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THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO OSAMA BIN LADEN

To Western ears, the author writes, the public utterances of Osama bin Laden have always come across like the "tirades of a loony ideologue." But these skillful rhetorical constructions, rich in historical allusion, have enormous powers of penetration—and will survive their author

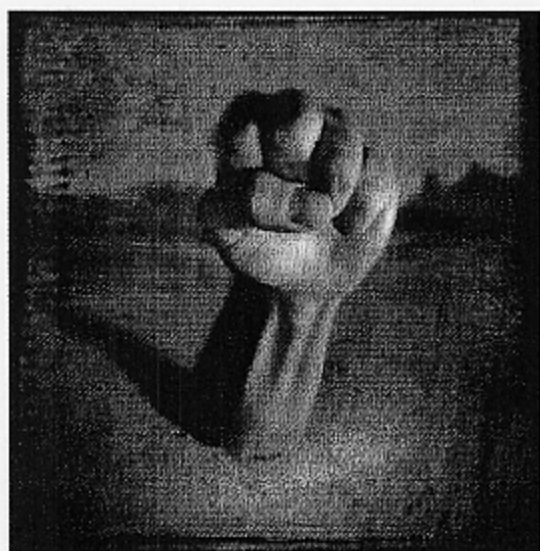
BY REUEL MARC GERECHT

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Osama bin Laden has established himself as one of the most momentous figures in contemporary Islamic history, etching into the Western psyche, not to mention the Muslim one, the rhetoric of *jihad* against "Jewish and Christian Crusaders." We may never know when the Maktab al-Khidamat, or "Office of Services"—a holy-war clearinghouse for several thousand ragtag Arab volunteers in the Soviet-Afghan War—evolved into the highly organized anti-American terrorist group known as al Qaeda. Bin Laden's greatest achievement—the creation of a worldwide network of warrior cells—will outlive bin Laden unless the United States physically eliminates al Qaeda's entire command structure.

Bin Laden's *jihad* will be harder to deal with spiritually and intellectually. Through the power of their own bitter, angry faith, bin Laden and his followers have melted skyscrapers and crippled an American warship. For holy warriors, who live to die, these are inspiring achievements. Just as important, bin Laden and his followers have left a written corpus that is likely to motivate the faithful for years to come.

Like the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, of Iran, Osama bin Laden made his anti-Western passion and plans clear in print years before gaining prominence through a frontal assault against America and its friends. *The Encyclopedia of the Afghan Jihad*, a multivolume guide to paramilitary and terrorist activity, written by his followers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, signaled bin Laden's intention to wage an anti-



Western campaign far beyond Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The encyclopedia was probably compiled and published in Peshawar, Pakistan, in late 1992. Because it doesn't provide a date or an exact place of printing (an intentional wartime evasiveness pervades the writing), one must make guesses about its provenance based on the text and on conversations with Pakistanis, Afghans, and Arabs. The encyclopedia, "one of the Sources of Energy for the faithful," was designed to transfer the knowledge and spirit gained from the "first

brick of Islamic justice"—the successful war against Soviet communism—to a larger, more important campaign against the West, which bin Laden's statements have referred to only as *kufi* ("unbelief"), a classical-Islamic way of denoting geography by faith. The next *jihad* against America and its Muslim allies would, the authors of the encyclopedia prayed, lead to "the establishment of a castle of the Muslims, a [new] Caliphate"—a reference to the ruling politico-religious office of Islam's "golden age." For many fundamentalists, if not for the common man, the caliphate remains, at least sentimentally, the ideal geopolitical expression of Muslim universalism—an empire free of Westernized nation-states, where the *shari'a*, the holy law, reigns supreme, thus guaranteeing the union of Church and State and the brotherhood and strength of the faithful.

The aim of the encyclopedia and many smaller paramilitary and terrorist manuals that have appeared since 1992 is to democratize terrorism, to give to any true believer a portable guide to waging holy war worldwide. The encyclopedia has

been found in print or on CD-ROM wherever al Qaeda has sent its cadres. Bin Laden and his followers also sought to accomplish philosophically what the Shi'ite Ayatollah Khomeini aspired to but never achieved: taking Islamic radicalism mainstream by forcing and dominating the discussion of holy war among the various strains of Sunni fundamentalism, which has become a significant force in every Middle Eastern country. Though unquestionably the most influential Muslim of modern times, Khomeini could never transcend the seventh-century division of Islamic society into those who recognize the legitimacy of the caliph succession to the Prophet Muhammad (the Sunnis) and "the party of Ali" (the Shi'a), who believe that only Muhammad's son-in-law and his descendants can rightfully rule the Islamic world.

After September 11 bin Laden and the Arabic-speaking spokesmen of the Taliban tried, through the Gulf-based satellite-television channel Al Jazeera and through sympathetic partisans elsewhere on the ground, to make vivid the Muslim history of 300 years of defeat at the hands of Christians and Jews preceded by a thousand years of triumphs. Bin Laden's effort has been much more successful than that of Khomeini, whose charisma had a distinctly Shi'ite, messianic core, at gaining a foothold in the Sunni community, which comprises around 90 percent of the world's Muslims. A wealthy man who chose hardship in Afghanistan, a "persecuted" man who repeatedly fled countries to escape the hostility of Americans and their Middle Eastern allies, bin Laden evokes the prophetic tradition. Muhammad, too, was a well-off man; he had to forsake his native Mecca owing to the hostility of infidels and faithless members of his own tribe. His *hijra* ("emigration" or "flight") was arduous and perilous, but he was, as every faithful Muslim knows in detail, eventually victorious—in the hearts and minds of his followers, and then on the battlefield.

Bin Laden's criticisms of the West, and America in particular, can easily appear to a Westerner as the tirades of a loony ideologue with a Leninist capacity to sublimate slaughter through a testament of faith. To embittered Muslims, however, his image is far more complicated. It is seen in the context of a civilizational tug-of-war that began in the seventh century, when Arab Muslim armies invaded Byzantine Palestine. And his ideas will survive martyrdom.

Osama bin Laden's initial calculation was simple: that the anti-Western (for "Western" it is actually more meaningful to use the term he sometimes employs, "Judeo-Christian") baggage of 1,400 years would sufficiently neutralize the revulsion that Muslims might feel for terrorist tactics. His writings and communiqués have reminded Muslims "not to forget the dropping of the H bombs on cities with their entire populations of children, elderly, and women [and] ... the Christian Serbians who massacred and raped in a manner not seen in contemporary history ... [and the] massacres in Tajikistan, Borneo, Kashmir, Assam, Philippines,

Fatani, Ogadin, Somalia, Eritrea, [and] Chechnya ... that sent shivers through the body and shake the conscience [all while] a clear conspiracy between the USA and its allies ... under the cover of the iniquitous United Nations [allowed it to happen]." The writings hammer home the suffering of the Iraqis, always citing a figure of 600,000 Iraqi children dead as a result of "the boycotts and sanctions against the Muslim Iraqi people." They call attention to the dictatorial regimes under which Muslims live and the friendly relations the United States has with their "moderate" rulers. They remind Muslims that Americans, like the Crusaders of old, aren't invincible. Here is how bin Laden once addressed U.S. Defense Secretary William Perry, in his 1996 "Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places":

Where was this courage of yours when the explosion in Beirut took place in 1983 ... You were transformed into scattered bits and pieces at that time; 241 soldiers were killed, most of them Marines. And where was this courage of yours when two explosions made you leave Aden in less than twenty-four hours! ... you moved tens of thousands of international forces, including twenty-eight thousand American soldiers, into Somalia. However, when tens of your soldiers were killed in minor battles and one American pilot was dragged in the streets of Mogadishu, you left the area in disappointment, humiliation, and defeat, your dead with you ... It was a pleasure for the heart of every Muslim and a remedy to the chests of believing nations to see you defeated in the three Islamic cities of Beirut, Aden, and Mogadishu.

Fortunately, Sunni Muslims, who are, so to speak, the Roman Catholics of Islamic history, have never been particularly keen to embrace radical ideas en masse, let alone the ruthless violence that is an integral part of bin Laden's message. Historically, they have been uncomfortable with Saudi Wahhabism, the creed of bin Laden's homeland, a "purist" version of Islam that issued forth in the eighteenth century from the Hanbali school of legal thought, the last born and least fun of Sunni Islam's four schools of jurisprudence. The conquest in 1925 of Mecca and Medina, Islam's holiest cities, by the as-Sa'ud family, and the enormous oil wealth of Saudi Arabia, have tended to obscure the fact that the Saudi version of Islam is closer to Puritan Christianity than to the more tolerant and more widespread traditions of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Saudi Arabia, with its intrusive morals police, decidedly does not represent mainstream Islam.

Since September 11, though, perhaps a little too much has been made of Wahhabism in Western commentary. Bin Laden's vision was designed to appeal to the larger Muslim world. His primary target is the enemy without, the United States, not the enemy within, the "impious" Muslims. The goal is to unify Muslims, not to divide them by doctrine or even by the intensity of their faith. In the October–November, 1996, issue of *Nida'ul Islam (The Call of Islam)*, a militant-Islamic magazine published in Australia, bin Laden said this

about the collective responsibility of the Muslim community against the Western threat:

What bears no doubt in this fierce Judeo-Christian campaign against the Muslim world, the likes of which has never been seen before, is that the Muslims must prepare all possible might to repel the enemy, militarily, economically, through missionary activity, and all other areas. It is crucial for us to be patient and to cooperate in righteousness and piety and to raise awareness of the fact that the highest priority, after faith, is to repel the aggressive enemy that corrupts the religion and the world. Nothing deserves a higher priority, after faith, as the religious scholars have declared. It is crucial to overlook many of the issues of bickering to unite our ranks so that we can repel the greater Kufr.

Even more practical and ecumenical were bin Laden's statements in his 1996 "Declaration," which was, to cite the Princeton historian Bernard Lewis, the first official "license to kill" Americans issued by bin Laden and al Qaeda. Those who think al Qaeda wouldn't ally with an irreligious Saddam Hussein or Iran's Shi'ite clerics should reflect on the following:

To repel the greatest of the two dangers at the expense of the lesser one is an Islamic principle which should be observed. It was the tradition of the people of the Sunnah to join and invade and fight with the righteous and non-righteous men. Allah may support this religion by righteous and non-righteous people as told by the Prophet ... If it is not possible to fight except with the help of non-righteous military personnel and commanders, then there are two possibilities: either fighting will be ignored and the others [the infidels], who are the great danger to this life and religion, will take control; or [we will have] to fight with the help of non-righteous rulers, thereby repelling the greatest of the two dangers and implementing most, though not all, of the Islamic laws. The latter option is the right duty to be carried out in these circumstances and in many other similar situations.

Bin Laden's militant-Islamic thought represents a fascinating mixture of several strands. To borrow the terminology of Olivier Roy, a French scholar of Islamic radicalism, it is in part "Islamist"; bin Laden has advocated overturning Islamic society politically by toppling or spiritually transforming (through intimidation) its leadership. But bin Laden has not wanted to fracture Islamic society, creating divisions among the faithful that could be exploited by the West or by pro-Western Muslims. Bin Laden's fear of religious division, or *fitna*, is perhaps the main reason why hatred of the Saudi royal family, which has committed the unforgivable sin of allowing U.S. soldiers on Saudi soil since 1990, has not turned into a violent campaign against the house of as-Sa'ud and its very bombable oil wells. In his "Declaration of War Against the Americans," bin Laden wrote,

I would like here to alert my brothers, the Mujahidin ["holy warriors"] ... to protect this (oil) wealth and not to include it in the battle, as it is a great Islamic wealth and a large economic power essential for the soon to be established Islamic state, by Allah's Permission and Grace. The existence of such a large country [Saudi Arabia] with its huge resources

under the leadership of the forthcoming Islamic State, by Allah's Grace, represents a serious danger to the very existence of the Zionist state in Palestine. The Noble Kaa'ba, the Qiblah of all Muslims [that is, the direction to which Muslims pray], makes the land of the two Holy Places a symbol for the unity of the Islamic world ... An internal war [would be] a great mistake, no matter the reasons for it.

Bin Laden's rhetoric has not been heedless in its calls for suicide bombers; not every Muslim male need volunteer to vaporize himself for God's glory. Bin Laden was a businessman and a student of public administration and economics at King Abdul-Aziz University, in Jidda; his statements betray an awareness of the complexity of the modern state and the need for Muslims to keep working. He powerfully reproached the Saudis for the existence of so many jobless in the Muslim world's richest oil state.

Bin Laden's words have never drawn a detailed picture of the Islamic future; in this sense his vision should be characterized as what Roy calls "neofundamentalist," a vision alluring in its unprogrammatic simplicity and in its recourse to God and holy law to solve all problems. In bin Laden's view, Muslims should think first of their honor, of their historic pride in being a victorious people through countless difficult battles. It would be pointless for everyone to die in some cataclysmic struggle between good and evil. Rather, bin Laden's writings speak of "guerrilla war ... fast-moving, light forces that work under complete secrecy."

The leader of al Qaeda always wanted to be seen, above all else, as the Muslim world's anti-American paladin—fighting the good fight while putting few demands on, and making few serious threats against, the status quo in the Muslim world. No wonder America's Muslim allies, who successfully countered (often in draconian ways) fundamentalist opposition to their rule throughout the 1980s and 1990s, have not yet leaped enthusiastically to answer Washington's longstanding request for help. The war in Afghanistan certainly made real bin Laden's dream of becoming the focal point of Muslim conversation. But as the war wound on, bin Laden became angry that ordinary Muslims in the Middle East had not risen up more loudly in support of him and the Taliban.

Dealt a blow in Afghanistan, al Qaeda will call passionately for a new wave of terrorism against the United States. These battle cries will confront the profound conservatism of Sunni Muslim society, which has repeatedly denied glory to its radicals. The anti-Crusader rhetoric will also confront a reality vastly different from the one that shaped bin Laden's mind, and shaped the promises bin Laden made to his holy warriors. This time around, the Americans aren't running.

A good thing, too. In the years ahead bin Laden's followers throughout the Muslim world will continue to distribute, and add to, *The Encyclopedia of the Afghan Jihad*. Martyrdom will only enhance its cachet. The encyclopedia may serve, in effect, as Osama bin Laden's last will and testament, and his dreams will beckon from its pages. ▀