



## **USAMA BIN LADIN AND AL-QA'IDA: ORIGINS AND DOCTRINES**

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*The September 11, 2001, attack on the United States made Usama bin Ladin and his al-Qa'ida group the center of a major global crisis. This research essay examines the evolution of al-Qa'ida's doctrine as well as bin Ladin's origins and experience. It discusses the development of this group's ideology and strategy, showing how it switched from an emphasis on promoting revolution in Saudi Arabia to a priority on attacking the United States.*

In his February 2001 testimony to the Senate Intelligence Committee, CIA director George Tenet called al-Qa'ida, "The most immediate and serious threat" to U.S. national security.(1) Just seven months later, the horrific attacks of September 11, 2001 demonstrated to the American public and to the world the threat posed by al-Qa'ida and terrorist groups with a "global reach." Yet many questions still remained regarding the background and ideology of the forces involved in these and previous attacks, as well as the basis of broader support for the movement.

Bin Ladin's personal history is integral to understanding his self-proclaimed mission and the creation of al-Qa'ida. He was born in 1957, the 17<sup>th</sup> of 52 children to one of the wealthiest construction contractors in Saudi Arabia. Today, the CIA estimates his family's worth to be \$5 billion, of which bin Ladin can access roughly \$300 million.(2) Neither of bin Ladin's parents were Saudis—his father was from South Yemen and his mother was Syrian—making him an outsider in a country obsessed with parentage.(3)

His childhood and status within Saudi society were further complicated by the death of his father in 1968. Prior to completing his studies in civil engineering at King Abdul Aziz University in 1979, bin Ladin spent time in Beirut in the early 1970s living the lifestyle of a playboy. He was reportedly a "heavy drinker

who often ended up embroiled in shouting matches and fistfights with other young men over an attractive night-club dancer or barmaid."(4)

Bin Ladin embraced his present-day path following the events of 1978 and 1979—the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. These events, and especially the Afghan issue, provided him with a purpose that he previously lacked in his life. Shortly after his graduation, bin Ladin relocated to Afghanistan and supported the Afghani resistance to the Soviet invasion. He raised money, visited wounded soldiers, constructed roads and tunnels, and compensated the families of martyrs. According to several accounts, bin Ladin fought in the successful battle of Ali Khel, though his battlefield role has since been mythologized into much larger dimensions.

For bin Ladin, the war in Afghanistan and the triumph over a superpower there was a watershed moment in Islamic solidarity and a personal turning point. He once said, "One day in Afghanistan was like 1000 days of praying in an ordinary mosque."(5) In Afghanistan, "The myth of the superpower was withered in front of the *mujahideen* cries of *Allahu Akbar!*"(6) Gilles Kepel, an expert on contemporary Islam, characterized the *mujahideen* as "intoxicated by the Muslim victory in Afghanistan. They believed that it could be replicated elsewhere—that the whole world was ripe for jihad."(7) Bin

Ladin has since gushed that the Afghanistan experience was so important that “it would have been impossible for me to gain such a benefit from any other chance.... This jihad was great.”(8)

While the 1989 Soviet withdrawal left bin Ladin with a triumphant feeling that anything was possible, it is likely that bin Ladin and others experienced a feeling of emptiness, too, at the struggle’s end. There was no longer an immediate enemy through which he could define both himself and his view of Islam. Yet he longed to continue the struggle and had been convinced in Afghanistan that the *mujahideen* could succeed again. It is roughly at this time, at the end of the war in Afghanistan, that al-Qa’ida was formed.

Bin Ladin returned from Afghanistan to Saudi Arabia as a hero. However, this status was short-lived as he vocally criticized the regime’s corruption and policies. When Saddam Husayn invaded Kuwait in 1990, though, bin Ladin immediately offered to protect Saudi Arabia from the Iraqi forces with his *mujahideen*. Bin Ladin saw the opportunity for a cause that could recapture the glory achieved in Afghanistan—defending the holy mosques from invasion.

The royal rejection of his offer coupled with the royal request for U.S. protection must have been a stunning and embarrassing blow to his personal pride and vision of the world. After all, it was bin Ladin’s view that the *mujahideen* could defeat a great power and Muslims did not need a superpower’s protection. This stance, of course, was based on a selective reading of the war in Afghanistan, where U.S. help was critical to the *mujahideen*’s victory.

Shortly thereafter, bin Ladin’s criticism of the regime led to his expulsion from Saudi Arabia and he fled to Sudan. His ties with his old life were further weakened when bin Ladin’s family disavowed him. With the build-up of U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia, bin Ladin applied to the United States the Soviet-Afghan analogy of an invading infidel to the Muslim heartland. A new conflict—this one even more inflammatory due to a perceived threat to the

Islamic holy places—presented bin Ladin and others with the opportunity to reenact the exact situation in which they felt their jihad had succeeded in Afghanistan.

Bin Ladin’s links to his pre-Afghanistan past and outside of his revolutionary commitment were further reduced when Saudi Arabia revoked his citizenship in 1994, and he was stripped of some financial assets. Bin Ladin was displaced once again in 1996. In response to U.S. pressure, Sudan expelled him from his new home, despite that government’s self-image as an Islamist regime, the economic projects he had financed, and his establishment and financing of training camps and guesthouses for Islamic militants.

From bin Ladin’s standpoint, these rejections occurred in reaction to his attempts to voice and apply the lessons that he had thought typified the proper practice of Islam, implying that the Saudi regime did not share this commitment and that American behavior was a key factor in this failure to fulfill Islam. Bin Ladin returned to Afghanistan where he rebuilt destroyed roads and was welcomed by the cash starved Taliban government. He cemented his relationship with the Taliban through building a personal relationship with Mullah Omar, the movement’s spiritual leader.

Political psychologist Dr. Jerrold Post argues that people are drawn to political violence not purely from ideological considerations but also through personal and psychological factors, as an end in itself: “Individuals become terrorists in order to join terrorist groups and commit acts of terrorism.”(9) This view also applies to bin Ladin and his colleagues. Fighting provides them with an identity, a group that functions as a community, a respected leadership position, and a set of ideas providing a purpose to life. Mona Yacoubian, a former State Department expert, called these young holy warriors, “Angry lost souls...[and] a mishmash of disgruntled people.”(10)

For a poor, “disgruntled,” and culturally insulted young man, the appeal of killing in the path of God, belonging to a great movement,

overcoming incredible odds to triumphantly change history, and ensuring a future in paradise, are all tempting reasons to become a militant. By the same token, the “newcomer” status to being a pious Muslim make bin Ladin and some other radical Islamists less influenced by normative Islam as practiced for centuries. They feel free to pick and choose among texts, interpreting their religion as they please, in a manner quite different from many generations of respected Islamic clerics. For example, it is a basic tenet of Islam that only trained clerics can issue *fatwas* (decrees), but bin Ladin has not hesitated to do so.

Such “lost souls” are also susceptible to recruitment in militant groups perhaps partly due to past personal failures. Ahmad Ressam, the Algerian who attempted to cross the U.S.-Canadian border before New Year’s 2000, was unable to hold a job, spent a good deal of time watching Clint Eastwood movies, and attempted to join the Algerian military security and police before becoming a holy warrior.(11) Nizar Trabelsi, who intended to blow himself up along with the U.S. embassy in Paris, is a divorced failed professional soccer player who forfeited his career by not training hard enough. He became a petty criminal, cocaine addict, and heavy drinker before involving himself with Islamic militants.(12)

Furthermore, as demonstrated by some perpetrators of the September 11 attacks, the appeal of becoming a holy warrior is not just a product of poverty. Militants like Mohammad Atta come from a wealthier background. Atta, an Egyptian, became a radical while living and studying in Germany. Fouad Ajami, an expert on Arab political thought, argues that Atta and others “were placed perilously close to modernity, but they could not partake of it.”(13)

The availability of opportunities that are simultaneously highly attractive and forbidden by their cultural background or identity could create a rejection of Western values along with a questioning of familiar values at home. After indulgence in what Iranian militants have called Westoxification, individuals can engage in self-

loathing and a determination to punish the system, which lured them off the proper path. Having drunk alcohol, gone to strip clubs, and played video games, some of the suicide bombers apparently felt that militant action would redeem them.

In the four-page letter attributed to Atta, point seven alludes to such a mindset. Atta (allegedly) wrote, “The time for play is over and the serious time is upon us. How much time have we wasted in our lives?” For militants like Atta, their relatively greater contact with the West—or at least Western lifestyles—makes them more likely to identify such lures as dangerous tempters. Since these factors have undermined their own commitment to Islam, they can more easily see the West as trying to undermine Islam in general.

In the 1980s, thousands of militants traveled to Afghanistan, the “school for jihad” to fight “the communist infidel.”(14) Many of them did not know where Afghanistan was but were galvanized by a chance to find an outlet for their anger at the conditions they lived under and a ticket out of their empty, routine existence. They could join a group of holy warriors, become a hero, fight, and die as a martyr—a fate bringing honor to one’s family, forgiveness for one’s sins, and a desirable afterlife in paradise. One young warrior stated, “It’s not the main idea to be a *shahid*...but it’s part of my plan.”(15) Another such fighter, Obeida Rahman from Yemen, who came from a poor family with ten children, described the joys of training and fighting: “When you have a gun, you’re free. You feel as if you can do anything.”(16) For their services, they were paid not in money but by gaining honor, hope, camaraderie, and purpose.

## **THE DOCTRINE OF BIN LADIN AND AL-QA’IDA**

Of course, bin Ladin’s background, the Afghanistan experience, and the motives behind becoming a holy warrior cannot explain al-Qa’ida alone without a consideration of the organization’s doctrine. Its central principle is to expel the forces of unbelievers and heresy

from the Middle East. Al-Qa'ida considers the United States and its allies, the region's "oppressive, corrupt, and tyrannical regimes," to be heretics that wage war against Muslims through murder, torture, and humiliation.(17) Most offensive to bin Ladin and his followers is the U.S. "occupation of the land of the two Holy Places," Saudi Arabia.(18)

The 1998 "*fatwa*" of al-Qa'ida and its allies, the "Declaration of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders," described the U.S. presence as a catastrophe that had humiliating and debilitating effects on the Muslim people. Bin Laden wrote, "Since God laid down the Arabian peninsula, created its desert, and surrounded it with its seas, no calamity has ever befallen it like these Crusader hosts that have spread in it like locusts, crowing its soil, eating its fruits, and destroying its verdure."(19)

A Western power has never occupied the Hijaz in Muslim history. Traditionally, non-Muslims are not permitted to enter the Hijaz based on the Prophet's deathbed statement, "Let there not be two religions in Arabia."(20) Historian Bernard Lewis explained that the sanctity of the Hijaz is clear from the disparate difference between the fall of Jerusalem to the Crusaders in 1099 and Saladin's attack on Reynald of Chatillon in 1182. In the case of Jerusalem, the Crusaders roused little interest in Damascus and Baghdad when they captured the city. In contrast, when Reynald attacked Muslim caravans in the Hijaz, including those of pilgrims to Mecca, his actions were perceived as a "provocation" and a "challenge directed against Islam's holy places."(21) Saladin responded by declaring jihad upon the Crusaders.

More than eight hundred years later, bin Ladin applies the same principle and interprets the U.S. presence as an equal provocation requiring a similar solution. As retribution, bin Ladin anticipated "a black future for America. Instead of remaining [the] United States, it shall end up separated states and shall have to carry the bodies of its sons back to America."(22) And in revenge for the Saudi regime's alleged

betrayal of the Islamic people, bin Ladin expects the royal family to be expelled from the faith and to face a similar fate as that which befell the Shah of Iran.

After long emphasizing the U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia, bin Ladin moved to other issues dealing with the U.S. attempt to destroy Islam. These included an opposition to UN sanctions against Iraq (which he blamed on the United States) as killing the Muslim Iraqi people and the assertion that the United States was supporting the Jews in an effort to "achieve full control over the Arab peninsula."(23) Bin Ladin claimed the United States did not rest after the "slaughter" of the Gulf War but instead pushed for the "dismemberment and the destruction...of what remains of this people and to humiliate their Muslim neighbors."(24) These actions, according to bin Ladin, are meant to divert attention from the Jewish occupation of Jerusalem and the killing of Muslims in Palestine.(25) In a 1996 interview, bin Ladin outlined American and Israeli crimes against Islam from Iraq to Qana to Bosnia and detailed the "killing [of] weaker men, women, and children in the Muslim world."(26) To further demonstrate America's brutality, he cited the use of atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in non-Muslim Japan at the end of World War Two.

From bin Ladin's perspective, these attacks in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Palestine meant a declaration of war on God and the Prophet, making it Muslims' duty to fight a holy war "to glorify the truth and to defend Muslim Land, especially the Arab peninsula."(27) More recently, he has also elevated the plight of Muslims in Kashmir, East Timor, and other places such as the Sudan, Somalia, and Chechnya to his list of top grievances. Bin Ladin believes that all Muslims need to pool their resources, stand together, and fight against the threat to Islam, acting as a unified nation that overcomes superficial, contrived national differences to fight against its common enemies.

In a sense, al-Qa'ida, an umbrella framework of groups committed to Jihad that

acts together in recruiting, training, and planning of guerrilla actions, is a symbol of the goal. Like bin Ladin's vision for the future, al-Qa'ida crosses national boundaries through a bridge of Islamic brotherhood and a hatred for the United States and its allies. While each group and even different cells have local interests, they share a common enemy and a greater common goal.

This perceived clash of worlds allows bin Ladin to adopt a romanticized vision about the battle of Islam against the West. This is clearly visible in his 1996 "Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places." In a section directly addressed to then U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry, bin Ladin wrote of the holy warriors who will take on the United States:

A youth fighting in smile, returning  
with the spear colored red.

May Allah keep me close to knights,  
humans in peace, demons in war

Lions in jungle but their teeth are spears  
and Indian swords.

The horses witness that I push them  
hard forwarded in the fire of battle . . .

I am willing to sacrifice self and wealth  
for knights who never disappointed me

Knights who are never fed up or  
deterred by death . . .(28)

Such rhetoric painted a clear picture of bin Ladin's perception of the world into exactly defined and opposing spheres of the right and the heretic, his commitment to the battle, and the pleasing emotions stirred up by this war for himself and other *mujahideen*.

#### **CHANGES IN THE AL-QA'IDA MESSAGE, 1992 TO 2001**

Through a detailed analysis of bin Ladin's written documents and interviews, it is clear that the scope of al-Qa'ida's doctrine, the methods endorsed to achieve its purpose, and the popular political appeal it seeks to generate

have all changed since 1992. In regard to al-Qa'ida's target of criticism, bin Ladin started his mission with a focus on the Saudi regime and its subservience to American forces. Since then, his belligerency toward the United States has grown and his advocacy against the United States has become more prominent. At the same time, his proposed attack against the Saudi regime has become a less frequently stated priority.

In his 1996 Declaration of War that was issued after his expulsion from the Sudan, after offering praise to *Allah*, bin Ladin immediately launched into a global list of wrongs committed by the "Zionist-Crusaders alliance" against the Muslim people from Iraq to Palestine to Chechnya to Bosnia.(29) While the declaration was replete with graphic threats to the United States, these threats did not characterize the content of the first section of the Declaration of War. Instead, the specifics of the Saudi regime's treachery, its compliance with the enemy, and the effect that these actions had on the Saudi people were the true emphasis of the first part of the document. Bin Ladin attacked the regime's religious behavior and accused it of reversing the principles of *Sharia*, "humiliating the *Umma*, and disobeying Allah."(30) Such an emphasis on the Saudi regime is not as clear in later interviews and in his second *fatwa*, issued in February of 1998.

Throughout the Declaration of War, the belief that all power and acquisition of power can only occur through God was repeated continuously. The Saudi regime, according to bin Ladin, violated this premise through its compliance with the United States, its arrest of prominent scholars and activists, and its disregard for the reforms put forth by the July 1992 "glorious Memorandum of Advice."(31) Bin Ladin's declaration outlined the complaints of the memorandum, which include: the intimidation of religious officials, the regime's arbitrary departure from *Sharia*, the state of the press, the forfeiture of human rights, the government's corruption, the poor state of the economy and social services, and an army that

could not defend the country and which ultimately led to the American occupation.(32)

Expanding on these complaints, the declaration listed economic problems such as the depreciation of the Saudi currency, high foreign debt, and inflation. Bin Ladin accused the royal family of pursuing an oil policy that suited the American economy and not Saudis or the Gulf states. He emphasized the importance of protecting Saudi oil as it is “a great Islamic wealth and a large economic power essential for the soon to be established Islamic state.”(33)

These complaints regarding internal Saudi Arabian conditions tried to appeal to popular sentiment, as they demanded an improved political, spiritual, and economic situation for the Saudi people. Moreover, bin Ladin blamed the regime as religiously failed, unjust, and labeled it “the agent” of the “American-Israeli alliance.”(34) The declaration actually stated that to “use man-made law instead of the Sharia and to support the infidels against the Muslims is one of the ten ‘voiders’ that would strip a person of his Islamic status” and make him a non-believer.(35)

Based on a comparison with the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, where Abd al-Salam Faraj declared Sadat to be a non-believer,(36) bin Ladin justified similar action against the Saudi regime and its backers. With this declaration of war, he called violence against the regime and the United States in Riyadh and Khobar the “volcanic eruption emerging as a result of the severe oppression” and the suffering from “excessive iniquity, humiliation, and poverty.”(37) He presented a situation in which the regime was a transgressor and he and his supporters were religious correctors.

In contrast to previous declarations, the February 23, 1998 *fatwa* was more global in its focus. Aside from the primary objection to the occupation of the land of the two holy places, there was no emphasis on the failures of the Saudi regime and the internal difficulties of Saudi society. The *fatwa*'s tone was set from one of its first lines, a citation from the Koran,

“Fight and slay the pagans wherever ye find them, seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them.”(38) After stating the previously mentioned American crimes of the occupation of the holy places, the war on the Iraqi people, and the support of Jewish aggressions, bin Ladin asserted that the United States had declared war on God. The language of the document shifted the emphasis of responsibility to the United States for dictating policy to the Saudi regime and other local rulers.

Because of the 1998 *fatwa*'s exclusive focus on the United States, the 1996 Declaration of War's detail concerning local and practical problems is interesting. The 1996 document clearly asserted the guilt of the United States in regard to creating such domestic problems, but was more critical of the Saudi regime for allowing such American influence and transgressions. While U.S. offenses were given definite attention, it seemed as if bin Ladin was more concerned with rectifying the situation in Saudi Arabia, starting with the expulsion of U.S. forces and the reform of the government in an Islamic manner.

It is possible that the Saudi regime was more of a direct threat to bin Ladin and his supporters in 1996 and that he judged religious reform there still possible or the regime's overthrow relatively easier. The 1996 declaration perhaps also reflected his recent clashes and humiliation by the Saudi regime. Two years later, he seems to have concluded that only by striking directly at the United States could he mobilize popular support and convince Arab regimes to overlook his operations in those countries or their neighbors' lands. This shift in emphasis between overthrowing Arab governments and prioritizing attacks on the West also had happened with earlier Arab revolutionary movements, such as the Nasserists, Ba'athists, and neo-Marxist groups.

In addition to a different focus of blame, the spectrum of targets also evolved in the period between the two “*fatwas*.” In a March 1997 interview with CNN, bin Ladin emphasized the importance of driving Americans from all Muslim countries. When questioned about the

target of the jihad, bin Ladin stated that the jihad is aimed against “soldiers in the country of the Two Holy Places,” not against the “civilians in America.”(39) He explained that the special nature of the holy places required American civilians to leave the country, but they were not targeted for killing.

This contrasts with both bin Ladin’s 1998 *fatwa* and his ABC interview in which he called for violence to punish the United States and Israel. In the February 1998 *fatwa*, he stated that any Muslim wishing the rewards of God must adhere to the order to “kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it.”(40) The *fatwa* declared that:

To kill the Americans and their allies, both civil and military, is an individual duty for every Muslim who is able, in any country where this is possible, until the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Haram Mosque are freed from their grip and until their armies, shattered and broken winged, depart from all the lands of Islam.

In the 1998 ABC interview, bin Ladin reiterated the inclusion of American civilians as targets for the jihad. He stated, “We do not differentiate between those dressed in military uniforms and civilians. They are all targets.”(41) If the American “people do not wish to be harmed inside their very own countries, they should seek to elect governments that are truly representative of them that can protect their interests.”(42) Bin Ladin continued, “Any American who pays taxes to his government is our target because he is helping the American war machine against the Muslim nation.”(43)

Bin Ladin justified what the West called “terror” and the killing of civilians as permissible since the victims of such actions are not true victims. “Terrorizing oppressors and criminals and thieves and robbers is necessary for the safety of people and for the protection of their property.”(44) In 1998, he

told ABC News that Americans are “the worst thieves in the world today, and the worst terrorists.”(45) Bin Ladin took issue with being called a terrorist. In the same interview, he said, they have “compromised our honor and our dignity and dare we utter a single word of protest against the injustice, we are called terrorists.”

Aside from the factors mentioned above, bin Ladin’s decision to expand the scope of al-Qa’ida’s targets might also have been a response to U.S. pressure to capture him and combat his organization because of earlier attacks. It is also possible that bin Ladin wanted to sanction actions such as the embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania so as not to inhibit the planning of future attacks and to encourage attacks that had a greater chance for success due to their softer nature as civilian targets.

Bin Ladin’s statements since the September 11 attacks demonstrate a further change in the al-Qa’ida message. In his October 7 message he shuffled al-Qa’ida’s priorities to maximize political appeal in the Arab and Muslim world by emphasizing the issue most likely to enhance his popular following in the Arab World, the Palestinian struggle. He also tried to capture the hearts of the Muslim world by raising new issues such as Kashmir.

In his al-Jazeera statement of October 7, bin Ladin’s first mention of political issues was to accuse, “U.S. arrogance and Jewish persecution” of humiliating the “entire nation” of Islam and committing the most “heinous actions and atrocities” of “perpetrated murders, torture, and displacement.” While these were not new accusations, bin Ladin referred to the killing of the Palestinian boy Muhammad al-Durrah before any mention of such previously emphasized issues as those of U.S. soldiers in Saudi Arabia and military actions against Iraq.

As before, though, bin Ladin was demanding that Muslims choose between supporting al-Qa’ida—and thus taking the side of God—and being both apostates and henchmen of the West, collaborators in the murdering of Muslims. By not allowing

ambiguities, he defined al-Qa'ida as the representative of Islam and America as crusaders bent on a religious war. In his November 3 statement, bin Ladin demanded that all Muslims oppose the U.S. war on Afghanistan, saying his cause was "fundamentally religious...a question of faith." He called the attacks on Afghanistan, "the most ferocious, serious, and violent Crusade campaign against Islam ever since the message was revealed to Mohammad." He dismissed the leaders of Islamic countries that supported the Western campaign as illegitimate representatives of their nations.

In the October 7 statement, bin Ladin only twice raised the issue of foreign soldiers in Saudi Arabia. The first time was more than halfway through the statement when he called on these forces to leave the Arabian Peninsula or the land "will be set on fire under their feet." He mentioned what previous statements called the greatest American transgression a second time in al-Qa'ida's summary of demands. Considering its previous emphasis, American retreat from the Arabian Peninsula was remarkably only demanded after retreat from Afghanistan, cessation of aid to "the Jews in Palestine," and termination of sanctions on Iraqis. The call to stop helping Hindus against Muslims in Kashmir was the only issue that fell below it in the chronology of his statement. The mention of the issue of Kashmir was significant, though, as it was prioritized among the core list of demands for the first time and was meant to drive the Pakistani street against the Pakistani government. In addition, in bin Ladin's November 3 statement, he highlighted claims of abuses inflicted upon Muslims in Bosnia, Chechnya, East Timor, the Philippines, the Sudan, and Somalia, a further indicator of his effort to win popular appeal among Muslims far beyond the Arab world alone.

#### **AL-QA'IDA, ITS CHARACTER, TACTICS, AND ACHIEVEMENTS**

In addition to further shifting the emphasis of al-Qa'ida's message, bin Ladin's October 7 al-Jazeera statement familiarized the world with

some of al-Qa'ida's other leaders. Appearing with bin Ladin in the video statement were Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri and Sleiman Abu Gheith. Al-Zawahiri was leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the group responsible for the 1981 assassination of Sadat, until 1998 when he signed the World Islamic Front's *fatwa* for Fighting Jews and Crusaders. This decision split the group since many members objected to diverting from its original focus of making an Islamist revolution in Egypt.(46) After spending three years in an Egyptian prison, al-Zawahiri left Egypt for Pakistan, the Sudan, and then Afghanistan and vowed to return "as a conqueror only."(47) Due to his experience, al-Zawahiri is one al-Qa'ida's ideological authorities and a great influence on bin Ladin. He is associated with the 1995 bombing of the Egyptian embassy in Pakistan, for which he was sentenced to death by an Egyptian court, and the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Africa, for which a New York grand jury indicted him in 1999. Abu Gheith, a former imam at a government-backed mosque in Kuwait, has a more junior position in the organization as a spokesperson.

Two other important al-Qa'ida officials have been Muhammad Atef, reportedly killed in November 2000 by U.S. bombs in Afghanistan, and Abu Zubaydah. Atef was a former Egyptian police officer who, like al-Zawahiri, had roots in Egyptian Islamic Jihad. He was al-Qa'ida's military commander in charge of recruiting and training militants, and was suspected of involvement in the Somalia operations in the early 1990s and the planning of the U.S. embassy bombings in Africa. Abu Zubaydah, born in Saudi Arabia but of Palestinian origin, is also involved in recruiting. He brought in Ahmad Ressay and played a role in the proposed millennial bombings. A Jordanian court sentenced him to death in absentia in 2000.(48)

Under this leadership, al-Qa'ida, which means "the base," is an umbrella organization with an estimated 3000 to 5000 followers that works in conjunction with Islamic Jihad and Gamaa Islamiya in Egypt, Harak ul-Ansar in



Pakistan, and has contacts with the National Islamic Front in the Sudan. The group's intention was to take *mujahideen* from around the world involved in local revolts and to direct them into an international battle seeking to create a single Islamist state. The organization began by mobilizing veterans from the war in Afghanistan already familiar with guerrilla fighting. Today, among other countries, al-Qa'ida is active in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, the Sudan, Uzbekistan, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the Palestinian territories, Algeria, Libya, Eritrea, Somalia, Bosnia, Chechnya, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, Germany, Britain, and the United States. Significantly, al-Qa'ida has crossed the Sunni-Shiite divide in that it also has contact with the Lebanese group, Hizballah.(49)

Al-Qa'ida's status as a non-state-sponsored terrorist organization creates both operational difficulties in the areas of financial and tactical operations and advantages in their choice of targets and missions. Without direct state aid, al-Qa'ida raises money through three main sources: bin Ladin's own wealth and businesses; donations from mosques, schools, and charities; and collection of protection money.(50) In the early 1990s, bin Ladin established several construction and farming businesses in Khartoum that provide income for al-Qa'ida, as well as a cover to attain weapons and to conceal operatives. Yet, without state funding, al-Qa'ida is susceptible to potential money problems; a freezing of private businesses' assets; and direct military attacks from states.

In addition to these considerations, al-Qa'ida misses out on several tactical benefits of state sponsorship such as intelligence, international documents, communications equipment, weapons, and specialized field training. This lack of specialized training makes the al-Qa'ida group more susceptible to infiltration, capture, and failure. For example, with the proposed bombing of the U.S. embassy in Paris, plotters made basic mistakes such as buying all of the chemicals needed for the bomb at the same place.(51) However, as the September 11

attacks demonstrate, not all cells are so unsophisticated.

The absence of state sponsorship has its benefits too, such as the organization's flexibility and mobility. As Bruce Hoffman, author of *Inside Terrorism*, argues, this lack of specialized training gives the organization "enormous replicating ability."(52) In commenting on the planned embassy bombing in Paris, a French interior ministry official acknowledged that detecting the terrorists would have been very difficult if they were better trained since they are able to blend into Western societies. He explained, "These people are pulled from our midst...They are almost impossible to detect. If they get a little more sophistication and training, we could all be in more trouble."(53)

In planning and staging the September 11 attacks, al-Qa'ida's leadership showed remarkable intelligence and flexibility in using their enemies' assets and openness against them. Al-Qa'ida terrorists have taken advantage of the political asylum system to gain a safe haven where they can raise money and create operational cells. Militants understood how to enter Western countries to the extent that more than half of the September 11 perpetrators passed through Britain before exploiting the disarray surrounding the U.S. visa system.(54) Furthermore, with ample funding, they took advantage of U.S. educational opportunities, learned to fly airplanes in professional schools, and lived American lifestyles in normal American communities, and communicated with each other through coded Internet messages.

Another benefit to not being sponsored by a state is that al-Qa'ida does not have a permanent central command center, which makes direct attacks on the organization more difficult. Organizational mobility also makes the group less vulnerable to being turned over to outside authorities. Perhaps most beneficial, non-affiliation with a state avoids any implication that the group is mercenary and makes its religious and communal bonds stronger. Cell members are tied to each other

through a common belief and goal that transcend national and ethnic boundaries.

Yet al-Qa'ida's propaganda, training, and ideology give the group a reach beyond its own ranks. There is a misperception that bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida are tactically behind every terrorist attack connected to radical Islam. In reality, the role and tactics of al-Qa'ida are complicated since they are so multi-faceted. Al-Qa'ida adjusts its role to the situation by acting in a variety of manners that include training, funding, and organizing attacks. But both bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida also act consciously to encourage others to carry out operations on their own by providing inspiration and ideological justification.

One of bin Ladin's methods of supporting both his own and other forces launching attacks is the provision of training camps and guesthouses in Afghanistan, the Sudan, Yemen, and Pakistan for *mujahideen*. Within these camps, *mujahideen* are trained to forge travel documents, use covert communication techniques (such as encryption), and to handle and operate small arms and explosives.(55) They are also indoctrinated to hate the West and to engage in jihad as they intensively study Islam and are shown videotapes to persuade them of the existence of a Western war against Muslims.(56)

Al-Qa'ida's ties to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing are an example of bin Ladin's connection to terror in this supportive capacity. Investigators believed that Ramzi Ahmed Yousef received financial support from bin Ladin and was sheltered in an al-Qa'ida guesthouse in Pakistan prior to his arrest.(57) In addition, Ahmad Ajaj, who was convicted of the bombing, was in possession of an al-Qa'ida manual that included information on how to make bombs, conduct psychological warfare, and recruit new members.(58) As far as actually planning the attack though, bin Ladin did not appear to be directly involved. The organization's role was one of support.

This is not a rare situation. For example, in 1999, Khalfan Khamis Mohamed, one of the Tanzania embassy bombers, told FBI agents

that he had never met bin Ladin, heard him speak, or was even sure what he looked like.(59) Individual cells seem to have a great deal of autonomy in choosing their targets and organizing their planning. Operatives are taught not only how to choose and destroy targets but also how to dress, behave, and support themselves financially. For example, Ahmad Ressay, the Algerian who was caught crossing the U.S.-Canadian border to stage attacks, told authorities that he was supposed to support himself through bank robberies and to select his own target.

By giving religious sanction for attacks, al-Qa'ida seeks to spread jihad beyond its own ranks. Though bin Ladin, as a non-cleric, has no authority to issue a *fatwa*, he authorizes killing for God's cause, offering the reward of paradise. In a 1998 interview with *Time*, bin Ladin stated, "Our job is to instigate, and by the grace of God, we did that."(60) An example of this tactic is the 1995 car-bombing incident in Riyadh. Before their execution, four perpetrators of the bombing cited the influence of bin Ladin's communiqués (in a forced confession) lending some credence to the theory that bin Ladin may not tactically have planned the attack, but did influence the action through his words.(61)

In the same interview with *Time*, bin Ladin explained that the United States needed to realize that "thousands of millions of Muslims are angry" and would respond with a proportionate reaction. Bin Ladin's perceived ability to sanction killing and to inspire action coupled with the financial means to communicate his message are the factors that make him so dangerous. The danger that he represents is only further compounded by his popularity in the Arab and Muslim world for standing up to America and corrupt Arab regimes. Bin Ladin justifies actions against such regimes, like the attempted assassination of Egyptian President Husni Mubarak, as proper since they are aimed at destroying a tyrant who is an unbeliever. Bin Ladin explained that actions against such regimes not adhering to Sharia are praiseworthy. They are

“directed at the tyrants and the aggressors and the enemies of Allah, the tyrants, the traitors who commit acts of treason against their own countries and their own faith and their own prophet and their own nation.”(62)

Bin Ladin’s point, when taken from his perspective, is one that has been repeated throughout history. Most recently in the Middle East, Khalid Istanbuli and Yigal Amir used such arguments to explain the assassinations of Egyptian President Sadat in 1981 and Israeli Prime Minister Rabin in 1995 respectively. In *De Officiis*, Cicero explained that despite there being “no greater crime than to murder a fellowman,” assassinating a tyrant is “the noblest of all noble deeds.”(63) Supporting this position, a passage from *Vindiciae contra Tyrannos*, explains:

It is then lawful for Israel to resist the king, who would overthrow the law of God and abolish His church; and not only so, but also they ought to know that in neglecting to perform his duty, they make themselves culpable of the same crime, and shall bear the like punishment with their king.(64)

With some substitution of proper names and phrases, the preceding passage could be used to explain bin Ladin’s doctrine, perceived obligations, and justification for al-Qa’ida’s actions against Arab regimes allegedly led by unbelievers.

In addition to supporting actions through finances, training, and religious sanction, al-Qa’ida is involved in the direct planning of some operations. Despite the presence of many amateur warriors, al-Qa’ida cells and militant Islamist terrorists in general, reflect an extraordinary amount of patience, planning, and intelligence in their successful operations such as the 1998 embassy bombings, the bombing of the USS Cole, and the September 11 attacks. The embassy bombings were planned years in advance and involved a scale model manufactured in an Afghan camp. The Cole bombers took advantage of a four-hour window

of opportunity available every other month to attack the U.S. naval vessel. The details and planning involved with the September 11 attacks ranging from how the perpetrators entered the country, to their flight training, to their surveillance of airport security, to their coordination of flights, are all remarkable.

Part of this detailed planning can be attributed to the Islamist militants’ goal of an Islamic state ruled by Sharia coupled with their concept of the lengthy time it will take to reach such a goal. Bin Ladin and al-Qa’ida do not expect immediate results. They plan to wage their struggle over generations. Al-Qa’ida’s concept of time gives it an advantage over counter-terror efforts. The United States and its allies perceive the terror problem as averting disaster today and tomorrow. Al-Qa’ida’s ideology looks at developments and actions within the timeframe of a battle that will only end once the other side is defeated, and where all of their own casualties receive the ultimate reward of paradise. When law enforcement officials avert an attack, it is only a slight setback for al-Qa’ida. The organization only needs to be successful a small percentage of the time to achieve the effect they seek.

Something that might change this timeframe, though, is al-Qa’ida’s attempt since 1993 to acquire weapons of mass destruction, according to the Federal Grand Jury indictment of bin Ladin. Bin Ladin called the acquisition of such weapons the “carrying out of a duty.”(65) The group contacted Iraqi agents, among others, in an attempt to get a ready-made nuclear device as well as the materials and technology to construct their own nuclear weapon. The U.S. government thought that bin Ladin was a major investor in the al-Shifa pharmaceutical factory in Khartoum that was bombed by the United States in 1998 following the east Africa embassy bombings. The plant was believed to be an al-Qa’ida production site for a key component of VX nerve gas. The U.S. government believes that al-Qa’ida might try to create “dirty nukes,” conventional weapons encased in radioactive substance that when

exploded kill people by radiation poisoning.(66)

#### *Al-Qa'ida's Ambiguous Resume*

Because of the multi-faceted tactics of al-Qa'ida, U.S. officials seem to have difficulty pinning down bin Ladin's exact involvement in the anti-U.S. terror incidents of the last decade. Likewise, while bin Ladin is quick to commend terrorist acts against the United States, he avoids taking responsibility. For instance, in the case of the 1995 Riyadh car bombing that killed five Americans, bin Ladin praised the act, but denied involvement. While he has not taken outright responsibility for the September 11 attacks, bin Ladin provided religious justification for them indirectly through quoting the founder of Islam: "The destruction of the earth is more tolerable to God than killing a believer without cause." Bin Ladin applies this statement as God favoring destruction of the earth instead of the western infidel killing Muslims.

Other examples of praise, but not claim, are drawn from the Khobar bombing and a plan to assassinate President Clinton in Manila. Bin Ladin referred to the Khobar bombing as a "great act in which I missed the honor of participating."(67) As for his connection to Wali Khan, arrested for his plan to assassinate President Clinton, bin Ladin refused to comment on whether Khan worked for him. Yet he did say, "We are all together in this; we all work for Allah."(68) Bin Ladin's reticence could be explained by his belief that his target audience, God, knows who committed the actions while other audiences are unimportant.

However, there are several incidents for which bin Ladin has either claimed responsibility or that were credibly linked to al-Qa'ida, such as the attempt to kill U.S. soldiers in route to Somalia in December 1992.(69) Also in Somalia, al-Qa'ida took credit for providing training and help to Somalis that attacked U.S. soldiers and killed eighteen in Mogadishu at the beginning of October 1993.(70) Al-Qa'ida is also linked to the previously mentioned 1995 assassination

attempt of Egyptian president Mubarak and the 1995 bombing of the Egyptian embassy in Pakistan that was conducted by Egyptian Islamic Jihad.(71) Until September 11, 2000, the most prominent al-Qa'ida attack was the August 1998 embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania that killed more than 250 people and injured more than 5500. The bombings occurred on the eighth anniversary of the United Nations' sanctions on Iraq. The main evidence linking bin Ladin to the attacks are an intercepted mobile phone conversation between two of bin Ladin's deputies and the testimony of Ali Mohamed, a former bin Ladin aide.(72)

It seems as if al-Qa'ida attempted several missions to usher in the 2000 New Year as well. In December 1999, eleven Jordanians and two others trained in explosives in an al-Qa'ida camp were arrested in Amman for planning terrorist attacks on Christian tourist sites.(73) In Kuwait, a man with ties to al-Qa'ida was arrested for planning to bomb American and Kuwaiti targets. The Kuwaiti police eventually uncovered that he was in possession of 300 pounds of explosives and a large number of detonators.(74)

#### **THE MYTH**

The United States and the international media have helped to transform bin Ladin into something of a myth, a hero and popular man in the Islamic and Arab World. Yet despite some direct involvements, many of the ties between bin Ladin and the militant Islamist terror of the 1990s were indirect. To some extent, bin Ladin is the figurehead for the ideology of militant Islamism rather than "the spider at the center of a worldwide web plotting to attack American interests."(75)

Still, after putting all myths aside, the threat that al-Qa'ida and bin Ladin pose is as real as the September 11 attacks. If bin Ladin was arrested or killed, al-Qa'ida would certainly feel the effects of the loss of his leadership, his financial backing, and his cult of personality. Yet the West's problem with al-Qa'ida, its distinct terrorist groups, and its cells would not disappear entirely. Al-Qa'ida supports these

allied groups but does not control them. Each has its own distinct agenda that fits into al-Qa'ida's grander view of an Islamic struggle against the United States and its influences and would continue the struggle without bin Ladin. Bin Ladin designated Muhammad Atef, who has apparently predeceased him, as his successor.(76) It is part of bin Ladin's doctrine to make plans for after his death, as martyrdom is a critical goal and he has expressed his willingness to die, be it sincere or otherwise. For this same reason, operations would not stop because of his absence, whether the group was led by al-Zawahiri or another leader.

The deep challenge that bin Ladin and al-Qa'ida represent is not just that of one man and an umbrella organization. Rather, it is the threat of a radical ideology that has grown more violent and more extreme with time and that has no interest in negotiation with the West. Judith Miller states that between "50,000 and 70,000 militants from 55 different countries have trained in Afghanistan in recent years."(77) Such a number of trained, armed, and angry warriors pose a big problem for the United States and its European, Arab, and Israeli allies, as long as there are Islamic leaders that not only give sanction, but proclaim it the duty of these warriors to commit jihad.

By the same token, though, the destruction of bin Ladin, his immediate lieutenants and network, and his Taliban hosts would be a major setback for the movement. Not only would this loss weaken the militants' ability to plan and carry out operations, but it would also undermine the myth that bin Ladin is the proper leader, his strategy the best strategy, and his doctrine the right doctrine.

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