

## Osama bin-Laden Interview, June 1999: Entering the Mind of an Adversary

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Osama bin-Laden's news medium of choice, the Al-Jazeera television network, has enabled him to converse in a religious style of Arabic used by learned men of theology in Saudi Arabia. Al-Jazeera correspondent Jamal Abdul-Latif Ismail, author of *Bin Laden, Al-Jazeera, and I* (Bin Laaden wa al-Jazeera wa Ana) conducted a most insightful interview with Bin-Laden in 1999.<sup>1</sup> This essay focuses on excerpts from this interview and helps the reader understand the meaning behind Bin-Laden's words.

### Getting the Interview

Ismail begins his book by describing how he obtained interviews with Bin-Laden and the number two al-Qaeda leader, Ayman Al-Zawahiri. Getting to Bin-Laden involved many false starts and required working with contacts in London, Cairo, and Peshawar: an al-Qaeda operative would set up an interview with Ismail then abruptly cancel it. It is important to understand that Ayman Al-Zawahiri and members of his Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) orchestrated media events. Al-Zawahiri, who has a keen understanding of the power of media, imagery, and slogans, is a prolific writer about the past and future of Islamic militancy. His book *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner* is required reading for those who wish to understand al-Qaeda.<sup>2</sup> The book explains the rationale behind Al-Zawahiri's strategic shift from attacking Egypt to directly attacking the United States.

Ismail dealt with several al-Qaeda front men before landing the interview with Bin-Laden. Meetings at hotels and telephone calls at specified times finally resulted in Ismail's contact with Al-Zawahiri via tele-

phone. Ismail was taken to many safe houses and never knew if he was temporarily stopping for a rest or if this was the place his interview would occur. It took 16 months to secure a face-to-face interview with Bin-Laden. Bin-Laden no longer grants personal interviews, no doubt because al-Qaeda used a hit team posing as a television crew on 9 September 2001 to assassinate Northern Alliance commander Ahmed Shah Masood in Afghanistan. Bin-Laden now videotapes his messages.

### Interview and Assessment

Ismail's interview affords much insight into Bin-Laden's ego, mind, and psyche. Bin-Laden uses symbols and imagery that requires interpretation and chooses words carefully to create a mystique and image for Arab audiences. Excerpts from the interview follow:

**Ismail:** Who is Osama bin-Laden, and what does he want?

**Bin-Laden:** Praise be to Allah, Usama bin Muhammed bin Awad bin Laden was by Allah's grace born to Muslim parents on the Arabian Peninsula in the Malaaz District of Riyadh in the year 1377 Hejirah [1957]. With Allah's grace, we went to Medina 6 months after my birth. I then spent my entire life in the Hijaz between Mecca, Medina, and Jeddah.

My father Sheikh Muhammed bin Awad bin Laden was born in Hadramaut and left to work in the Hijaz over 70 years ago. With Allah's grace, he was given an honor not bestowed on any contractor and that is the building of the holy mosque in Mecca, which contains the blessed Kaaba. [Muslims believe this is the first House of God established by the Prophet Abraham.] He then

undertook the construction of the prophet's mosque in Medina. When the Jordanian government announced a bid to renovate the Dome of the Rock Mosque in Jerusalem, he gathered all his architects and engineers and asked them to place a bid without any profit. They insisted that they could submit a competitive bid and make a little profit on this project. So, may Allah have mercy on his soul, he further reduced the bid in order to guarantee serving this project. It is with Allah's grace that he would occasionally pray in all three mosques in one day. It is no secret that he was one of the founders of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's infrastructure.

After this I studied in the Hijaz and majored in economics at Jeddah University or what is called King Abdul-Aziz University, I learned early the inner-workings of my father's company, may Allah bless him, despite the fact that my father died when I was 10 years old, this is briefly who Osama bin-Laden is.

**Assessment:** What Bin-Laden does and does not reveal about himself speaks volumes. He opens his interview by giving his full name, which establishes his Arab and Islamic bloodline. He never mentions Saudi Arabia by name; he refers to the country as the Arabian Peninsula. Bin-Laden wants his audience to understand that he grew up in the Hijaz province, where Islam was founded 14 centuries ago.

Bin-Laden is tremendously proud of his father but purposefully does not mention his mother, a Syrian woman who did not remain married to his father for long. Bin-Laden did not want to detract from his image as a pure Arab fighter by disclosing

that his mother was Syrian. An Arab in Bin-Laden's mind is defined not by language, but by religion and geography. An Arab is one who is from the Arabian Peninsula—a Sunni Muslim—everyone else (Egyptians, Iranians, and Syrians) being less pure.

When Bin-Laden mentions that his father died when Bin-Laden was a child, he sends the message to listeners that he became independent at an early age. In Arabian society the loss of a father is significant because he is the chief patriarch. Much attention is given to the fact that the Prophet Muhammad was orphaned at a young age and needed an elder to protect him. Bin-Laden might have modeled himself after Muhammed or hidden the fact that his older brother took care of his mother and him until Bin-Laden was able to inherit his father's funds.

**Ismail:** What do you want?

**Bin-Laden:** What we want and what we are demanding are the rights of every living being. We demand that our land be freed from our enemies, and that our land be freed from Americans. For these living creatures were given by God a protective instinct that refused to be intruded upon. For these, may Allah praise you, are like the chickens. When an armed person enters a chicken's home, it attacks [the assailant], and it is only a chicken.

We demand the rights for every living creature, specifically human rights and in particular the [rights] of Muslims. There were aggressions on the lands of Islam, particularly the holy shrines, the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the first center [qibla] in which Prophet Muhammed, peace be upon him [PBUH], directed his prayers. This aggression continued with the alliance between crusaders and Jews that is led by America and Israel, in which they have taken the land of the two holy mosques [reference to Saudi Arabia], and there is no power except by Allah. We desire to instigate the community [of Muslims] to undertake the liberation of their land and fight for the sake of Allah, most high, so that Islamic law and Allah's are raised high.

**Assessment:** Bin-Laden's demand for human rights is classic mimicry of

the Western view of international human rights. Militants will feign democracy and petition for freedom to seek power, but once in power, impose a religious dictatorship. Bin-Laden makes clear his goals to instigate an Islamic militant revolution against the United States and Israel. Bin-Laden believes the United States and Israel are in collusion to dominate the Islamic world. "There is no power except for Allah," is an old saying that denotes the helplessness of Muslims. Bin-Laden uses his messages of violent jihad as the remedy for this helplessness.

**Ismail:** [Ismail asks Bin-Laden about recent attacks by British and U.S. forces against Iraq during Operation Desert Fox.]

**Bin-Laden:** Praise be to Allah, the last attack [1999] that occurred a few days ago in Iraq was directed by America and Britain. This confirms many meanings that are both dangerous and significant. We will not discuss here the material and human losses, the killing of our Muslim brothers from among the Iraqi people but will discuss the proofs [rationale] behind these attacks. America accuses Iraq of using poison gasses on its own people and against the Kurds. America accuses Iraq of using its destructive weapons against Iran. What is significant and what people should stop and take note of is that America did not speak of these things at that juncture, America at that time aided [Iraq], who was subsidized by many agents in the region.

It [Iraq] became the largest Arab [military] power in the region threatening the security of the Jews and Israeli security that has occupied the legacy [Al-Aqsa Mosque] left us by our holy prophet [PBUH]. It was when [this threat to Israel] appeared that it began making an issue of these things [Iraq's weapons capability]. It [America] claims to hold them [Israel] accountable, [America says]: correct, there are advanced weapons and weapons of mass destruction in Israel, but Israel has never used them, but Iraq uses them; this talk is redundant. America also possesses these weapons and has deployed them hitting entire nations in the Far East in Nagasaki and

Hiroshima after Japan surrendered and World War II was beginning its conclusion. Despite this, America insisted on striking nations [their] fathers, children, women, and elderly. The truth must be revealed that any attack today against any nation in the Islamic world is in reality an attack [orchestrated] by Israel and that people must awake to this reality.

People must organize large popular movements to bring down world organizations that have enslaved and maintained their positions at the expense of Islam and the Muslims. America has divorced itself from this popular discontent, for the Jews have been able to direct the Christians from among the Americans and English to encourage the strike against Iraq. It is the Israeli influence and Jewish influence inside the White House that has become clear. For the Defense Secretary is Jewish, the Secretary of State is Jewish, the head of the CIA and national security, [all of] the highest officials are Jews. They have encouraged the Christians to clip the wings of the Islamic world and the real objective is not Saddam Hussein but the development of the Islamic world as an emerging world power [sic]. They have struck Iraq, encircled Libya before, or if [the Americans] strike the Al-Shifa factory in Sudan, and it was a plant that made medicine, are all clear signs of recent events [sic].

It has become clear that no Muslim should and every sane person not go to the United Nations. Muslims legally must not succumb to this organization that is heretical. We will tell those intelligent non-Muslims not to go to this organization, for look at North Korea, for [would] any sane person go to an infidel to receive judgment[?]

**Assessment:** Bin-Laden finishes this section by railing about the United Nations, America's control of the organization, and its right to veto on the Security Council. He accuses Muslims who wish to divide the Muslims for their own gain or those who participate in the United Nations as not understanding their own faith.

Bin-Laden's claim that the United States dropped the atomic bomb after Japan surrendered displays his

incredible misunderstanding of the events of World War II. He has no comprehension of World War II, Operation Olympic, or U.S. President Harry S. Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb to shorten the war.<sup>3</sup> Bin-Laden's reference to World War II and his manipulation of Islamic history and the law shows how he takes pieces of history and alters them to justify his arguments. He views the Japanese self-sacrifice and kamikaze ethic from a jihadist perspective.

Bin-Laden's vehement anti-Semitism is a staple of many Islamic militant groups but also shows his fixation on Israel and the demonizing of Jews, partly because of the Wahhabi doctrine by which he was raised. It is not to Bin-Laden's advantage to reveal Muhammed's relationship with the Jews in Medina, where there was a societal compact between Muslims and Jews to live as one community. It is also not in Bin-Laden's interest to mention that early Christians helped sustain early Islam. One must also remember Bin-Laden's religious education is steeped in the teachings of Wahhabism. Wahhabism's founder, Muhammed bin Abdul-Wahab, in *Kitab al-Tawheed* wrote, "The ways of the people of the book (Jews and Christians) are condemned as polytheist."<sup>4</sup> Abdul-Wahab's Islam is far more intolerant than 7th-century Muslim doctrine. Bin-Laden's focus is on incitement at all costs, and he prefers a simple explanation of a world in which Muslims are perpetual victims and self-examination is discouraged.

**Ismail:** What impact did the British and American strikes on Baghdad have on anti-American sentiments in the region, and [do you] see military responses curbing [your] terrorist efforts?

**Bin-Laden:** Praise Allah, what must be understood regarding this question is that the Muslim nations after this attack are nations that are not in control of its destiny. Our enemies roam freely and with conceit through our homes, lands, and air space. They strike [Muslims] without seeking anyone's permission and especially during this attack. . . . The current [Arab] regimes are in a deep conspiracy [with the adversary, and have lost the] ability to do anything

against this obscene occupation. For it is up to Muslims, particularly the Ahl al-Hal Wal-Aqd [those leaders that loosen and bind communities]; those of truthful Ulama, believing merchants, and heads of tribes must immigrate for Allah's sake and find for themselves a place where they can raise the banner of [offensive] jihad. To make their umma [communities] aware of [the importance of] preserving their religion and dignity, otherwise all shall be lost. They must reflect on what has happened to our brothers in Palestine . . . the Palestinian nation used to be famous for its agricultural prowess. . . . This nation today has made refugees unwelcome and rejected around the world. . . . Why is there no response when the Holy Mosque in Jerusalem is under attack, what will make 1.2 billion Muslims move? This is something that is incredulous that must be addressed. . . . Anyone believing that [America will not] strike is living in a fantasy.

**Assessment:** Bin-Laden's reference to immigrating to a place where a banner of jihad can be raised is intended to encourage Muslims to join him in Afghanistan. Playing on Islamic history once again, Bin-Laden describes how Muhammed was forced to leave Mecca to go to Medina, where he established the first Muslim society. Bin-Laden takes this hijra (withdrawal) out of context. Muhammed was ordered to leave Mecca to spare Muslims from genocide. Bin-Laden also conveniently excludes how Muhammed peacefully interacted with non-Muslims in Medina and how he attempted to construct a single community made up of Muslims, Jews, and other non-Muslims.

Bin-Laden's idea of migration and waging offensive jihad was also used in the 1970s and 1980s by an Egyptian terrorist group called Takfir wal Hijrah whose followers left Cairo and traveled to remote regions of southern Egypt to wage war against Egyptian authorities. No doubt Bin-Laden and his Egyptian ideologue, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, have discussed many Islamic militant movements and their tactics.

Bin-Laden's reference to truthful Ulama (religious scholars) comes

from his belief that any cleric who does not espouse Bin-Laden's religious view is being paid by Arab regimes. He considers the Saudi Council of Ulama a mouthpiece of the government. Bin-Laden admires militant Saudi clerics like Sheikh Safar Al-Hawali, whose sermons about an inevitable clash between Islam and the West are widely disseminated by cassette tape. Al-Hawali's diatribes, which appeal to many young Saudi students, offer an alternate and militant explanation to the perceived impotence of the Saudi regime during Operation Desert Storm. Al-Hawali's radical speeches include diatribes about a worldwide conspiracy against Islam by the United States and Israel.

There are indications that the religious and political views of the 15 Saudis among the terrorists who attacked the World Trade Center were shaped by Al-Hawali's tapes. Another popular militant Saudi cleric, Skeikh Salman Al-Auda, has written a book, *The End of History*, which highlights the decay of Western civilization and uses Muslims to accelerate the collapse of the West.<sup>5</sup>

**Ismail:** Will there be a response to the cruise-missile attacks on Afghanistan of 1998?

**Bin-Laden:** With Allah's grace we have formulated with many of our brothers around the globe the World Islamic Front for the Jihad Against the Jews and Crusaders. The Front's organization and coordination is coming along in an exceptional manner. It will have a wider ability to move and achieve victory for the faith and take revenge on the Jews, Christians, and Americans.

**Assessment:** Bin-Laden's response demonstrates his patience and unwillingness to strike without careful planning and coordination. This is not the answer of an impulsive person.

**Ismail** points out to Bin-Laden that there have been no operations carried out since the announcement at the World Islamic Front.

**Bin-Laden:** [This organization] has not gained firm roots, and its members come from varied backgrounds around the world. They have wide activities within the movement. It is also not necessary to

announce every operation they have attempted or succeeded in.

## Important Lessons from the Interview

Several concepts contained in Bin-Laden's interview must be highlighted to help the reader understand the rationale behind Bin-Laden's thoughts. He claims that 75 percent of Americans supported President Bill Clinton's 1998 and 1999 operations against Afghanistan and Iraq. He considers U.S. civilians and soldiers to be one and the same, thereby justifying killing U.S. civilians. Bin-Laden admits that he set up military training camps and trained over 15,000 men—the majority from Arab countries—during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

Ismail asked Bin-Laden about his being implicated in Sheikh Abdullah Azzam's assassination. Bin-Laden never directly answered this question but, instead, lavished praise on Azzam as a key leader in the Islamic militant movement. Azzam organized the first Arab resistance against the Soviet Union during the invasion of Afghanistan. Azzam's Maktab-al-Khadamat-al-Mujahidden (Mujahideen Services Office) also known as Al-Qaeda al-Sulba (the firm base) became the core of Bin-Laden's organization.

When asked about his health, Bin-Laden said he could ride a horse 70 kilometers without needing a rest. This statement is meant to appeal to the romantic image of Arabs as warriors and skilled horsemen. Bin-Laden says it is the right of Muslims to acquire nuclear technology and that the West can no longer monopolize it. He believes veterans of the Soviet war against Afghanistan bear a high responsibility. With only small numbers of rocket-propelled grenades, Kalshnikovs, and antitank mines, they were able to crush the greatest superpower known to mankind. Bin-Laden is convinced that the United States is weaker than the former Soviet Union, citing the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Somalia as a sign of American weakness. He has created an alternate history that claims that U.S. forces, under the banner of the United Nations, killed 13,000 Somalis. Bin-Laden refuses to believe that U.S. forces were in Somalia to feed starv-

ing refugees and deter warlords from using food as a weapon to control them.

## Bin-Laden's Views on Petro-Politics

Ismail describes Bin-Laden's belief that America robs Saudi Arabia of its oil wealth. Bin-Laden explains that during the reign of King Faisal, the United States paid only 70 cents per barrel [of oil]. In the 1973 oil crisis, the Muslims asserted their economic power using oil as a weapon, and prices began to rise to \$40 per barrel. When the [oil] prices leveled off to \$36, the United States pressured Gulf countries to increase their production to lower prices. Bin-Laden labels this "the great swindle." Doing basic math, Bin-Laden explains that from \$36 the price was lowered to \$9 per barrel, he relates the retail price at \$144 per barrel, or a loss of \$135. He multiplied \$135 by the 30 million barrels produced in the Islamic world daily, totaling a loss of \$4.5 billion per day for Muslim nations. He breaks down the loss over 25 years to \$30,000 for every Muslim man, woman, and child. Although this is an oversimplification of petroleum production and evolution of agreements between oil companies and oil-producing nations, it is highlighted to demonstrate the skill with which Bin-Laden panders to the disenfranchised, giving them an alternate history.

Aside from exporting atrocities around the world, Bin-Laden exports alternative messages that must be discredited. He has a skill at taking World War II history out of context and packaging Quranic verses, prophetic sayings, and Islamic militant writings from the 13th through the 20th century and passing them off as theology. In a post-11 September

2001 world, the United States must find the logic behind Bin-Laden's diatribe to begin the process of discrediting it Islamically and intellectually. In the end we will capture the likes of Bin-Laden and Al-Zawahiri, but their writings, commentaries, and speeches will outlive them. Dismantling their arguments is an important aspect in this war on terrorism.

Fifty years from now when young Muslims read Bin-Laden and Al-Zawahiri's works, they will hopefully reflect on how not to lapse into Islamic militancy, much like Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is viewed as a lesson on how not to lapse into fascism.<sup>6</sup> From a military education perspective, the United States has spent hours discussing the ideology and military tactics of the Vietnamese; a new corpus of literature must be developed for this new adversary. **MR**

## NOTES

1. *Bin Laden wa al-Jazeera wa Ana* (Bin Laden, Al-Jazeera, and I) (Casablanca, Morocco: Dar-al-Najaaah Al-Jadeedah, 2001).
2. Ayman al-Zawahiri, "Knights Under the Prophet's Banner," *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, London, 2 December 2001.
3. For more information about Operation Olympic, see online at <[www.ibiblio.org/pha/war.term/Olympic.html](http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/war.term/Olympic.html)>, accessed 23 June 2004.
4. Muhammad bin Abdul-Wahab, *Kitab al-Tawheed* (Miscellaneous Pakistani Publisher). *Kitab al-Tawheed* is an 18th-century tenets of faith book.
5. Salman bin Fahed al-Auda, *The End of History* (No publishing data given.)
6. Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (My struggles) (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

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