

What is bin Ladenism?

Al Qaeda leader's letter to Americans

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A recently translated 4,000-word letter purported to be written by Osama bin Laden provides what may be the clearest presentation yet of the utterly reactionary political and social views that underlie his brand of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism.

Despite its threat of a new wave of attacks on US targets, the letter has received scant attention from either the Bush administration or the mass media. Its timing could not be more inconvenient, coming as it does in the midst of the Bush administration's buildup for war against Iraq and the growing revelations tying both Saudi and US intelligence to the September 11 hijackers.

A year ago, bin Laden's sickening celebration of the attacks on the World Trade Center was widely publicized in a bid to boost support for the US invasion of Afghanistan. Now, however, official Washington does not want any distractions from its demonization of Iraq and its attempt to portray Baghdad's alleged "weapons of mass destruction" as the overriding threat. As a result, the alleged author of the September 11 attacks, once referred to by Bush as "the evil one" whom he wanted "dead or alive," has become a non-entity in the eyes of official Washington.

Yet the letter deserves careful study, in the first instance because of its threats of new terrorist atrocities. These are cast as acts of revenge for the expected military attack on the Iraqis. For example, the letter states: "Anyone who tries to destroy our villages and cities, then we are going to destroy their villages and cities. Anyone who steals our fortunes, then we must destroy their economy. Anyone who kills our civilians, then we are going to kill their civilians."

These lines underscore the backwardness and savagery of bin Laden and his ilk, whom the US government and its intelligence agencies repeatedly utilized to attack revolutionary movements and further imperialist aims in the Middle East and Asia before the chickens came home to roost.

Much of the letter from bin Laden is devoted to a filthy defense of terrorist attacks against civilians. In addition to claiming the divine sanction of Allah, he justifies such attacks as vengeance for Palestinians killed by Israeli occupation forces in the West Bank, Afghan victims of US bombings and Iraqis who have perished from disease and starvation as a result of US-enforced economic sanctions.

Those who have followed bin Laden's political evolution note that his profession of concern for the plight of the Palestinians chafing under occupation and the estimated 1.5 million Iraqis who have died as a result of US-backed sanctions are relatively recent additions to an ideological agenda driven by ferocious anti-communism and religious fanaticism.

Against the claims of right-wing Zionists that "Judea and Samaria" were bequeathed to the Jews by God, this Islamic fundamentalist argues on the same tribal-religious basis that Muslims are the only true heirs of the biblical prophets.

He dismisses out of hand any protest that American civilians, like the nearly 3,000 office workers, airplane passengers, firefighters and others slaughtered on September 11, are not responsible for the repression of the Palestinian people, the bombing of Afghanistan or the sanctions against

Iraq.

"The American people are the ones who choose their government by way of their own free will; a choice which stems from their agreement to its policies," he writes. "The American people are the ones who pay the taxes which fund the planes that bomb us in Afghanistan, the tanks that strike and destroy our homes in Palestine, the armies which occupy our lands in the Arabian Gulf, and the fleets which ensure the blockade of Iraq... So the American people are the ones who fund the attacks against us, and they are the ones who oversee the expenditure of these monies in the way they wish, through their elected candidates."

This ignorant diatribe is the hallmark of a movement that is seeking not the revolutionary transformation of society, but rather the use of terror to pressure imperialism into an accommodation.

"The American people are the ones who choose their government by way of their own free will..." This is said about a country whose president was installed through the suppression of the "free will" of the people, as reflected—palely and partially—in the popular vote two years ago. It is a country in which the alienation of masses of people from the entire political process is so great that barely one third of the electorate participated in the congressional election earlier this month. That hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated across the country last month to oppose the Bush administration's war plans and that many millions more are hostile to militarism and repression is for bin Laden a matter of indifference.

The US is, finally, among the most socially stratified countries in the world. A vast gulf separates the masses of working people, who have virtually no say in the running of the government or the economy, and the thin stratum of multi-millionaires who control the politicians of both major parties and dictate domestic and foreign policies that have nothing to do with the interests of the majority. Bin Laden makes no distinction between the exploited and oppressed layers of American society and the system that exploits and oppresses them. All are lumped together as targets for revenge.

As for his religion-based critique of American society, much of it, with slight alteration, could serve as planks in the political platform of that vital Republican Party constituency, the Christian Right. Bin Laden rails against America for tolerating homosexuality and fornication and allowing the depiction of women in advertising.

Echoing the witch-hunt launched by the Republican Right in the impeachment campaign of 1998-99, bin Laden declares: "Who can forget your President Clinton's immoral acts committed in the official Oval Office? After that you did not even bring him to account, other than that he 'made a mistake', after which everything passed with no punishment. Is there a worse kind of event for which your name will go down in history and be remembered by nations?" With only slight editorial changes, these words could be worked into a column for the *Washington Times* or the *American Spectator*.

In his indictment of American society as the "worst in the history of

mankind,” bin Laden’s principle charge is that America is a “nation who, rather than ruling by the Shariah of Allah in its Constitution and Laws, choose to invent your own laws as you will and desire. You separate religion from your policies, contradicting the pure nature which affirms Absolute Authority to the Lord and your Creator.”

This credo of clerical fascism also has its parallel in American politics. Indeed, the echo of the Republican Right’s persistent attack on the separation of church and state is a bit too close for comfort. It is little wonder that Bush and other administration officials refer only obliquely to bin Laden and his followers as the “evil ones,” without daring to probe the politics underlying their heinous acts.

US connections

Are these similarities between Islamic reaction and the politics of the American right merely a formal coincidence? Hardly. Bin Laden and others like him have long enjoyed intimate connections with US imperialism.

As is now well known, the relations between the bin Laden and Bush families go back many years, with George Bush the elder having brokered a number of profitable deals between his Carlyle Group investment firm and the family of the Al Qaeda leader. Bin Laden got his start as a junior partner to the CIA in waging the covert war against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan that began in 1979 and continued for a decade. The US poured some \$5 billion in lethal weapons and aid into the coffers of the Mujaheddin, both those recruited locally as well as the Arab volunteers that bin Laden helped recruit and coordinate.

President Jimmy Carter’s National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski spelled out the US policy in an interview with the French newspaper *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1998, acknowledging that Washington had deliberately stoked Islamic fundamentalism in an effort to draw the Soviet Union into war. “We now have the opportunity of giving to the USSR its Vietnam war,” he told Carter in 1979 after Soviet troops intervened.

Asked if he regretted helping to create a movement that had carried out worldwide acts of terrorism, Brzezinski dismissed the question, declaring, “What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?”

That successive American governments bear political responsibility for the death of thousands of American civilians at the hands of Islamic fundamentalist terrorists is further underscored by the words of Ronald Reagan, who in 1985 declared the Mujaheddin to be “the moral equal of our Founding Fathers and the brave men and women of the French Resistance.”

Once American goals were realized, and Afghanistan reduced to rubble with 1.5 million killed, the CIA operation ended and bin Laden found himself left out in the cold. It was then that his political orientation turned sharply toward anti-Americanism. Even then, Washington and its allies provided backing to bin Laden’s protectors and religious-ideological co-thinkers in the Taliban, as a means of countering Russian and Iranian influence in Afghanistan.

Nor was the relationship between imperialism and Islamic fundamentalism unique to Afghanistan. Repeatedly, Washington and its surrogates have encouraged these elements in an attempt to undermine secular nationalism and socialist-oriented workers’ movements throughout the Middle East. Even now, while deriding Iran as part of the “axis of evil,” Washington is preparing to back an exiled Iranian-sponsored Shiite Imam in an attempt to spark a revolt in southern Iraq against the regime of Saddam Hussein.

The development of the revolutionary workers’ movement in the Middle East and Central Asia has always confronted the necessity of a bitter fight against tendencies like that represented by bin Laden. At the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920, Lenin

presented a draft thesis on the struggle of the working class in the backward countries that spelled this out.

While insisting that workers in the advanced capitalist countries had to actively support the fight against colonial oppression, the thesis stressed “the need for a struggle against the clergy and other influential reactionary and medieval elements” within the oppressed countries, and specifically “the need to combat Pan-Islamism and similar trends, which strive to combine the liberation movement against European and American imperialism with an attempt to strengthen the position of the khans, landowners, mullahs, etc.”

Here Lenin described the social and political essence of bin Ladenism. It is not a political movement of disoriented freedom fighters that somehow expresses the strivings of oppressed but politically confused masses. In both his political views and his activities, bin Laden reflects a dissident and disaffected section of the national bourgeoisie in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East generally.

This privileged social layer feels that it has not been treated fairly in its dealings with imperialism and chafes at the limitations imposed on its own ambitions. It is no accident that bin Laden and movements like his have received substantial funding from Saudi Arabian business executives and elements within the Saudi state.

Unable to advance a progressive alternative to the global dominance of American and world finance capital, and contemptuous of the social interests of the masses in their own countries, not to mention the rest of the world, these forces promote the reactionary utopia of a Pan-Islamic state, which would drag the predominantly Muslim countries, if not the entire world, backwards a millennium to the rule of the Sharia and the Caliphate.

In the absence of a revolutionary leadership, Islamic fundamentalism is capable of exploiting the profound discontent of broader layers of the population in the Middle East for reactionary purposes. These movements have fed off of the failure of the secular nationalist projects—from Nasserism to the Palestine Liberation Organization—to ameliorate the social conditions of the masses or achieve any genuine independence from imperialism.

Washington’s policy—from the support for Israeli occupation and aggression to the US drive for war in Iraq, and its attempts to militarily dominate the oil-rich countries of the Gulf—has fueled popular anger in the region.

The relation between US imperialism and Islamic fundamentalist terrorism is symbiotic. The so-called “war on terror,” a cover for the use of military violence to achieve US global strategic objectives, will only create more recruits for the Islamic fundamentalist movements. New acts of terror against American targets, meanwhile, will be utilized to justify further US aggression all over the globe. The seeming disinterest of the Bush administration in capturing bin Laden is in good measure explained by the useful political purpose that his terrorism serves.



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