



# Osama bin Laden's Global Islamism and Wahhabi Islam

— Jonathan Sozek

There has recently been much speculation as to what sort of relationship exists between Osama bin Laden's militant Islamist network, al Qaeda, and Wahhabism - the form of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia. Some have denied any relationship whatsoever,<sup>1</sup> others have alleged material cooperation between al Qaeda and the Saudi authorities,<sup>2</sup> and still others have linked Wahhabi Islam with global terrorism on the basis of a supposedly shared 'extremism' or 'intolerance'.<sup>3</sup> The most sophisticated commentary has tended to focus on allegations of doctrinal similarities between the brand of Islam espoused by bin Laden and the teachings of earlier Muslim authorities such as ibn Taymiyya - a thirteenth century Syrian scholar - or Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, the eighteenth century founder of Wahhabism. As Michael Doran, professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, put it in October of 2001, bin Laden is 'tapping into a minority Islamic tradition with a wide following and a deep history'.<sup>4</sup>

Adopting the premise that bin Laden does indeed somehow 'tap into' a 'minority Islamic tradition', this paper aims, first, to define more clearly what this tradition is by examining its foundational ideas in the lives and work of ibn Taymiyya and ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. Then, through a close reading of bin Laden's public statements from 1996 to the present, the paper considers just how bin Laden has 'tapped into' this tradition, and how his reception differs from that of contemporary religious authorities in Saudi Arabia who are, historically speaking, the direct descendents of ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab himself. It will be concluded that although bin Laden and contemporary Saudi authorities both draw on the same 'minority tradition' of Islamist reform, bin Laden's relation to this tradition is selective, pragmatic, and illegitimate even by the standards of ibn Taymiyya or ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. Whatever might be said about al Qaeda, its project is by no means to be conflated - at least on the level of doctrine - with the practice of present day Wahhabi Muslims.

## Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab and his teaching

The school of thought referred to herein as Wahhabism was founded by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab in mid-18<sup>th</sup> century Najd, a region of what is now eastern Saudi Arabia. Those inside the tradition prefer to call themselves the *Muwahiddun*, rendered in English, perhaps misleadingly, as ‘Unitarians’.<sup>5</sup> Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab – referred to in Saudi Arabia simply as ‘the Sheikh’ – was adamant that his teachings should be seen as adding nothing *new* to Islam. Rather, as American Arabist George Rentz puts it, his teachings have been treated by his followers as ‘a return to the original principles of Islam and a repudiation of all innovations contrary to the practices of the Prophet Muhammad and the early generations of pious Muslims’, not as the doctrines of a new school or sect.

The movement can be identified as belonging to a larger traditionalist trend among Muslims known as Salafism<sup>6</sup>, which has emerged in recent years as a global phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> Salafism can be understood as an umbrella term under which a movement like Wahhabism might be placed. Not everyone who identifies with Salafism is a Wahhabi; many in fact may even be critical of that latter smaller, more regionally specific movement. Bin Laden himself has identified himself with Salafism<sup>8</sup> (meaning little more, perhaps, than a Christian identifying themselves as an evangelical), but this says nothing as to his relationship to Wahhabism. In order to understand ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s teachings, it is imperative to consider the context in which he developed his ideology.

By the start of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Arabian Peninsula was ripe for a reformist movement. A rigid socioeconomic stratification between poor, nomadic peoples in the provinces and the wealthier, more urbane populace of the cities was matched by corresponding differences in religious practice. Perhaps most notably, the two groups followed different traditions of Islamic jurisprudence.<sup>9</sup> Provincials adhered to the traditionalist Hanbali school, and looked with suspicion on the more permissive practices condoned by Hanafi jurists in the cities. Certain pre-Islamic practices, such as the consumption of wine and opium, had again become popular in the Hijaz (the region of contemporary Saudi Arabia containing the cities of Mecca and Medina), and extravagant Ottoman dress and musical festivities had become common among pilgrims on the *hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca). The Ottoman Empire was nominally sovereign over the peninsula at this time and formally recognized the Hanafi School as the official state legal system. This lent a political implication to the charges of urban degeneration. At the same time,

conservative jurists everywhere decried the rise of various popular devotions in the provinces, such as the ‘worship’ of trees and natural objects in hope of receiving favors and the veneration of the tombs of the Prophet Muhammad’s Companions.<sup>10</sup> Some went so far as to describe the peninsula as being in a state of *jahiliyya*, a term usually used to describe the region before the advent of Islam. The reformation of the Arabian Peninsula would become the life work of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab.

Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab (b. 1703) was the son of a prominent judge (*qadi*) of the Hanbali school who memorized the *Qur’an* before the age of 10 and undertook the *hajj* before he was 20. After spending some time in Basra to continue his studies, ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab moved to the town of Huraymala (near present-day Riyadh) where he composed the *Kitab al-Tawhid*, or ‘book of the Unity [of God]’. This was his most important treatise, ‘condemning all types of innovation’,<sup>11</sup> especially devotions to natural objects and sacred sites.

With the death of his father in 1740, ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab assumed the vacant post of *qadi* and began his public preaching. The Sheikh’s<sup>12</sup> aggressive efforts to purge Huraymala of all popular devotional practices met with condemnation by the town’s inhabitants, and he soon fled to the nearby town of Uyayna, where the ruler was more sympathetic to his project. Rentz presents a useful summary of his activities there: ‘Under the ruler’s protection he carried out a series of acts dramatizing his demand for reform: cutting down sacred trees, razing the revered tomb of [a Companion of the Prophet Muhammad] ... and stoning an adulterous woman, thereby reviving an ancient sentence in abeyance for many years’.<sup>13</sup> The Sheikh also enforced *zakat* (a charitable tax mandated by *Shari’a* law),<sup>14</sup> and preached against popular Sufism and the Shi’ites.

In 1744 public outcry again forced ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab to flee. Two brothers with whom he had razed the Companion’s tomb invited him to Dir’iyya, a nearby village (on the site of modern Riyadh) ruled by their brother, ibn Sa’ud. Finding ibn Sa’ud sympathetic to his project, the two entered into a compact, ‘sealed by the same oath the Prophet and the men of Medina had sworn to cement their alliance’.<sup>15</sup> They consummated their agreement through the marriage of ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s daughter to ibn Sa’ud, inaugurating the Saudi-Wahhabi dynasty.

With the support of ibn Sa’ud, the Sheikh sent letters to the rulers of nearby towns enjoining them to reject un-Islamic law and popular devotional

practices. When these were met with mockery, he and Ibn Sa'ud prepared a military *jihad* to purge the region of these practices by force. According to the Sheikh, these rulers had removed themselves from the community of Muslims by their un-Islamic practices. The Saudi-Wahhabi raids met with remarkable success, and by Ibn Sa'ud's death in 1765 much of Najd was under his control. Ibn Sa'ud's son, 'Abd al-'Aziz, subjugated the remainder of Najd by 1773, at which time Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab 'retire[d] from active participation in public affairs... [though] he continued to be the intimate adviser of 'Abd al-'Aziz'.<sup>16</sup> He continued in this capacity until his death at age 89 in 1792.

'Abd al-'Aziz took on his father's project of expansion after the Sheikh's death. In 1801, Saudi forces captured and violently razed the Shi'a holy city of Karbala in what is now Iraq. Assassinated two years later, 'Abd al-'Aziz was succeeded by his son Ibn Sa'ud 'Abd al-'Aziz, who by 1805 conquered both Mecca and Medina. Upon the Saudi capture of Mecca and Medina, the Saudis closed the holy cities to all non-Wahhabi Muslims, looted and divided the cities' treasures as booty, and demolished shrines and cemeteries for serving as centers of saint-worship.<sup>17</sup> The Ottoman caliph, no longer able to ignore the Saudi-Wahhabi state, dispatched his Egyptian governor Mehmet Ali Pasha to expel the Wahhabis from the Hijaz. By 1815, the area was recaptured and the Saudis driven back to Dir'iyya, which Mehmet Ali's forces conquered and razed in 1818.<sup>18</sup>

The Wahhabi movement, left without state support, nonetheless proved resilient. By 1843 the state had revived in Dir'iyya (by then renamed Riyadh) under Faisal ibn Turki, a member of the Saudi family (called the House of Sa'ud). A period of conflict followed his death in 1865, when another family - the House of Rashid, which had been established by the House of Sa'ud some years before - vied for control of the region. The House of Rashid conquered Riyadh in 1891, driving the Saudis into exile in Kuwait. Only in 1902, under the leadership of another 'Abd al-'Aziz, would the Saudis recapture Riyadh and launch an ambitious campaign to retake the peninsula. Rentz describes his unique strategy:

Starting in about 1912, he encouraged the Bedouins [nomads living in the Arabian desert] to found perhaps two hundred *hijrahs*, new towns which were a combination of military cantonment, agricultural colony and missionary centre for the propagation of Wahhabism. The settlers called themselves *Ikhwan* (Brothers). Devotees of the *jihad* against unbelievers,

that is, all non-Wahhabites, the *Ikhwan* rendered valuable service to ‘Abd al-‘Aziz in building up Saudi Arabia.<sup>19</sup>

Upon his recapture of the Hijaz in 1921, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz adopted the title of Sultan, shedding the religious title of Imam borne by all his predecessors. This major symbolic change, along with the new Sultan’s refusal to support the *Ikhwan* in campaigns against the British in Jordan and Iraq, incited the *Ikhwan* to openly revolt against their leader in 1928. They were crushed violently and disbanded by early 1930, signaling ‘the end of militant Wahhabism’<sup>20</sup> and the adoption of a more moderate state religious ideology.

In 1933, an oil concession was granted to the Arab-American Oil Company (Aramco), effectively ending British patronage of the Saudi state. With massive new wealth at their disposal, Saudi rulers steered a course toward modernization – a movement checked constantly by conservative Wahhabi *ulama* (scholars) who were suspicious of Western technologies. For the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to say that this system of checks and balances between Wahhabi clerics and Saudi rulers has continued through the present day. The *Qur’an* remains the official constitution of Saudi Arabia, and the *Shari’a* continues as its law, although the government has ‘issued numerous regulations [to supplement it] ... governing the use of motor-vehicles, the application of customs tariffs, the registration of trademarks and so on’.<sup>21</sup> Wahhabism continues to form a major part of educational curricula, and has become familiar to many Muslims around the world through the Saudi government’s well-financed evangelical efforts.

Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s thought can be understood as ‘pivoting’<sup>22</sup> around one central conviction: a belief in the absolute oneness and unity (*tawhid*) of God. There is no claim to offer a new teaching or philosophy, only a heavy reliance on both the foundational texts of Islam – the *Qur’an* and *sunna*<sup>23</sup> – and on a particular ‘minority tradition’ stemming from the reformist project of ibn Taymiyya, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Syrian thinker. Following discussion of this earlier project, the Sheikh’s understanding of *tawhid* and its practical implications will be examined more closely.

Ibn Taymiyya (b. 1263, near Damascus) devoted his career to formulating an understanding of *Shari’a* law<sup>24</sup> that was ‘comprehensive in spirit’.<sup>25</sup> Although the notion of *Shari’a* originally bore some consistency of meaning among different Muslim schools of thought, it had, during the centuries preceding ibn Taymiyya’s birth, been appropriated by a number of groups which sought to emphasize one or another of its aspects, whether

rational, legal, or mystical. For many, this showed that the original, holistic sense of *Shari'a* was being lost.

Ibn Taymiyya undertook the unpopular project of trying to correct this situation. In Fazlur Rahman's view, ibn Taymiyya sought to outline a *Shari'a* that encompassed 'the spiritual truth of the Sufi, the rational truth of the philosopher, and the law. ... [An] 'inclusiveness' that is not formal and 'aggregative' but points to a religious quality which is the source of these three'.<sup>26</sup> To accomplish this, ibn Taymiyya returned to Islam's foundational texts, the *Qur'an* and *sunna*, aiming to read them independently of all later juristic developments. He denied, importantly, the validity of *ijma* (consensus of the scholars) and *qiyas* (argument by analogy) as legal tools. Only *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) based on an informed reading of the relevant texts was seen as valid, any other juristic method being distorting of the *Shari'a*. It was on this point that ibn Taymiyya differed perhaps most acutely from his contemporaries: for most, the 'gates of *ijtihad*' had already been 'closed' - in other words, the period of time during which independent reasoning could be legitimately exercised in the interpretation of sacred texts had expired. By affirming *ijtihad* as the *only* valid jurisprudential method, ibn Taymiyya effectively rejected all legal developments since the ninth century, none of which were based on *ijtihad*. Unsurprisingly, ibn Taymiyya and his project met great resistance.

Two important practical implications follow from ibn Taymiyya's doctrinal position, and were appropriated by ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab as cornerstones of his thinking. The first of these is the categorical rejection of all *bid'a* (innovation). A practice is considered *bid'a* when it fails to demonstrate a grounding in the *Qur'an* or *sunna*, even if not explicitly denied by these. Both new religious customs as well as certain new technologies (e.g. the telephone or automobile) could conceivably be placed in this category. In common practice, a new custom ceases to be *bid'a* through either *ijma*, when a majority of scholars deem the practice to be acceptable, or through *qiyas*, when the new practice is justified by analogy with an accepted custom. Ibn Taymiyya's denial of both these methods makes such appropriation impossible.

The second implication concerns the understanding of *taqlid*, or religious authority. Ibn Taymiyya denied that any individual ruler's or teacher's *taqlid* should be followed uncritically, excepting that of the Prophet himself. While professional religious scholars (*ulama*) remain necessary to practice informed *ijtihad* in reading the *Qur'an* and *sunna*, their readings are not the final word. If they are seen as corrupt or misguided, it is the duty of

the individual *mujtahid* (qualified practitioner of *ijtihad*) to reject these individuals' authority (*taqlid*) and reestablish society's foundation in the *Qur'an* and *sunna*. As Ahsan writes: 'anyone who could force and seize the government was the legitimate ruler, but he must act according to the *Shari'a*. [For ibn Taymiyya,] religion without a Sultan, army, and money is as futile as a Sultan with army and money but without religion'.<sup>27</sup>

Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab made all of these ideas central to the articulation of his own project: a rejection of certain jurisprudential methods (*ijma* and *qiyas*), as well as a concomitant rejection of *bid'a*, and of blind submission to rulers' *taqlid*. This threefold rejection is seen to follow necessarily from a genuine belief in divine unity, *tawhid*. True believers are called to ascribe no partners to God: to pray to no other, swear by no other, sacrifice to no other. Yet the confession of *tawhid* is not merely an intellectual act. As Yusron describes the Sheikh's position, 'it is incumbent upon one who professes *tawhid* that he should believe with his heart and support it with his hand and his tongue... [*tawhid*] must be declared, and must be manifested by obedience to God'.<sup>28</sup> Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab had the resources of the burgeoning Saudi state at his disposal, presenting a unique opportunity to 'manifest' his confession of *tawhid*, violently if necessary, and demand that others do the same. This is perhaps the greatest difference between the Sheikh's project and that of ibn Taymiyya, whose calls for reform were supported by no military or state power. Indeed, several of his works were composed in prison.

The Sheikh saw his countrymen's failure to confess *tawhid* most clearly in the popularity of saint veneration and devotion to natural objects (ancient trees, etc.). Such traditions were identified as *shirk*, translatable as 'idolatry' or 'polytheism', for their apparent ascription of partners to God. While the presence of *shirk* in a given action is usually treated as a matter of degree - believers corrupting their devotions with larger or smaller elements of *shirk* - the Sheikh's rejection is categorical: any presence of it whatsoever is seen to render a believer's devotions 'void and unacceptable'.<sup>29</sup>

Those corrupted by *shirk* are seen to have 'rejected the divine truth' (i.e., to be engaged in *kufi*). Crucially, they are to be treated as *kufar* (sing., *kafir*) - those who have placed themselves outside the community of Muslims. According to the Sheikh, 'Islamic law... authorizes the shedding of the *kafir*'s blood or the confiscation of his property'.<sup>30</sup> The criteria for determining who is and who is not a *kafir* are broad: anyone who 'believes the Prophet on something and disbelieves on something else'<sup>31</sup> is condemned, as are any who practice *bid'a*. No one is exempt: even rulers and religious authorities seen to



engage in *shirk* are identified as non-Muslims and become acceptable targets for *jihad*.

In a sense then, the Sheikh's project can be understood as the political and practical eventuation of ibn Taymiyya's earlier calls for reform. Importantly, this project extended only to the borders of the Muslim world (the *dar al-Islam*), being an effort to internally purify the *Umma*, the community of Muslims. Osama bin Laden tended, before 2001, to portray al Qaeda's *raison d'être* as a similar effort to purify the Land of the Two Holy Places (Saudi Arabia) of foreign troops. The recent, almost complete, withdrawal from these relatively local aims has led to the stipulation of a broader, more global and apocalyptic set of aims going far beyond any project of internal reform.

### Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda<sup>32</sup>

Osama bin Laden was born in Riyadh in 1957, the 17<sup>th</sup> of 52 children. When his father, Saudi Arabia's foremost construction magnate and a close personal friend of King Faisal ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz, was killed in a helicopter crash in 1968, Osama was left in the care of his Syrian mother. Attending university in Jeddah, he made several important acquaintances, including Muhammad Qutb, the brother of famous Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb, and Abdullah Azzam, a prominent Jordanian-Palestinian Islamist. An average student, bin Laden left Jeddah for Pakistan within a month of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 to work with Azzam at building the ad hoc assembly of Arab fighters there into a guerilla force.

By the early 1980s, bin Laden - with his personal charisma, great wealth<sup>33</sup> and connections to the Saudi royals - emerged as the leader of these fighters in the field, while Azzam spent most of his time abroad garnering political and financial support. The wealthy Saudi became popular and respected among his men, who saw him as having selflessly devoted all he had to the *jihad* against the Soviets. His religious convictions deepened during this time, readying the ground for his meeting in 1986 with the radical Egyptian Islamist Dr. Ayman Muhammad Rabi' al-Zawahiri. The two became close, and Azzam's moderating influence came over time to be replaced by al-Zawahiri's more radical ideas. As Rohan Gunaratna claims in his book *Inside al Qaeda*, '[m]any insiders... [argue] that Osama was transformed from a guerilla into a terrorist by al-Zawahiri'.<sup>34</sup>

Al Qaeda itself was first conceptualized in 1987-88 by Azzam, not bin Laden. Gunaratna again: 'He envisaged it as being a[n] organisation that would channel the energies of the *mujahidin* [those who engage in *jihad*] into fighting on behalf of oppressed Muslims worldwide, an Islamic 'rapid reaction force', ready to spring to the defense of their fellow believers at short notice'.<sup>35</sup> For Azzam, women and children were not generally acceptable targets for *jihad*, though Muslim fighters are not obliged to refrain from battle if women and children are present. He writes: 'Islam does not urge its followers to kill anyone amongst the *kufar* except the fighters, and those who supply... [the] enemies of Islam with money or advice'.<sup>36</sup> As bin Laden's views radicalized under al-Zawahiri's influence however, this understanding of *jihad* looked increasingly insufficient. Tensions between the two - bin Laden being Azzam's designated successor as head of al Qaeda - continued to grow until 1989, when Azzam and his two sons were killed by a car bomb. Though impossible to directly implicate bin Laden in this incident, some have argued that he at least condoned it.<sup>37</sup> Victorious against the Soviets in Afghanistan<sup>38</sup> and now the head of al Qaeda, bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia.

It was during the early 1990s that al Qaeda's character was decisively established, starting with the Gulf War of 1990. When Iraq's invasion of Kuwait led the Saudi government to consider accepting American troops on its soil, bin Laden approached the government with an offer to 'forge an anti-Saddam Hussein Arab coalition to defeat the Iraqis by enlisting 5,000 *mujahidin* veterans who were still in Afghanistan'.<sup>39</sup> For bin Laden, the government's rejection of this offer and subsequent failure to demand a full American withdrawal showed it was no longer legitimately Muslim. In later statements, bin Laden refused to recognize the Saudi government as legitimate, calling its territory simply 'the Land of the Two Holy Places' and demanding its liberation from non-Muslim rule.

Around this time, bin Laden accepted an offer by Sudan for al Qaeda to relocate there. Al Qaeda's campaign against Saudi Arabia continued from this new base, with anti-Saudi pamphlets and audio-cassettes being distributed throughout the Kingdom, and attacks launched on Americans and Britons there. These activities, along with several attempted assassinations,<sup>40</sup> won al Qaeda international attention, and Sudan was soon pressured to expel the group. Returning to Afghanistan in 1996, bin Laden helped to consolidate Taliban rule, forming a brigade to rout the Northern Alliance and work alongside Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taliban's spiritual leader. With

Mullah Omar's support, al Qaeda and the Taliban grew in strength together; the Taliban drew on al Qaeda's weapons depots and al Qaeda's members traveled on Taliban aircraft.<sup>41</sup> The Afghani rulers radicalized under bin Laden's influence, staging such public spectacles as the destruction of the Bamiyani Buddha statues in March 2000 under his advice.<sup>42</sup> Only after September 11, 2001 would the groups' symbiosis be broken.

The return to Afghanistan marked a decisive shift in al Qaeda's strategy that continues to characterize its activities. Recognizing that attacks against 'infidel' Muslim rulers had been not only ineffective in toppling their regimes but had actually alienated much popular support, bin Laden and al-Zawahiri decided to shift the network's focus from Middle Eastern targets to American and Jewish ones.<sup>43</sup> Such a shift promised to tap the deep reserves of Arab outrage against perceived Western and Israeli injustice, thus swelling the ranks of al Qaeda's sympathizers.<sup>44</sup> Pursuant to this new course, al Qaeda issued in 1996 a 'Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places'. The organization's activities in the late 1990s and through September 2001 have aimed relentlessly at maximizing attacks' symbolic effects<sup>45</sup> and winning support for its project by exploiting particular rhetorical strategies.

### **Analysis of bin Laden's statements**

Al Qaeda's 'Declaration of War', issued in 1996, was the group's first major public statement, and did more than any of its previous activities to win it international recognition. In the statement, bin Laden 'condemned the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, criticized the international sanctions regime on Iraq, and voiced his opposition to U.S. support for Israel',<sup>46</sup> citing recent US military interventions around the globe as evidence of a 'growing war on Islam for which the United States should be punished'.<sup>47</sup> His next major statement, in 1998, came in the form of a *fatwa*, or religious edict. Bin Laden claimed that the United States had made 'a clear declaration of war on God, his messenger, and Muslims' through its policies in the Islamic world,<sup>48</sup> making defensive *jihad* the duty of all Muslims. Bin Laden did not claim responsibility for subsequent attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (1998) and the USS Cole in Yemen (2000), though he did express approval of them and sympathy with the attackers' motivations. The first major attack for which al Qaeda has subsequently claimed responsibility<sup>49</sup> came on September 11, 2001.

Subsequent to the September 11 attacks, bin Laden released statements in November of 2002 and in February and March of 2003. These declarations continued to expand and develop his case against the US, as will be explored below. An important pair of statements responding to the war in Iraq was released in October of 2003 as 'letters' addressed to the American and Iraqi people. In April 2004, al Qaeda offered a truce to those nations of Europe that would agree to withdraw all their troops from the Middle East, though no European nation accepted this offer. As of this writing,<sup>30</sup> bin Laden's most recent statement came on 30 October 2004, on the eve of the American elections.

Three themes stand out as particularly central to the rhetoric bin Laden employs in his statements: (1) his claim that Muslim rulers in the Middle East, along with any who aid the West, have placed themselves outside the community of Muslims; (2) his call for Muslims to unite, overlooking the minor *kufi* that divides them in order to drive out the major *kufi* of the West; and (3) his view that all 'unbelieving' noncombatants (including women and children) are valid targets of *jihad*. Before examining these themes however, some general comments are in order.

Although bin Laden's rhetoric is heavily religious, it remains primarily sociopolitical in its appeal. Winning sympathizers seems to be conceived as a two-step process. First and foremost, a rapport is established by tapping common political and economic resentments over Israel-Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, Iraq, oil prices etc., and convincing hearers that some action must be taken to rectify these situations. Secondly, these conflicts are translated into the language of militant Islamism, and extreme actions are undertaken by al Qaeda members to demonstrate the force and efficacy of such an interpretation. If these actions elicit a disproportionate response from the West, the Islamists' first premises - namely, that Western leaders understand only violence and respond only with violence - are simply affirmed. Whether or not listeners start out in agreement with al Qaeda's understanding of Islamism or with the methods it employs, the fact remains that bin Laden's network has taken action against problems demanding solutions - he has gotten America's attention, something more moderate Muslim rulers have failed to do. This alone may lie behind much of the great resonance bin Laden's rhetoric has encountered, especially in the developing parts of the Muslim world, regardless of whether these populations sympathize with his radical Islamist doctrines.

Bin Laden's skillful employment of two other strategies has also contributed to al Qaeda's popularity. The first is his dependence on symbolism both in target selection and building his public image. As is commonly held, bin Laden's choice of targets in 2001 was intended not only to exact maximum financial damage (the attacks in New York were, in insurance terms, the most expensive events in history), but to maximize psychological impact by striking America's economic and military centers. Similarly, efforts to decapitate enemy regimes by assassinating their leaders seem more symbolically than pragmatically motivated, since the chance of such actions successfully toppling the regime in question are slight.

To maintain its international appeal, Al Qaeda selects targets identifiable with global economic and political systems, such identification being dependent to some degree on the global media's ability and inclination to present specific attacks as bearing universal significance. The reach of these media also presents bin Laden himself with an opportunity to project the persona of a holy 'man of the people'. Bin Laden tends to meet foreign journalists in caves, highlighting his alleged humility; on posters, he is often depicted as riding a white horse, in a manner reminiscent of the Prophet Muhammad. He is often shown wearing a white turban, suggesting near-clerical status, and donning a knife, usually the preserve of rulers and those in authority.<sup>51</sup> Yet these pretensions to religious authority are truly just pretensions: bin Laden's lack of religious training would disqualify him as a legitimate practitioner of *ijihad* by the standards of either ibn Taymiyya or ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab.

A second strategy employed by bin Laden is his thorough exploitation of al Qaeda's flexibility as a non-state geopolitical actor. Without the responsibilities of a nation-state, such as the need to maintain a physical infrastructure or to work within the limitations posed by geographical location, al Qaeda enjoys advantages similar to those enjoyed by an internet-based company. Neither the company nor al Qaeda have much physical infrastructure to maintain: office space and computer hardware in the company's case; weapons depots and training camps in al Qaeda's. Both entities are highly mobile: al Qaeda might relocate from one country to another, an internet company from one city to another. Given this lack of limitations, al Qaeda, like Yahoo! or MSN, is able to act unfettered by infrastructural responsibilities or regional limitations. Also like these companies, al Qaeda is free to become an idea, a symbol in people's minds that is no less understandable in Malaysia than in New York.

For these reasons, it is unclear whether al Qaeda's ideology could survive beyond the initial accomplishment of what it identifies as its ultimate goal, the establishment of a new caliphate and a 'true' Islamic state. Key to the network's success is precisely its amorphous nature: its mobility, lack of institutional responsibilities and ability to present specific actions as bearing universal, apocalyptic significance. Also, the network's existence is too parasitic on the global infrastructures it combats - for instance in its extensive use of credit card fraud to finance operations<sup>32</sup> - to allow for its continued existence following the collapse of these systems.

On another note, the civil liberties and freedoms of Western democracies have conditioned the possibility of al Qaeda's successes in those states since they tend to insulate the group from persecution. For all these reasons, it seems that al Qaeda's ideology is not translatable into an institutional context. Any state founded by bin Laden would collapse, not only as a result of foreign military incursions but due to the very nature of its ideology.

As stated, three rhetorical themes stand out from bin Laden's public statements. The first is his claim that Muslim rulers, in their willingness to compromise with the West, 'are apostates and outside the community of Muslims' (2002a).<sup>33</sup> He identifies a number of states as 'qualified regions for liberation' including 'Jordan, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Land of the Two Holy Mosques [Saudi Arabia], and Yemen' (2002a). A later statement (2003c) calls upon 'Muslims in general and Iraqi people in particular... to avoid supporting the American crusaders and those who back them. Those who assist them, whatever they are called, are renegades and infidels'. And elsewhere:

These rulers have violated [their legitimacy] by allying themselves with unbelievers, by passing man-made laws and by approving and applying the infidel laws of the UN. As far as religious law is concerned, their rule has long been null and void, and it is impossible to remain under their dominion. (2002a)

Bin Laden calls for those unable to fight to boycott US products and weapons (1996). He continues his campaign against the Saudi government, discussing in detail King 'Abd al-'Aziz's refusal in the 1920s to side with the *Ikhwan* against the British in Palestine. Current Saudi rulers are accused of

‘trying to deceive the Muslims for the second time so as to lose what is left of the sanctities’ by allowing American troops to enter in 1990 (1996). Bin Laden’s sympathy with the *Ikhwan* (referred to as *mujahidin*) against their state patron is significant: he seems to view al Qaeda as a new, globalized *Ikhwan*, loosed from the moorings of geography and state. A November 2002 statement is telling in this regard, with bin Laden describing his group as ‘the Islamic Nation... [t]he Nation of Monotheism’ (2002b). It seems that bin Laden regards this nation as the *only* nation. He writes elsewhere: ‘Nations are nothing without ethics and morals. If these are gone, the nations are gone’ (2003d). Thus adrift in a sea of infidel peoples and regimes, the so-called Nation (not ‘State’) of Monotheism is presented as having no option but *jihad*.

A second theme is more novel: bin Laden’s call for all Muslims – traditionalists, Shiites and socialists alike – to unite against the major *kufir* of American imperialism. In support of this he invokes ibn Taymiyya, the thinker he cites most frequently:

As was said by Ibn Taymiyyah (Allah’s mercy upon him):  
 “people of Islam should join forces and support each other  
 to get rid of the main ‘Kufr’ who is controlling the countries  
 of the Islamic world, even to bear the lesser damage to get rid  
 of the major one, that is the great Kufr” (1996)

Bin Laden argues that ‘there is no other duty after Belief than fighting the enemy who is corrupting the life and the religion ... If it is not possible to push back the enemy except by the collective movement of the Muslim people, then there is a duty on the Muslims to ignore the minor differences among themselves’ (1996). Indeed, a major concession is later made to those he sees as Muslim *kufar*: ‘Under these circumstances, there will be no harm if the interests of Muslims converge with the interests of the socialists [i.e., Iraqi Baathists] in the fight against the crusaders, despite our belief in the infidelity of the socialists... [who] are infidels’ (2002a).

There is a pragmatism evident in this willingness to cooperate with ‘minor’ infidels in working against ‘major’ infidels which is absent from either ibn Taymiyya’s or ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s thinking, leaving it unclear that the reformist aim of purging the *Umma* of *kufir* remains bin Laden’s motivating force. Indeed, any such reformist pretensions seem ultimately shattered in bin Laden’s recent willingness (2004a) to form a truce with European nations willing to withdraw their troops from the Middle East – a cooperation not only with Muslim *kufar* but with non-Muslim ‘infidel’ nation-states in working

against the ‘major’ *kufir* of another of these states (i.e. the US). Such strategies look more like *realpolitik* than anything ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab would ever have advocated, however ‘extremist’ the methods it entails.

A third theme is also quite novel: the identification of women, children and noncombatants as justifiable targets in the *jihad* against America. Extending Azzam’s identification of acceptable targets as ‘those who supply... [the] enemies of Islam with money or advice’, bin Laden argues that the nature of American democracy places every American into this category:

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. ... [They] are the ones who pay the taxes which fund the planes that bomb us ... [and] the American army is part of the American people. (2002b)

In this logic, *all* Americans provide the ‘enemies of Islam with money [and] advice’ and are acceptable targets. Again, bin Laden works within the terminology of his predecessors while broadening and globalizing the implication of their arguments.

Yet it would seem his argument here is compromised by some of his other statements. In March 2003, bin Laden asserted that the 11 September attacks brought ‘the collapse of the myth of democracy’ (2003b) and later that year in reference to the Iraqi Legislative Council: ‘[the Council members] have chosen democracy, the faith of the ignorant, through becoming members of legislative councils. They have gone astray and misled many people’ (2003c). If democracy is a ‘myth’, the ‘faith of the ignorant’, what kind of foundation can it provide for *jihad* against women, children and non-combatants in Western democratic states?

## Conclusion

What similarities or differences, then, can be identified between bin Laden’s current project and ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab’s work in the 18<sup>th</sup> century? Both rely on premises first articulated by ibn Taymiyya, and so share a willingness to reject others’ religious authority if it is seen as corrupted by *shirk* or *kufi*: Both are willing to use violence in pursuit of their aims, and both have



- unlike ibn Taymiyya - a force of arms to back this up, be it a state military (ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab), or a non-state guerilla network (bin Laden).

Yet the differences are far more striking. The first, and that which presents the starkest contrast between the two figures, is that bin Laden - unlike ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab - has had no religious training. His statements have been issued on the basis of no clear religious authority, a strikingly 'modern' characteristic. Whereas ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and ibn Taymiyya before him were concerned with following a *rightly-guided* religious authority, bin Laden seems willing to dispense with the idea altogether in pursuit of a self-styled notion of social justice based on individual assessment of a given situation. Such a move can indeed be called modern: authority is understood as lying not in an individual's social or hierarchical position, but in his or her ability to see and experience the 'truth' of a situation based on their own exercise of reason or experience of revelation. The lone action of a solitary, wholly convinced suicide bomber is perhaps a paradigmatic expression of this belief.

The second difference is in bin Laden's willingness to compromise with 'minor' *kufar* - even with 'infidel' nation-states - in pursuit of his goals. This difference is important: one cannot imagine, for example, ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab cooperating with worshippers at a Meccan tomb to further his project of banishing opium from the *haji*. For him, all those engaged in *shirk* are seen as equally corrupted. Bin Laden's willingness to accommodate those he views as infidels and *kufar* reveals a pragmatism characteristic of his project, and even a kind of *realpolitik* which seems more appropriate to a modern, political program than to any religiously motivated reformism.<sup>54</sup>

This practical willingness to compromise seems to stem from the third and perhaps most revealing difference. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's project was essentially local, extending only to the borders of the Muslim *Umma*; it was limited by his essentially religious aim - to demand right practice - and the constraints of his standing as a state-actor, accountable to a populace and bound to a certain geographical territory. Bin Laden's project is essentially global, extending as far as media technologies allow. It is not limited by a religious desire for enforcing right practice, but rather by a modern, political desire more akin to ethnic cleansing (driving Westerners from the Land of the Two Holy Places). As a non-state actor, al Qaeda is accountable to no population and bound to no geographic region, leaving it free to 'sell' its image and ideology in whatever way necessary to further its sociopolitical aims.

Regardless of one's understanding of 'reform' in the Islamic context, it seems clear from these differences that while ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's project might be identified as at least responsive to and motivated by that tradition, bin Laden departs from it in every way save its rhetorical presentation. Whether this deviation from Islamic reformism renders bin Laden's project 'not really Muslim' is neither a concern in this paper nor, I think, a question answerable independent of some stipulated 'normative' Islamic tradition. I will only conclude, then, that painting both bin Laden's and ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's projects with the brush of 'extremism' is insufficient to understand their relationship. The closer examination provided in these pages indicates just how different the two projects really are.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> A comprehensive case is made by Haneef James Oliver.  
Haneef James Oliver, *The Wahhabi Myth: Dispelling Prevalent Fallacies and the Fictitious Link with Bin Laden*. Haneef James Oliver, 2002.
- <sup>2</sup> Arguments of this sort range widely in terms of sophistication and credibility.  
For one example, see Michael Moore, *Dude, Where's My Country?* (New York: Warner Books, 2003).
- <sup>3</sup> For example, see Stephen Schwartz, *The Two Faces of Islam: The House of Sa'ud from Tradition to Terror*. (New York: Doubleday, 2002).
- <sup>4</sup> Cited in Robert Worth, 'The Deep Intellectual Roots of Islamic Terror', *The New York Times*, 13 October 2001, p. A13.
- <sup>5</sup> One should not suppose any similarity between the *Muwahiddun* and the liberal Christian denomination, with which they bear little or no similarity.
- <sup>6</sup> 'Salafism' is the anglicized form of the Arabic term *Salafiyya*, derived from *al-salaf al-salih*, meaning 'the venerable forefathers'.
- <sup>7</sup> This rather general characterization of the Salafi movement seems sufficient for the purposes of this paper, but it is admittedly very broad. For further reading on the relationship between Wahhabism and Salafism, see:  
Febe Armanios, "CRS Report For Congress: Islam: Sunnis and Shiites" Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2004, available at <http://www.fas.org/irp/crs/RS21745.pdf>.
- <sup>8</sup> Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. 27. This identification is contested by Oliver (2002).
- <sup>9</sup> Four such legal schools have emerged since the ninth century, of which Hanbalism and Hanafism are two.

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- <sup>10</sup> 'Companion' is a title ascribed to those in the first generation of Muslims who were with the Prophet Muhammad during his life.
- <sup>11</sup> Sayyid Ahsan, *Life and Thoughts of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab*, (Aligarh: The Aligarh Muslim University Press, 1988), p. 63.
- <sup>12</sup> I employ this title here and below for the sake of brevity.
- <sup>13</sup> George Rentz, 'Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia,' in Derek Hopwood, ed., *The Arabian Peninsula: Society and Politics*, (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1972), p. 56.
- <sup>14</sup> Ahsan, *Life and Thoughts of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab*, p. 69.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid. 72. See also Rentz, 56, and A.J. Arberry, 'The Wahhabis' in *Religion in the Middle East: Three Religions in Concord and Conflict*, Vol. 2, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 272. Significantly, both ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and his followers see the move from Uyayna to Dir'iyya as parallel to the *hijra* (flight from Mecca to Medina) of the Prophet.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 77.
- <sup>17</sup> Schwartz, *The Two Faces of Islam: The House of Sa'ud from Tradition to Terror*, p. 78. While Schwartz's language is strong here, there is no reason to doubt his account's accuracy.
- <sup>18</sup> Rentz, 'Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia', p. 61.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 64.
- <sup>20</sup> Arberry, 'The Wahhabis,' p. 274.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 279.
- <sup>22</sup> Alexei Vassiliev, 'Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and his Teaching.' *The History of Saudi Arabia*, (London: Saqi Books, 1998), p. 73.

- <sup>23</sup> As Vassiliev writes, “90-95% of his works consist of quotations from the orthodox *hadiths* and works by the *ulama* of the first centuries of Islam.” Ibid, p. 76.
- <sup>24</sup> The common English rendering of *Shari’a* as ‘law’ is inadequate to capture the term’s dynamic quality: it is translated as ‘the way to the water hole’, and the meaning embraces not only law in the Western sense but also religious practice, personal discipline and mystical truth.
- <sup>25</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 113.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 111.
- <sup>27</sup> Y. Armajani, *Middle East Past and Present* (New Jersey, 1970), p. 111, cited in Ahsan, *Life and Thoughts of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab*, p. 28.
- <sup>28</sup> Muhammad Yusron, *Muhammad Ibn “Abd Al-Wahhab: What He Believes Based on His Writings*, (Masters Thesis. New York: New York University, 1987), p. 32.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 28.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 38. Ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab cites from the *Qur’an* (2:193), ‘fight them [the *kufar*], till there is no persecution and the religion is God’s’.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 37.
- <sup>32</sup> The following discussion of bin Laden’s life and the development of al Qaeda relies heavily on Rohan Gunaratna’s *Inside Al Qaeda*. This seems to be the most reliable and comprehensive source on the topic, as it incorporates not only the author’s textual research but also extensive personal interviews with former al Qaeda members.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid. It seems that bin Laden inherited \$25-30 million dollars from his father, and with prudent investment it has ballooned to some \$250 million.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Gunaratna from Azzam's text, *Guidelines and Rules of Jihad*.

<sup>37</sup> Gunaratna makes a strong argument of this point (p. 23) based on interviews with imprisoned al Qaeda members.

<sup>38</sup> Soviet troops withdrew in February 1989. Significantly, bin Laden himself takes credit for ending the Cold War by weakening Russia in Afghanistan, accusing American leaders of ungratefulness for pretending to have ended it on their own. Ibid, p. 23.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 27-8.

<sup>40</sup> These included the attempted assassinations of US President Clinton in 1994, of Philippine President Ramos in 1995 and of Egyptian President Mubarak in that same year.

<sup>41</sup> Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda*, pp. 40-1.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> As a number of subsequent attacks in the Middle East have been attributed to al Qaeda, this shift is best understood as precisely one of emphasis, not a complete proscription of Arab targets.

<sup>44</sup> Notably only some 20-30% of graduates from Al Qaeda's central Asian training camps are asked to join the organization itself, limiting membership to the most dedicated and the best of the best. This small membership is supported by a much more massive network of more or less sympathetic individuals. Ibid, p.73.

<sup>45</sup> For example, attacks on the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam occurred on 7 August 1998, the eighth anniversary of the US troops' arrival in Saudi Arabia.

- <sup>46</sup> Christopher Blanchard, *Al Qaeda: Developing Statements and Ideology*, Congressional Research Service Document RS21973, 16 November 2004, pp. 2-3.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid, p.3.
- <sup>48</sup> Ibid, p.3. See also, Osama bin Laden, 'Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders, Statement of the World Islamic Front,' 1998, p. 23. Available from Federation of American Scientists. 4 October 2004. <<http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs980223-fatwa.htm>>
- <sup>49</sup> Bin Laden did not claim responsibility for the 11 September attacks until 30 October 2004, in a statement released just before the 2004 US elections. Full transcript available from Al-Jazeera Online. Al-Jazeera, 29 March 2005. <<http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/554FAF3A-B267-427A-B9EC-54881BDE0A2E.htm>>
- <sup>50</sup> March, 2005.
- <sup>51</sup> Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda*, pp. 41-2. Provides a useful survey of this and other imagery.
- <sup>52</sup> Described in detail in Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda*, p. 65.
- <sup>53</sup> Bin Laden's statements and interviews are cited parenthetically by date.
- <sup>54</sup> On this, see Blanchard (2004), in which Blanchard describes bin Laden's project as a 'pragmatic messianism'.