

Understanding Osama bin Laden

In a statement released in October 2001, Osama bin Laden praises the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001, criticizes United States policy in the Middle East and specifically in Palestine, denounces a hypocritical world, and calls to action Muslims worldwide. His words are proud, boastful, and confident in a belief that Muslims will one day “eradicate oppression from the island of Muhammad” (1).

Bin Laden’s claims of Islamic oppression are based on the policies and actions of the Great Powers – Britain, France, Russia, and the United States – following World War I. Prior to WWI and dating back to the days of Muhammad, the lands of Islam (dar-al-Islam) were ruled by a sultan or caliph. After the war, the Great Powers (specifically Britain) seized the land from Egypt to India and “established states, appointed persons to govern them, and drew frontiers between them” (2, 560). These actions were taken with little to no input from the local populaces. According to David Fromkin, “the European powers had taken the political destinies of the Middle Eastern people in their hands” (2, 560).

Although these decisions were made long before the birth of bin Laden, he claims the Middle East is still suffering from their effects. The policies enacted by the Great Powers have resulted in either weak, subjective governments or extreme punishment for nations that rebel. He claims modern Middle Eastern governments have “supported the butcher over the victim, the oppressor over the innocent child” (1).

Hope emerged for bin Laden, however, with the victory of Afghanistan over the Soviet Union in the 1980s. According to George Friedman's America's Secret War: Inside the Hidden Worldwide Struggle between America and its Enemies, the defeat of the Soviet Union "was seen as an Islamic victory rather than an Afghan victory" (3, 16). Friedman continues by stating that "With the Islamic world having been occupied by the British and French, manipulated by the United States, and crushed by the Israelis in several wars, the Afghan war was the first time in centuries that an Islamic force had defeated a non-Islamic force" (3, 16).

The idea of an "Islamic victory" gave confidence to bin Laden and others who shared his views. They believed that if they could defeat one of the world's superpowers, perhaps they could finally strip themselves of 80 years of European influence in the Middle East and hopefully reestablish the caliphate. For bin Laden and his followers, the rule of the caliph presented "governance of divine law" and correct world order (4). This, of course, far exceeds the initial British notion that the caliph "could be a spiritual leader only" (2, 104).

According to bin Laden, because the governments of the once-powerful Islamic world were failing in their duties to guide the people they had become illegitimate. Whereas they were once subjects of the British, the growth of American hegemony had turned them into puppets and economic slaves to American interests. To bin Laden, these governments were hypocritical and misguided. He believed that in order to break American ties and spur the Islamic world into action a major attack on the United States was necessary. According to Friedman, "the United States, as the only remaining superpower and a Christian state, had to be humiliated if the psychological dependency

on the United States was to be broken – and, more important, in order to generate confidence among the Islamic masses” (3, 22).

Whereas Friedman discusses Christianity as a focus of Islamic resistance, Framkin’s study offers that the basic root of the issue could be economic in nature. For the Great Powers, the struggle for control of the Middle East was and remains a struggle to control its economy. The British, for example, did not attempt to control the region in order to propagate Christianity (as they did in other regions of the world), rather they did so to protect their trade routes from Egypt to India (2, 16).

In respect to the United States, although spreading Christianity was once a goal of President Woodrow Wilson (2, 547), it is not the dominant international ideology of today. Rather America’s foreign policy is to “actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development, and free trade to every corner of the world” (5, intro). Some would argue however, that democracy is merely a cover for U.S. economic interests and cooperation (see U.S.-Japanese relations in regards to Iraqi oil fields (6)).

Regardless of its nature and/or its economic ties, bin Laden objects to the promotion of democracy in Islamic lands. His argument against democracy is based on the Islamic belief of “divine governance” – governments should follow the will of God. A system that does not follow God, but rather follows the will of the people, such as American-style democracy, is regarded by bin Laden as Satanic (4). This “Satanic” government system and the notion of spreading it across the world is one of the reasons bin Laden and his followers label Americans “infidels” and praise those who do America harm (1).

Bin Laden's final point of contention in his October 2001 statement is in regards to the Jewish settlement in Israel. For bin Laden and the other believers in "divine guidance," Islam is the supervisory religion, overseeing all others. The British undermined this notion by allowing for a Jewish National Home after World War I and the U.S. continues to disrupt the Muslim balance of power by supporting Israel in recent years. For bin Laden, placing Muslims as secondary or even equals to Jews especially in a land once ruled by Islam is against the natural order of the world (4).

Framkin makes clear that bin Laden's ideas in regards to Israel-Palestine are not new and that there has long been Muslim resistance to the settlement of the Jewish nation in the Middle East. He describes the Arab delegation that met with Winston Churchill in 1921 as taking "into account no claims, fears, needs, or dreams other than its own" (2, 521). Despite disputing the Israel – Palestine issue for years, not until recently has bin Laden's Al-Qaeda terrorist network made its presence felt in the region (7).

So why is U.S. policy so fearful of Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network? Perhaps the answer lies in Framkin's explanation of the British fear of a Turkish uprising in 1922: "if comparatively weak Turkey could have been seen to have inflicted a major defeat on the Allies; presumably the rest of the Moslem world would be encouraged to throw off colonial rule" (2, 550). Of course, in America's case the desire to spread democracy and/or protect economic interests replaces "colonial rule." All of which are unacceptable to Osama bin Laden.

Works Cited

- 1) October 2001 statement, Osama bin Laden. Class handout.
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- 4) Class lecture, Dr. John Kelsay. Florida State University, November 3, 5, 10, 2004.
- 5) The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, George W. Bush. September 2002.
- 6) Japan in Iraq: Deploying Troops, Greasing Hands and Seeking Oil, George Friedman. <http://www.stratfor.info/Story.neo?storyId=227424>, January 26, 2004.
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