Middle East Policy" (2002) adapted from his book *Anti-American Terrorism and the Middle East: A Documentary Reader*, he lays out his thesis that Arab anti-Americanism developed through the skillful manipulation of popular perception much more than as a reaction to actual U.S. policies.

Rubin (2002) marshals a number of points as evidence. First, seeking to deflate bin Laden's primary complaint concerning the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia, he notes that the soldiers presence was sanctioned by the Arab league (Rubin 2002, 83). Responding to the claims of aggression directed against Muslim borderland countries, Rubin notes the United States came out in support of Kosovo and Bosnia against Yugoslavia, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia against Iraq, Turkey against Greece in the Cyprus conflict, Egypt over France and Britain in the Suez crisis and Egypt over Israel in the 1973 war, and most memorably, Afghanistan against the Soviet Union (Rubin 2002, 82, 86-87). Commenting on the economic immiseration of the Arab world, Rubin points out the vast amount of control OPEC has over American corporations against the United States' comparative lack of control over Arab economies, especially with regard to regions such as Latin America. Indeed, if anything, the record of the United States has been one of lack of engagement (Rubin 2002, 98). Moreover, as Pastor Sensing points out, the root causes of Arab immiseration lie in the mismanaged adoption of Western economic systems, usually socialism, itself an intrinsically flawed system, by Arab governments, without possessing any of the cultural, economic, or social prerequisites that led to its adoption in the West.<sup>22</sup> As for the other vocalized grievances of bin Laden, the sanctions against Iraq were enacted to prevent Iraq from re-threatening Saudi Arabia and Iraq's continued violation of them maintained the need

for American forces. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, meanwhile, has always been at best an auxiliary concern of his. It caused the rupture in his relationship with his mentor Dr. Azzam, a Palestinian by birth (Benjamin and Simon 2005, 103-104). Even the late Yasir Arafat has called into question his commitment to a Palestinian state (Randal 2004, 305). To be sure, there are grounds for some of the grievances bin Laden holds, but to claim as he does they all are caused by American foreign policy is pushing credibility.

Rubin (2002, 99) argues these anti-American positions developed as the result of a campaign to divert attention from the failures of Arab society: “[anti-Americanism] is a way to mobilize masses, to excuse the shortcomings of local governments, and to carry ideological movements to victory.” This description of the benefits of anti-Americanism shows it to be a powerful tool to any group seeking political control, as is the case with Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. It is unlikely, however, that bin Laden and Al-Qaeda are really so cynical as to peddle this message in a cheap ploy to gain political power. Were this the case, there would likely be far less commitment in the movement to act as martyrs, risking as they already do the possibility of eternal damnation for dying by their own hand rather than the enemy’s sword (Lewis 2003, 53). Moreover, in such a case it would probably be very easy to co-opt or buy them off. What is far more certain is that they deeply believe in the cause-and-effect narrative they have established, whatever its actual validity, and will thus continue to act according to its logical prescriptions in order to ensure their desired result, a new Caliphate.

As the United States has involved itself deeper in the Muslim world post-September 11<sup>th</sup>, however, it has given further grist and inadvertently substantiated the claims of bin Laden and others that the West is engaged in a religious war against all Islam. Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon explore and explain this quite effectively in *The Next Attack* (2005). Visualizing the *umma* as contained in a circle, they picture another, smaller circle inside to depict the extremist portion of the *umma*. Nobody is sure just how large this inner-circle is, but what can be said with authority is that its boundaries are blurring and it is growing in size. The terrorists that make up the Iraq insurgency are increasingly new recruits seduced by the rhetoric of a global religious war and compelled by a duty to *jihad* (Benjamin and Simon 2005, 39). A more straightforward example is the case of the Islamic bombers in Madrid, who with almost no prior training, and no formal affiliation with Al-Qaeda managed to successfully plan and execute a massive attack. They were ‘self-starters’ and they represent the ultimate weapon in bin Laden’s arsenal (Benjamin and Simon 2005, 6).

Why have so many acted in defense of a religion when President Bush has declared explicitly that Islam itself is not the enemy? Because of blunders like Abu Ghraib, from which images of Americans humiliating Muslims spread far and wide. Likewise at Guantánamo Bay, where the long detention periods coupled with the widespread rumors of abuse conspire against the United States, though they may be wholly or mostly inaccurate (Benjamin and Simon 2005, 200). Perhaps most paradoxically, members of the *umma* who are suspicious of American motives but taking a cautious approach may

come to blame the United States for investing in the region and not reversing their continued immiseration and downward economic spiral. Similarly, some Muslims may well view the high number of Iraqi civilian and military casualties and develop a conspiracy that American soldiers are allowing them to die intentionally. Finally, there is the issue of the increasing religiosity here at home with its particular emphasis on the sovereignty and right to exist of Israel (Benjamin and Simon 2005, 266). Indeed, as much as anything else, it was a perceived pro-Israel bias that radicalized Sayyid Qutb during his time stateside. These factors create a high hurdle to overcome in the construction of a successful foreign policy toward political Islam.

So what measures can one take to combat the unyielding dedication of a bin Laden without turning his many sympathizers into supporters? One cannot deal diplomatically with the hard core *jihadis*, typically the group that actually makes operational decisions, while an overly martial policy would likely alienate the majority of Muslims. The only available option is a combination of both approaches. Surgical military operations using Predator drones and Special Forces work well against the unpersuadable, but significantly more creative options are necessary for the yet-to-be-convinced.

It is said that President Bush won the 2004 election because, among other reasons, of the hurricanes that ravaged Florida. His visibility and generosity with disaster aid boosted his approval ratings and played a large role in convincing many hard-hit Floridians of his worthiness for a second term. Interestingly, the same strategy has yielded massive benefits in earthquake-devastated Pakistan. As in a poll taken by the ACNielsen polling firm at the end of November 2005, the percentage of Pakistanis with a favorable opinion of the United States climbed to 46% because of United States humanitarian aid to the affected regions, even as those with unfavorable views declined to 28%. These numbers have nearly doubled and halved respectively since May 2005, along with the most promising indicator for American policy ambitions yet, namely that 41% of Pakistanis now disapprove of bin Laden. These concurrent changes do not necessarily indicate a causal relationship, but it is undeniable that America's stock is rising in Pakistan. Even better news is that after similar efforts by the United States in Indonesia following the tsunami, our approval rating was as high as 65%.<sup>23</sup> This is evidence of one highly effective way of courting public opinion. There are doubtless many other similar avenues available, all one need do is look. And that ought to begin with a wholesale re-evaluation of America's foreign aid program. Less than \$1 billion given over the course of the last year to disaster victims has likely done the United States more good in the eyes of Muslims than \$2 billion given to Egypt for each of the last twenty years. Actions such as these do much to endear Americans to crucial Muslim demographics, the same demographics that Al-Qaeda must rely on to fill its ranks. America need not defeat the political Islamists outright, merely just prevent them from winning.

Woodrow Wilson is often credited with the dictum "Never murder a man who's committing suicide." The United States Department of State and executive branch would be wise to consider this advice as they continue to formulate strategies for dealing with the threat posed by political Islam, as in many

ways, political Islam might be the source of its own demise. In the two countries where it has been implemented, Afghanistan and Iran, political Islam has engendered a great deal of resistance. The initial widespread support for the Taliban in Afghanistan was as much a result of a desire for peace and stability after literally decades of war as it was a referendum on the desirability of a purified strain of Islamic government. The unending resistance of numerous warlords, typified by groups like the Northern Alliance, demonstrated that if anything, for a portion of the country, such a pure form of Islam was undesirable. It is likely, however, that personal concerns such as survival and desire for power greatly informed this resistance as well.

Iran is an even starker example of the same point. The generation born antecedent to and subsequent to Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution has known only a theocracy and has found it unsuitable to its tastes. They are joined in this regard by the majority of the Iranian population, who have failed to see the improvement that a *salafist* government promised to bring. As the *New York Times* describes, "the majority want[s] a sweeping transformation. They do not want to be told what to think, what to wear, what to read, what to watch, and how to behave, and they are frustrated at the glacial pace of change."<sup>24</sup> Thus, as a long-term force, political Islam appears unsustainable amongst its own practitioners. Moreover, for all the faults of the Iraq invasion, it is undeniable that it has allowed Al-Qaeda to demonstrate to murderous effect that its sole prescription is violence, and each time that violence is directed at Iraqis rather than Americans, its claim to represent the worldwide *umma*, to be the spokesperson for the Muslim nation, is undercut more and more.

Political Islam is a force that thrives on opposition. Most Americans ought to have seen enough cable television news, however, to know that you do not need to defeat political parties. You only need to marginalize them. How well the United States ultimately fares in the War on Terror will be a reflection of how deeply it has internalized that lesson.

## Notes

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