

## Osama bin Laden: Qur'an as Mandate for Jihad

1996 CE

Osama bin Laden embraces terror. A Saudi expatriate with Yemeni ties, he is an Afghan cave-dwelling terrorist who has killed thousands of people in the name of religion. He has also inspired tens of thousands of others to follow his path of hateful violence and wilful destruction. Yet he claims to be a Muslim and finds justification for his words and his deeds in A Book of Signs. For him the Qur'an is a book with only one Sign: kill the infidel in the name of Allah, pursue jihad as defensive holy war, no matter the cost and the carnage.

Over four years after the coordinated attacks on the United States that took almost 3,000 lives and launched the war on terror at home and abroad, Osama bin Laden remains at large. Physically elusive, he also escapes easy psychological analysis. The key to understanding him is to grasp the disconnection he perceives between his secondary homeland, Saudi Arabia, and his spiritual benchmark, the Qur'an. Bin Laden believes that the former has betrayed the latter, and that the infidel flourishes in the

birthplace of Islam. The alleged protectors of Islam, the Saudi ruling elites, have, in fact, become its worst enemies.

The manifesto of his double war – against native infidels and their foreign allies, equally infidels – dates back to 1996. It was in his 1996 declaration of war that he made an Islamic appeal to fight the 'Muslim' infidel. The Saudi rulers, he stated, had become Muslim infidels because they had welcomed other infidels, the 'Zionist-Crusaders', into the Land of the Two Holy Places (that is, Saudi Arabia in general but in particular the area of Hijaz, where both Mecca and Medina are located).

The basis for Osama bin Laden's Islamic opposition to Saudi rulers is supported by Qur'anic quotations. They dominate the structure, the tone and the argument of his 1996 declaration of war. He begins by praising God, and asking for both His help and His pardon. He also repeats the declaration of faith: 'There is no god but God; Muhammad is God's messenger.' He echoes Chapter 39:23, and also Chapter 39:36–7, when he asserts: 'Whoever has been guided by God will not be misled, and whoever has been misled will not be guided.' The body of the declaration draws its force from direct citation of the three following passages, which are also injunctions addressed to believing Muslims:

O believers, be conscious of your duty to God  
with the proper care due Him,  
and do not die  
without having first surrendered to God. (3:102)

O people, be careful of your duty to your Lord,  
Who created you from a single being  
and created its mate of the same kind  
and spread from these two, many men and women;  
and be careful of your duty to God,  
by whom you demand from one another your rights,  
and be attentive to the ties of kinship.  
Surely God is watching over you. (4:1)

O believers!  
be careful of your duty to God  
and speak the right word;  
He will make your actions sound  
and forgive you your faults;  
and who ever obeys God and his Apostle  
will indeed achieve a mighty success. (33:70-71)

None of these injunctions would seem exceptional. They refer to 'duty to God'. They accent that duty in different circumstances – as creature, as family relative and as social being; the duty is not otherwise specified. Yet in commentaries with which bin Laden was familiar, the duty to God was very specific: proper duty to God was equated with *jihad*, or defensive war against those who attack Islam. For militant Muslims, this set of verses must be read in conjunction with another Qur'anic command:

Strive in God's cause [with the proper care that] you ought to strive. (64:16)

What links this verse to those previously cited is the notion of 'proper care' or 'right' (*haqq*).  
And to give this injunction moral authority, bin Laden then adds another verse from the Qur'an, linked to the prophet Shu'aib:

He said, 'My people,  
have you seen whether I am following  
clarification from my Lord  
who has provided me  
a good provision  
from the Divine source itself?  
I do not wish to violate  
what I forbid to you.  
I only wish for reform,  
to the degree that I am able;  
and I can only succeed through God,  
in whom I repose my trust,  
and to whom I turn.' (11:88)

The prophet Shu'aib was exhorting his people to oppose false gods and to seek redress for social injustice. Though he was a wealthy man, he earned his wealth by acceptable means, and since he was not doing something that he forbade others to do, he was urging his fellow citizens to reform their lives, reform them 'insofar as (one) is able', in this world through social justice and in the next world through acts of devotion.

Bin Laden projects himself as a latterday Shu'aib, claiming

his own wealth as legitimate but also yearning for the social justice that faith demanded as the necessary expression of his privilege. The word for 'reform' is itself prized in modern Muslim movements. Though it occurs but eight times in the Qur'an, only here is it directly connected to a prophet.

A further Qur'anic reference expands the collective appeal of bin Laden's message:

You are the best of the nations  
raised up for the benefit of men:  
you enjoin what is right and forbid the wrong,  
and you believe in Allah. (3:110)

He then reinforces this partial verse with a Tradition echoing the life of the Prophet Muhammad. 'God's blessing and salutations on His slave and messenger who said: "The people are close to an all-encompassing punishment from God if they see the oppressor and fail to restrain him."'

As in earlier scriptural citations, it would be hard to see the militant edge of this cluster unless one recognized that bin Laden's commentary refers the reader/listener back to the beginning of Chapter 3 where there is also a reference to the criterion for differentiating truth and falsehood:

As for those who repudiate the Signs of God  
There is a severe torment for them;  
And God is Almighty, Able to revenge. (3:4)

Not everyone, reasons bin Laden, has the same capacity to enjoin right and forbid wrong. It is incumbent, above all, on rulers to enjoin right, or command good, and also to recognize the Signs of God. The Saudi rulers, implies bin Laden, have not lived up to the scriptural mandate; they have thus forfeited their right to rule.

Following this catena of scriptural references, bin Laden condemns the Saudi leadership outright because they depend on American 'Crusaders'. Bin Laden reasons that the twentieth-century American political and military leadership share the same aggressive hatred towards Islam as the twelfth-century Frankish conquerors of Jerusalem. Without a trace of hyperbole, he asserts, in this same declaration of war, that the latest and the greatest of the aggressions incurred by the Muslims since the death of the Prophet – may God's blessing and peace be upon him – is the occupation of the land of the two Holy Places – the foundation of the house of Islam, the place of the revelation, the source of the message and the place of the noble Ka'bah, the Qiblah of all Muslims – by the armies of the American Crusaders and their allies.

Later he justifies his own labour as one that liberates not just the occupied land of the two Holy Places but also Jerusalem. 'Today we work from the Hindu Kush mountains to lift the iniquity that had been imposed on the Ummah by the Zionist-Crusader alliance, particularly after they have occupied the blessed land around Jerusalem, route of the journey of the Prophet – may God's blessing and peace be upon him – and the land of the two Holy Places. We ask God

to bestow us victory on us, He is our Patron and He is the Most Capable.'

Here the 'route of the journey of the Prophet' is an unmistakable allusion to the Night Journey of the Prophet:

Glory be to Him Who took His servant by night  
From the sacred mosque to the farthest mosque,  
Whose precincts We blessed,  
In order that We might show him some of Our Signs. (17.1)

Bin Laden moves beyond identifying himself with the prophet Shu'aib and not only criticizes the 'illegitimate' Saudi rulers for inviting the Crusaders to the two Holy Places, but also invokes the memory of Saladin, the valiant holy warrior. What he did in the twelfth century bin Laden proposes to do in the twenty-first century: combat the Crusaders in the first Holy Land of Muslims – Jerusalem.

Throughout his declaration bin Laden conflates the two objectives of freeing the two Holy Places and reclaiming the original Holy Land, Jerusalem. 'To push the enemy – the greatest *kufr* (unbelief) – out of the country is a prime duty,' he proclaims. 'No other duty after Belief is more important than the duty of *jihad*. Utmost effort should be made to prepare and instigate the *ummah* (the Muslim community) against the enemy, the American-Israeli alliance occupying the country of the two Holy Places and the route of the Apostle – may God's blessing and peace be upon him – to the Furthest Mosque.'

The focus on *jihad* is paramount. If there is more than one duty to be carried out, then the most important one should receive priority. Bin Laden emphasizes that after belief (*iman*) there is no more important duty than pushing the American enemy out of the Holy Land. For the people of knowledge, said a medieval Muslim scholar, 'to fight in defence of religion and belief is a collective duty; there is no other duty after belief than fighting the enemy who is corrupting the life and the religion. There is no precondition for this duty, and the enemy should be fought with one's best abilities.'

The scholar quoted here is Ibn Taymiyyah. He fought against the Mongols in the thirteenth century. Since the Mongols were nominal Muslims, bin Laden is comparing the present-day status of those Arab Muslims living under Saudi rule to the earlier condition of Iraqis and other Muslims living under Mongol rule. Not only is *jihad* the necessary second pillar after faith, but *jihad* must be conducted against 'nominal' Muslims in the name of a higher principle of social justice and restoration of dignity. The declaration of *jihad* against Muslims as well as non-Muslims is a minority view, yet it does have a precedent in the history of Qur'an interpretation. Bin Laden strides forth as the modern Saladin emboldened by the Qur'an commentary of Ibn Taymiyyah.

But bin Laden draws on resources other than the Qur'an; he also invokes many anecdotes and lessons from the reports or traditions of the Prophet, as well as poetry, to justify his case against both the Saudis and their Zionist-Crusader allies, i.e. Israel and the United States. Yet his embrace of a minority

exegetical tradition of the Qur'an provides the backbone of his appeal, which does two things simultaneously. First, he selects only those Qur'anic verses that fit his message, and then cites them exclusively for his own purposes. He ignores both their original context and also the variety of historical differences among committed Muslims about how to apply their dicta. Second, he collapses the broad spectrum of Qur'anic teaching into a double requirement: first to believe and then to fight. There may be other duties but the first two – and by implication, the only two that matter in a time of crisis – are *iman*, then *jihad*, or defensive war on behalf of the *ummah*, or Muslim community.

He follows the same interpretive strategy when he appeals to those who will be the foot soldiers in the *jihad* that he is invoking against present-day Mongol Muslims, i.e. the current Saudi rulers, and those who support them, the Zionist-Crusaders who have occupied the two Holy Places (Mecca and Medina).

Claiming that the Saudis are apostates, he also charges them with failing to uphold both the religious scholars (*ulama*) and the righteous youth. In the third and final part of his 1996 declaration of war, he appeals directly to the righteous youth. 'I have a very important message to the youth of Islam,' he declares. '(They are) men of the brilliant future of the *ummah* of Muhammad – may God's blessings and peace be upon him. Our youth are the best descendants of the best ancestors!'

'Our youths are the best descendants of the best ancestors'

is a phrase that identifies the martyrs who volunteer for al-Qaeda as equivalent not just to the Companions of the Prophet but also to those who were exemplary in fighting for the creation and expansion of the *ummah*, or Muslim community. Bin Laden reinforces their sacred role with verses from the Qur'an that seem to enshrine this loyalty as binding. Not only will they stand up to those who protect the infidel occupiers but they will also understand that 'it is a duty now of every tribe in the Arab Peninsula to fight, *jihad*, in the cause of Allah and to cleanse the land from those occupiers. Allah knows that their blood is permitted (to be spilled) and their wealth is a booty; their wealth is a booty to those who kill them. The most Exalted said in the Verse of the Sword (*ayat as-sayf*):

So when the sacred months have passed away,  
then slay the idolaters wherever you find them,  
and take them captives and besiege them,  
and lie in wait for them in every ambush. (9:5a)

Our youths knew that the humiliation suffered by the Muslims as a result of the occupation of their sanctuaries cannot be opposed and removed except by *jihad*.

While there are many other verses that could be, and are cited on behalf of *jihad*, it is the Sword Verse from Chapter 9 that becomes the shibboleth, the battle cry, echoing other verses and etching their meaning in a single mandate. Probably no verse has occasioned more reflection as to its



context and applicability. Since the Chapter in which it occurs is among the last revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, militant interpreters want to make it the verse that trumps all others, mandating the battle against unbelievers as general and unending.

But the actual context begins with a crucial qualifier:

And an announcement from God and His Messenger  
to the people on the day of the Greater Pilgrimage  
that God and His Messenger are not liable to the idolaters;  
Therefore if you repent, it will be better for you.  
And if you turn back, then know that you will not weaken  
God,

And announce painful punishment to those who disbelieve.  
Except those of the idolaters  
with whom you made an agreement,  
then they have not failed you in anything  
and have not supported any one against you.  
So fulfil your agreement with them to the end of their term,  
Surely God loves those who are careful in their duty. (9:3-4)

Taken together, these two verses qualify the implied all-out mandate of Chapter 9:5a, but even more extenuating is Chapter 9:5b, also omitted from Osama bin Laden's citation in the declaration of war:

But if they repent and keep up prayer  
and give alms,

then let them go free;  
for God is Most Forgiving, Most Merciful. (9:5b)

So while Chapter 9:5 is severe if it is taken out of context in the form cited by bin Laden, the full text of the Qur'an qualifies its 'clear' and 'singular' meaning. Bin Laden, however, is declaring war and urging terror. He is not interested in interpretive niceties. He defines *jihad* as second in importance only to belief. He wants to take Qur'anic passages as proof texts rather than moral directives. He wants to create a rigid polarity between Muslim youth, who alone are righteous, and enemy occupiers, who along with native collaborators become legitimate targets of attack 'by any means possible'.

Crucial and deliberate is the lack of any specificity about the means of waging *jihad*. It is assumed that because the atrocities of the aggressors are so evident and bloody, the means to oppose them must be comparable. It is all-out war, it is unending terror. There is no negotiation, no compromise, no *modus vivendi* with the infidel enemy.

What is the end result of Osama bin Laden's project? It is neither an Islamic state nor a restoration of the Caliphate. Instead it promotes nothing but endless anarchy. Osama bin Laden is mislabelled as an Islamic fundamentalist. He is more the descendant of Rasputin and the Russian anarchists of the early twentieth century than he is of Muhammad and Muslim warriors of the early seventh century. His Qur'an is not a signpost but a grave marker.