

U.S. Foreign Policy: The Rise of Radical Islam

Branislav L. Slantchev

Department of Political Science, University of California, San Diego

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The “interwar” period that followed the end of the Cold War itself came to an end on September 11, 2001 when the Islamic terrorist organization **al-Qaeda** flew two planes into the World Trade Center in New York City, plowed another plane into the Pentagon, and apparently tried to crash yet another plane in either the Capitol or the White House in Washington, D.C. The carnage of 2,977 civilians killed and over 6,000 injured, the astounding \$55 billion in property damage, and the estimated economic losses of \$123 billion over the following year alone made this by far the most successful terrorist attack in history, not to mention the most devastating attack on U.S. soil ever. The attack ended the interwar policy vacillation, it created a national consensus that united the nation in a fight against global terrorist organizations, and it launched a new, focused and determined, U.S. foreign policy that would have global repercussions. The ensuing **Global War on Terror** would see the creation of a new department, **Homeland Security**, a reorganization of the intelligence services, escalation of military funding, and two long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. By one estimate, the new policies cost the U.S. over \$3 trillion by 2011.¹ To understand this massive policy response, we need to develop some appreciation of what global terrorism was about: where did it come from and how would one deal with it? Tracing the history of al-Qaeda itself will not be very informative without examining the roots of radical Islam, the terrorist tactics it spawned, and the globalization of what used to be localized and regional movements. This is the task for these lectures.²

¹Sean Carter and Amanda Cox, “One 9/11 Tally: \$3.3 Trillion,” *The New York Times*, September 8, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/09/08/us/sept-11-reckoning/cost-graphic.html>, accessed on March 2, 2016. The costs were \$589 billion on homeland security, \$1,649 billion on the wars, and \$867 billion on continuing the wars until 2016, reconstruction, and veteran care.

²The material is mostly based on two books. Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*. New York: Vintage, 2006. Daniel Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

1 Egyptian Roots

Hasan al-Banna founded the **Muslim Brotherhood** in Egypt in 1928. His goal was to turn Egypt into a true Islamic state. The country was still occupied by the British and ruled by the Turkish King Fuad I, but it was falling apart: poverty, unemployment, disease, and corruption were rampant and neither the British nor the government seemed to care. The Muslim Brothers filled the voids left by the authorities. They ran hospitals, schools, and factories. They organized welfare, sent fighters to Palestine, and resisted the British. All of these activities made them the sole legitimate native movement as far as the working class that filled its ranks was concerned.

The movement violently rejected modernity and its Western ideals of a liberal secular democracy, and instead sought universal Islamic rule. The Brothers had over a million adherents (out of a population of about 18 million), but they had organized themselves into a network of cells with no more than five members each, which made them exceedingly difficult to eradicate. The government tried nonetheless. The new (and notoriously dissolute) King Farouk declared the Muslim Brotherhood illegal in 1948, and in February the following year murdered its Supreme Guide, al-Banna. His successor, **Sayyid Qutb**, would prove both more radical and more effective.

When al-Banna was killed, Qutb was visiting the U.S., where he learned to despise and hate the country as the embodiment of all the superficiality and arrogance of the white race and its power. As he wrote,

The white man in Europe or America is our number one enemy. The white man crushes us underfoot while we teach our children about his civilization, his universal principles and noble objectives. . . We are endowing our children with amazement and respect for the master who tramples our honor and enslaves us. Let us instead plant the seeds of hatred, disgust, and revenge in the souls of these children. Let us teach these children from the time their nails are soft that the white man is the enemy of humanity, and that they should destroy him at the first opportunity.³

But the Islamic vision of Egypt was not to be. In July 1952, a military coup led by the young **Gamal Abdul Nasser** deposed King Farouk. The plotters had conspired with the Muslim Brotherhood but had succeeded so easily that they did not have to rely on it. Not that it would have worked had they tried. Nasser wanted a modern secular and industrialized welfare state that would guide the rest of the Arab world into a socialist future. Qutb and the Muslim Brothers wanted a theocracy under Sharia Law. It was going to be either a secular state supported by the army or an

³Letter to Tewfig al-Hakeem, cited in Bruce Hoffman and Fernando Reinares, Eds., *The Evolution of the Global Terrorist Threat: From 9/11 to Osama bin Laden's Death*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 384.

Islamic society supported by the mosque. The army won even though Nasser did have to cultivate some support among the Brotherhood.⁴

On October 26, 1954, a Muslim Brother tried to assassinate Nasser and failed. The resulting government crackdown suppressed the Brotherhood and herded thousands into detention camps. Qutb ended in prison (again) but because of his poor health, he was soon moved to a secure hospital. He spent the next decade there, writing *Milestones*, a distinctly chilling manifesto that resurrected the principle of **takfir**, or excommunication from the Islamic community. This is an extremely serious judgment in which a Muslim is declared an **kafir** (infidel, so an apostate), a sentence for which Sharia prescribes death (which sometimes could be commuted to amputation or exile). Qutb argued that Nasser and his Arab nationalist socialists had denied God and were kafir — armed struggle against them was therefore not merely justified, it was imperative. The book was published in 1964 and banned immediately, but it did circulate widely in the underground nonetheless.

According to Qutb, the world is either in Islam or **jahiliyya** (the word denotes the pagan barbaric world before the Prophet received the divine message). The decadent jahiliyya included the West and the Communists alike, and though it had all the trappings of modernity, it held no hope for the future. It was doomed. Only pure original Islam could save it. But what was this pure Islam? Qutb argued that one had to go back to the earliest history of Islam and rediscover it by rejecting all the later accretions, modifications, and interpretations (a call the Christian Protestants should have no difficulty understanding). He charged that even nominally Muslim governments were, in fact, apostates because they implemented false laws and did not govern in the Islamic fashion. They were, therefore, all legitimate targets of **Jihad**.

Qutb was released in 1964 after a personal intercession of the President of Iraq. He was arrested against barely 6 months later for plotting to overthrow the government (with Saudi money). After a show trial, he was sentenced to death. Not wanting to make him a martyr, Nasser offered to pardon him if he would just appeal his sentence, but Qutb refused. “My words will be stronger if they killed me,” he told his sister while in prison. They killed him on August 29, 1966. His words proved prophetic. It would be in Qutb’s teachings that modern jihadists would find their guidance.

The torch was picked up by then-unknown 15-year old by the name of **Ayman al-Zawahiri**, who formed his first underground cell with the aim of establishing an Islamic state after Qutb’s vision. The various similar cells were disjointed, uncoordinated, and did not amount to a serious movement, so they had little hope of gaining mass appeal, let alone achieving any of their ambitious goals. The government was in control, and the military that ran the country enjoyed a solid reputation. But then

⁴Nasser had Qutb imprisoned in 1954 but released him after 3 months. Qutb agitated for jihad against the British while Nasser was negotiating the terms of their withdrawal.

came the 1967 **Six Days War** with Israel, and everything changed.

In just a single day, Israel wiped out the air forces of Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. Over the next five days, it captured the Sinai from Egypt, Jerusalem and the West Bank from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. The crushing defeat of the Arab armies shattered whatever prestige they had in their societies, and provided what many Muslims considered tangible proof that God did not favor their cause, at least not while they were led by their feckless governments. With Israel seemingly invincible, the idea that these rulers were not true Muslims — the message that Qutb and his followers had been trying to spread for over a decade — now seemed vindicated. Not only were Arabs failing to live up to their past glory of conquest but now even the Jews in their tiny state had humiliated them. The debacle was punishment from God for abandoning the faith, and the solution was clear: these leaders had to go and society had to return to Islam. With the nation reeling in the aftermath of the defeat in search of answers, the mystical explanation found many adherents, and with the military discredited by its abject failure, its suppression would not be as easy as it had been in the past.

Consistent with the mystical explanation, al-Zawahiri concentrated on the **near enemy** — the Nasser regime — and tried to overthrow it in order to put Egypt under Islamic rule. Only then, after Islam had been reformed to its pure form, could Qutb's vision of deposing the **distant enemy** — the West — be realized. That is, when the **caliphate** was restored in Egypt, it could muster the forces of Islam for a jihad against the West. The Muslim Brotherhood escalated its attacks on the regime and gained more sympathizers for its cause.

It was clear to the regime that it would be impossible to undercut the Brotherhood's appeal while the government appeared impotent to recover large territories under foreign occupation: Egypt had to take the Sinai back from Israel. With the Arab states firmly committed to no peace, recognition and even negotiations with Israel, and the Jewish state seemingly committed not to relinquish any of its conquests without adequate concessions, Nasser concluded that recovering the Sinai could only be achieved with military action. The problem was that the Egyptian military was in no condition for a contest with the Israeli armed forces, and there was no international support for such a solution, which meant that the Egyptians could not count on anyone to help them. Nasser found himself in a bind between the domestic imperative to shore up his legitimacy, the need to maintain Egypt's leadership in the Arab world, and the formidable Israeli military. His solution was to try to wear the Israelis down with a **War of Attrition**: the near continuous shelling of Israeli positions, limited incursions into Sinai, and occasional small-scale aerial engagements. Starting in 1967, the fighting escalated in 1969 when the Egyptian army recovered sufficiently to launch more sustained operations, and Israel retaliated with incursions into Egypt. The war killed about 12,000 on the Arab side and about 1,400 on the Israeli side but did not have the desired effect: Sinai remained under occupation at the time of the cease-fire of August 7, 1970.

President Nasser died on September 28, 1970 and was succeeded by his Vice President, **Anwar el-Sadat**. Sadat also focused on taking back Sinai but tried to bolster his legitimacy by abandoning the hostility toward the Muslim Brotherhood, who was asked to renounce violence against the regime in return for rapprochement. He allowed it to preach freely and released thousands of its members from prison. Ironically, when the consequence of his domestic policy that flirted with Islam met the culmination of his foreign policy that sought the return of Sinai, the resulting clash would cost Sadat his life.

Initially, Sadat focused on domestic problems. He dismissed several of the most prominent Nasserites, dismantled some of the universally reviled secret police, expelled the Soviet advisors, and initiated reforms in the Egyptian army in expectation of another showdown with Israel. The military preparation did not go unnoticed, of course, but Israel had been lulled into a sense of security by its own success — apparently it was not only the Arabs who were susceptible to myths. At any rate, the Israeli government did not find Egypt's coercive moves credible enough to either attempt negotiations (which probably would have failed) or gear up for war (which was inevitable given Sadat's domestic and international positions).

On October 6, 1973, Egypt and Syria launched surprise attacks on Israeli positions in the Sinai and the Golan Heights. The **Yom Kippur War** was also short (less than three weeks) and it also ended with the Israeli forces in the ascendant. Despite initially strong showing, the Arabs were repulsed. The U.S. supplied arms to Israel to make up for the grave losses it had suffered during the opening stage of the war. The Egyptian army, which had astonished the world by successfully breaching the supposedly impregnable Bar Lev Line and advancing 10 miles into Sinai, was encircled and faced imminent annihilation. This prompted the Soviet Union to intervene, which threatened to turn the conflict into a superpower confrontation. With the nuclear forces on alerts, the U.S. and the USSR imposed a cease-fire on the warring sides on October 25. Although the Israelis had done well in military terms (aside from the encirclement of the Egyptians, they had penetrated Egypt and Syria, and were 60 miles from Cairo and 25 miles from Damascus when the cease-fire went into effect), the unexpectedly strong performance of the Arab armies restored public morale in Egypt and Syria. Sadat became known as the “Hero of the Crossing”, and his popularity soared. Egypt's political clout in the Arab world rose as well. For its part, Israel now recognized that Egypt's military power could be dangerous, which greatly softened its stance on the Sinai. Israel was ready to talk peace, and Sadat, with his newly found political strength at home and abroad but with his military strength not up to another war, was ready to talk peace too. The superpowers, having come dangerously close to blows over the Middle East, were also eager for both sides to talk peace. It would take several years for these talks to yield fruit, and in the meantime the situation in Egypt deteriorated.

Sadat's tolerance of the Muslim Brotherhood and his release of many youths radicalized by Qutb's teachings had a predictable effect: the Islamists spread around

the country and eventually turned the students at most universities. Most Egyptians had not seen long beards and women wearing the *hijab* (the veil that covers the head and the chest) for generations, and were now shocked to see both becoming commonplace on university campuses. The students, who opposed Muslim Brotherhood's renunciation of violence, called themselves **al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya** (the Islamic Group), and organized in a network of small cells. They were armed (some, ironically, by Sadat, to help them fight opponents of his regime) and opposed Sadat's policies, especially regarding any peace with Israel.

The **Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty** signed in March 1979 in Washington D.C., was the culmination of the peace talks that had taken place between Sadat and Israel's Prime Minister Menachem Begin at Camp David during the previous year. Under its terms, the two countries mutually recognized each other and ended the state of war that had existed between them since 1948, Israel agreed to withdraw its forces and civilians from the Sinai Peninsula, and Egypt undertook to keep the area demilitarized and permit the free passage of Israeli ships through the Suez Canal. Egypt became the first Arab state to make peace with Israel, and the recovery of Sinai was popular at home, at least with the majority.

The Islamists were incensed, as was the rest of the Arab world, whose leaders now expelled Egypt from the Arab League. Sadat had pledged to conform to Sharia but his wife was responsible for a new law that granted women the right to divorce. The Islamists now openly called for Sadat's overthrow. Al-Zawahiri, who had come to despise the Brotherhood for its meek acquiescence to Sadat and its willingness to work within the existing political system, merged his cell with similarly-minded radicals and formed **Jamaat al-Jihad**, to pursue the idea of a pure Islamic state in Egypt. Nothing much came of this early incarnation of al-Jihad because the authoritarian government was making it exceedingly difficult to establish a secure base of operations aiming at its overthrow.

Al-Zawahiri, who was a doctor by training, initially focused on his medical practice. In 1980, however, he traveled to Pakistan to aid Afghan refugees who were fleeing the fighting in their home country. (The Soviet invasion there produced nearly 3 million refugees in its first two years.) Here he hoped to find the terrain where he could raise an army to overthrow the Egyptian government. Unlike the deserts of Egypt, where guerilla warfare was practically impossible, the mountains of Pakistan and Afghanistan offered endless opportunities for just such a purpose. Al-Zawahiri crossed several times into Afghanistan itself to witness to fight of the **mujahideen** and gain ideas for his own coming battle.

If the resistance to the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul was not enough, then the example of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran was also inspiring even if it had brought to power a rival branch of Islam. Although Shia rather than Sunni, the government in Tehran had challenged the West and its radical Islamic regime had shown that an alternative to the secular state was possible. Ayatollah Khomeini raged against Western freedoms:

These people who want freedom, who want our youth to be free, write effusively about the freedom of our youth. What freedom do they want? . . . They want the gambling casinos to remain freely open, the bars to be freely open, they want the fleshpots to remain freely open, they want heroin addicts to be free, opium addicts to be free. . . . You want us to let things be free and easy so that our youth may become corrupt and so that your masters may reap the profits.

Yes, we are reactionaries and you are enlightened intellectuals: You intellectuals do not want us to go back 1,400 years. You are afraid lest we bring up our youth in the same way as 1,400 years ago, when just a small number of them were able to relegate to oblivion two great empires. We are reactionaries! You who want to drag our youth into Western teachings and not the teachings that they possess, the teachings of the Islamic countries, you are intellectuals! You, who want freedom, freedom for everything, the freedom of parties, you who want all the freedoms, you intellectuals: freedom that will corrupt our youth, freedom that will pave the way to the oppressor, freedom that will drag our nation to the bottom. This is the freedom that you want; and this is a dictate from abroad that you have imposed. You do not believe in any limits to freedom. You deem license to be freedom. . . .

In the name of democracy, in the name of liberalism, in the name of intellectualism — in various names — the traitors in this realm embarked on their activities and machinations with a free hand. . . . Of course, a freedom that will culminate in corruption, that will result in the fragmentation of the nation, the dissolution of the state, we cannot grant such a freedom. . . .

We do not accept this imported freedom. We must safeguard this nation. We must safeguard these youths. We must take these young people away by the hand from dissolution and render them powerful. We need a militant man.⁵

And if there was any doubt what kind of “militant man” Khomeini had in mind, his earlier pronouncements had dispelled any possibility for confusion:

Those who know nothing of Islam pretend that Islam counsels against war. Those [who say this] are witless. [. . .] Islam says: Whatever good there is exists thanks to the sword and in the shadow of the sword! People cannot be made obedient except with the sword! The sword is the key to paradise, which can be opened only for holy warriors!⁶

Here, then, were sentiments that al-Zawahiri wholeheartedly agreed with: Western liberalism and its dictates, the culprit of all that was wrong with the Muslim world, would be challenged by an Islamic force. Iran showed the way and Egypt would follow. Al-Zawahiri concluded it was time to act but events overtook him.

⁵Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, “Speech at Feyziyeh Theological School,” August 24, 1979. Translation available in Bary Rubin and Judith Colp Rubin, Eds., *Anti-American Terrorism and the Middle East: A Documentary Reader*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

⁶Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, “Islam Is Not a Religion of Pacifists,” 1942. Translation in *Anti-American Terrorism and the Middle East: A Documentary Reader*.

The turmoil in Egypt reached a boiling point when Sadat introduced a law that banned the *niqab* (the cloth that covers the face) on university campuses and provoked violent student demonstrations. The regime responded with a crackdown that dissolved student organizations and rounded up many hundreds of suspected radicals, many of whom were prominent Egyptians and not all of whom were Islamists. Indeed, the regime was using the demonstrations as a pretext to eliminate potential opposition of all stripes. In the summer of 1981 alone, Sadat — who by now had made himself president for life and prime minister just in case — imprisoned over 3,000 people. Most of the al-Jihad membership was also caught but some slipped through the dragnet.

The hardcore remnants of al-Jihad were few but disciplined and dedicated. They coordinated with the Islamic Group, and on October 6, 1981 they assassinated President Sadat. In the chaotic aftermath, al-Zawahiri tried to organize a coup that would topple the entire military regime (he conspired to bomb Sadat's funeral where many foreign leaders would be present) but was arrested two weeks later. The new strongman, **Hosni Mubarak**, would have no truck with religious zealots. The military remained loyal to the secular government: there would be no Islamic revolution in Egypt.

While in prison, al-Zawahiri was tortured into betraying his co-conspirators and friends. In consideration for his cooperation, the government dropped various charges against him and convicted him to three years in prison for arms smuggling. Al-Zawahiri was released in 1984 hardened by the experience, embarrassed by his weakness, and resolved not to repeat any of the mistakes that had led to such an easy capture of so many cells in his organization. With Mubarak's regime keeping a close eye on all suspected radicals, al-Zawahiri determined that discretion was the better part of valor and departed for Saudi Arabia in 1985.

2 Arab Afghans: Jihadists without Borders

In Saudi Arabia al-Zawahiri crossed paths with **Osama bin Laden**. It was probably inevitable: al-Zawahiri was looking to set up a base in Pakistan or Afghanistan, and bin Laden was the principal organizer and funder of the so-called **Arab Afghans** — Arabs who travelled to Afghanistan to join the mujahideen in jihad against the Soviet Union.

Bin Laden was the 17th child of billionaire construction magnate Mohammed bin Laden who was of Yemeni origins but had become close to the Saudi royal family, which had rewarded him with numerous contracts. The bin Laden construction company was the largest in the world, had renovated all three main mosques (Jerusalem, Mecca, and Medina), built numerous roads, and had rescued financially King Faisal at the start of his reign when he was desperate for money. Although his father divorced bin Laden's mother soon after his birth, Osama bin Laden inherited

between \$25 and \$30 million.⁷ He was now using some of that fortune to organize fund-raisers and transport for the Arab volunteers. Although he was very active and travelled to Pakistan frequently, he stayed away from Afghanistan for the first three years of the war. This was on request from the Saudi government, which was helping the U.S. funnel money to the Pakistani Intelligence Services (ISI) in support of the mujahideen.⁸ The Saudis were keen on concealing any direct links with ISI out of fear of the consequences if the Soviets used the funding as a pretext to invade Pakistan. Given bin Laden's close links with the royal house, him getting caught in Afghanistan would have been a major political embarrassment.

Bin Laden toed the Saudi government line until 1984, when he defied its wishes and crossed into Afghanistan. He was simultaneously appalled by the wretched equipment of the mujahideen and inspired by their bravery, and upon his return to Saudi Arabia he expanded his operations in their support. He raised millions for their cause, personally paid for transport, housing, and training of Arab volunteers, and supported his office in Pakistan to the tune of \$25,000 per month. The Saudi government also redirected about 10% of its private aid through him.

Despite all of these efforts, however, the total number of Arab Afghans probably never topped 3,000, and most remained in Pakistan without seeing any fighting. Many were either criminals fleeing sentences back home, trouble-makers whose communities were all too happy to be rid of, or seen as dangerous fanatics even by the organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood that wanted to focus on relief work. In short, most of these Arab volunteers had no place to return to and nobody wanted them there anyway. So they were stuck in Pakistan, ready to defend Islam anywhere where their services might be needed, sort of jihadists without borders. Unlike the Afghans, who were fighting for their country and families, the Arab Afghans did not have particularly strong social ties outside the world of jihad. They proved especially susceptible to the idea of **martyrdom** — the belief that a glorious death in the cause of jihad would be rewarded a plenty in heaven — so much so that they became a death cult: many of them were more distressed by their failure to die gloriously in battle than anything else.

In 1986, bin Laden set up a training camp in Tora Bora, much to the consternation of both Afghans and Arabs. The mujahideen thought it was useless since the Arab force was too small and militarily ineffective. The other Arabs thought it artificially separated Afghan Arabs from other Muslim brothers, and wondered whether bin

⁷Although Mohammed bin Laden had a total of 77 children by 22 wives, he was never married to more than four wives at a time. He divorced older ones whenever he wanted to marry a new one, frequently passing them onto his close associates. Osama bin Laden's mother, who was Syrian, was his 11th wife and was only married for a few years. It is worth noting that Osama bin Laden's fortune, while substantial, has been grossly exaggerated, with early claims putting it at \$300 million.

⁸The U.S. had to channel its aid through ISI exclusively, and could not control what the money is being spent on. Still, it is important to emphasize that the U.S. supported the Afghan mujahideen, not bin Laden's Arab Afghans, as one often hears.

Laden was building his own forces instead of helping the Afghans. Undeterred, bin Laden borrowed from his equity in the family's business and turned the caves into a vast complex, complete with dorms, hospitals, and shelters. All that impressive construction belied a near-farcical military ineptitude, which, however did not stand in the way of myth-making.

In 1987, the Arab Afghans participated in one desultory engagement with Soviet forces and fled the camp. They were chastized by the Afghans, who told them to go back, and who fought off the Soviet detachment, forcing it to withdraw. A minor sideshow in the long Soviet retreat from Afghanistan (it would not even merit a footnote), the gloriously-named **Battle of Lion's Den** created the myth of how a rag-tag band of jihadists defeated a superpower. The Afghans took over the Lion's Den.

Bin Laden had his enthusiastic Arab Afghans but they had proven quite ineffective. Things changed when al-Zawahiri joined, for the surgeon brought with him experienced Egyptians: doctors, engineers, policemen, and military officers. They quickly formed a core around bin Laden, who paid them stipends of about \$1,200 per month to support their families. On August 20, 1988 bin Laden, several Arabs close to him, and the Egyptians formally established **al-Qaeda** ("The Base") with the purpose of expanding jihadist operations after the Soviets pulled out from Afghanistan. No sooner had the Soviets begun their withdrawal in May 1989, however, that the differences among the various groups came to the fore. It was by no means clear what al-Qaeda was supposed to do.

Recall that the Egyptians (who were members of **Egyptian Islamic Jihad** as al-Jihad had become known) were **takfiri**, and were thus not interested in fighting Soviets or Americans. They wanted to use Afghanistan as a base to form an army that would overthrow the Muslim regime in their home country. As a Saudi, Bin Laden had no interest in Egypt, and he was opposed to Muslims fighting Muslims. He wanted to attack the infidel, although at this point the focus was on India (over Kashmir) and Israel (over Palestine). The situation in Afghanistan following the Soviet withdrawal further muddied the waters.

Without the Soviet threat to unite them, the mujahideen fell out amongst themselves over disagreements about the distribution of the spoils after what they thought was imminent victory. To the surprise of many, the Communist government in Kabul refused to collapse and stubbornly clung to power for three more years (in part, of course, because of the erosion of the common mujahideen front against it). Two major groups now emerged among the mujahideen: a Tajik group run by Ahmad Shah Massoud (who was responsible for most of the victories against the Soviets despite receiving relatively little assistance from outside), and a Pashtun group run by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (the recipient of most funds, and supported by the ISI). Both wanted to create an Islamic state in Afghanistan. Which one should al-Qaeda support?

Bin Laden consulted with the Saudi intelligence, which advised him to get out

of Afghanistan instead. He decided to follow that advice. He had recruited an army but no one knew exactly how large or how reliable it was. The influx of Arab jihadists had increased during the last year of the war: more arrived than when the fight was against the Soviet army. They were wealthy, adventurous, and enthusiastic, and they had no stomach for a fight. Many left after sampling the dubious attractions of a jihadi life in the wastes of Afghanistan. What remained was a paid volunteer force. Al-Qaeda was an attractive employer: it paid single men \$1,000 per month, married men \$1,500 per month, it provided for one month of vacation and one round-trip ticket home per year, it offered a healthcare plan, and even a payout option: anyone who wanted to leave would be given \$2,400 and sent away. How many of these jihadists were loyal to the cause, especially when it was unclear what this cause was going to be? How many were there because they had no job prospects at home and wanted to support their families? How many had joined because they wanted the chance to kill? How many would abandon the organization if its finances faltered?

3 Bin Laden and the Saudi Government

Bin Laden's relationship with the Saudi royal house was complicated. On one hand, he was a member of the bin Laden clan and as such was wealthy and enjoyed privileged treatment by the government, which also entrusted him with channeling some of the private aid to the mujahideen. On the other hand, he was a free agent and did not have the same incentives as the princes of the monarchy, so he did not necessarily toe the government line. This would soon put him at odds with the House of Saud because the situation in **Saudi Arabia** had become quite volatile.

The Kingdom was large (its territory would cover all of Western U.S.: California, Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona) but did not even exist in 1931. It came about when King Faisal al Saud united Arabia in the name of Islam. He then suppressed the group of Islamic fanatics who had served him in his campaigns but who now wanted to continue to wage jihad with the Saudi neighbors. The crucial moment for the new regime came when the King sought authorization for this suppression from the **Wahhabi** clerics, who espoused a particularly puritanical interpretation of Islam. He obtained it, just like his ancestors had two centuries earlier, but the authorization came at a price: the King had to support the Wahhabi vision throughout the Kingdom.⁹

The symbiotic relationship between the royal house and the Wahhabist clergy was to be sorely tested when the oil boom of the 1950s pumped unimaginable wealth

⁹Their founder, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, had started a revivalist movement in the 18th century, and had aligned himself with the House of Saud, offering legitimation of his rule in exchange for protection and expansion of his teachings. Al-Wahhab was in need of said protection because he had gotten himself expelled from the Najd in 1744 as a heretic.

into the Arabian peninsula. Oil was discovered in 1938, and the King quickly decided to make use of the potential for income it offered. He permitted exploitation of the oil fields by **Aramco**, the Arabian American Oil Company, which was controlled by the U.S., but whose profits filled the royal coffers on account of the oil belonging to the House of Saud rather than the country Faisal had founded. Even though a lot of the profit was squandered in dissolute and extravagantly profligate lifestyles of the hundreds of princes, even they could not waste all of it. Roads, schools, hospitals, power plants, ports, shopping malls, and entire new cities rose in the desert with dizzying speed. The Saudi regime was very interested in promoting economic growth, consolidating the country (by building the first roads in the desert to connect its vast expanse), and continuing the country's development. But the Saudi government, never known for its restraint, had not managed its investments very wisely and had seriously overspent on its projects, and thus found itself faced with large deficits and mounting foreign borrowing. Development was thus also imperative if the country was going to be able to handle its excessive debts.

The government policies tore at the fabric of traditional Saudi society. All the trappings of modernity were there and they were pulling the country into an unknown, unfamiliar, and frightening future. The problem was that the changes championed by the royal house came at great social cost. The people had lived in tribes governed by old codes of behavior based on the Koran. They had no concept of a nation, let alone a Saudi one. They had no experience with a capitalist market economy and found it challenging to cope with the sudden influx of foreign ideas and culture that came with all the commerce. Traditional values clashed with those brought in by foreign workers and by the expanding media. The unequal distribution of the benefits of this breakneck development also created numerous grievances. The Kingdom, however, provided no institutions to channel any political and social concerns. It was an absolute monarchy, in which the royal house quite literally owned most of the country. Traditionalists turned to the strictures of the Wahhabi doctrine, whose austerity and wholesale rejection of modernity provided a shield against having to adapt to its disturbing implications. Many also turned to the Wahhabi clerics whose intimate ties with the House of Saud at least held out a prospect for political influence. The religious community was neither blind to the impact of modernity on society nor deaf to the complaints that were not making their way up to royal ears. For the first time the clerics found themselves at odds with the regime, which nevertheless plowed ahead despite the 1975 assassination of King Faisal by a disgruntled nephew.

Discontent was, however, slowly rising, and eventually boiled into two traumatic events that revealed the dangerously thin ice, on which the government was treading. First, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 destabilized the region as the new Islamic regime in Tehran began to export its ideology and inspirational success. In late November, the civil unrest in Shia-dominated areas culminated in an uprising that the government forces managed to subdue with significant brutality. Second,

on November 20, somewhere between 300 and 600 Islamic insurgents seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca, proclaimed their leader to be the Mahdi (the Redeemer), and called on all Muslims to obey him. They were effectively aiming to overthrow the Saudi monarchy, and the government found itself in a serious bind about its response. Islam prohibited violence on the grounds of the mosque, and the government had to seek authorization from the **ulema** (the religious community) for the use of force to retake the mosque. After the ulema issued a **fatwa** granting permission to do that, the Saudi security forces assisted by French and Pakistani commandos, attacked the Grand Mosque but were repelled with heavy casualties. It took two weeks before the government regained control of the mosque although it lost no time dealing with the 68 rebels it managed to capture (they were found guilty, sentenced to death, and beheaded in less than a month).

The upshot of these events, however, was perhaps surprising. Instead of cracking down on Islamic fundamentalists in the manner of the Egyptian government, for instance, King Khaled opted to placate them. The royal family concluded that the best way to deal with extremists was to give them more power. The observance of Sharia law was tightened, the last cinemas were shuttered, music disappeared as did women from TV and newspapers, and a religious police began enforcing public morals and gender segregation in public places. The already stifling atmosphere became suffocating, leaving young people no outlet to express themselves except through religion, whose study at school was not intensified as well.

This might have worked had not the economy conspired against it. When the oil prices collapsed in the early 1980s, the government's finances became seriously strained, and the regime reneged on its promise of guaranteed universal employment. Suddenly all those disaffected youths were deprived of hope for the future as well. Unsurprisingly, when high expectations are unceremoniously crushed and when there is no political or cultural outlets to funnel the frustration into constructive uses, many turned to extremism. It was to these people that bin Laden, having just returned from his glorious mission in Afghanistan, was a hero. And this is what made him a threat to the royal family.

Bin Laden quickly made himself a nuisance to the government, initially because of his repeated interference in **Yemen**, where he was trying to prevent the peace deal between the Marxists in the south and the pro-Western authoritarian north. The two parties had set aside their grievances against each other and suspended hostilities because of the newly discovered oil in the area between them. They were busy patching up a peace that would allow them to exploit these resources, and were in fact making good progress toward an agreement. Bin Laden, whose paternal family hailed from Yemen, was opposed to any peace with the Marxists, and was using his money, his men, and his influence to derail the negotiations. The Yemeni governments appealed to Saudi Arabia to curb bin Laden but repeated remonstrations with him yielded nothing. Enraged by his defiance to a direct order of the King, the Saudi government finally confiscated bin Laden's passport to prevent him from

traveling to Yemen. But it would not be this imbroglio that would cause the total and final rupture between the Saudi regime and bin Laden; it would be Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 or, rather, the Saudi government's response to it, which ended up inviting a vast American military force into the Kingdom.

4 Al-Qaeda's Turn against the U.S.

America had been a big part of the transformation of the Kingdom from its inception. Americans had built the Saudi petroleum industry, much of its transport infrastructure, its entire defense industry, its broadcast facilities, and its first air service. Americans transferred technology, management techniques, and know-how. American universities trained the new elites: over 30,000 Saudis came to study in the U.S. every year during the 1970s and 1980s. America provided for the Kingdom's external defense and for its military. In return, Saudi Arabia was America's staunchest ally in the region, especially after Iran lost that role after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

This deal was good for the House of Saud: despite its size, Saudi Arabia is mostly empty. In 1950, its population was merely 3 million, and although the next 30 years saw massive growth, it was still just shy of 10 million in 1980 (and that number included the millions of foreign workers). In 1990, when America's role in Saudi Arabia's defenses would become obvious and irritating to many, the population stood at 16 million although it is rumored that the King had added a few million to the estimate to compensate for the embarrassingly low real number). After years of heavy investment (almost exclusively in hardware), the Saudi Army had about 40,000 soldiers (and perhaps up to 58,000 total personnel). Many of its neighbors, like Iraq, Egypt, and Yemen, were both more populous and fielded much larger military establishments. If they were ever tempted to snatch some of the Kingdom's fabulous riches, the Saudi government had no way of stopping them. Part of this was, of course, due to the ruling dynasty keeping the army well-heelled but small to minimize the risk of a coup. That is why the arrangement was so attractive: it permitted the monarchy to avoid having to maintain a larger army, which, in a region where military coups had deposed or tried to depose most of the existing monarchies, was no small bonus.¹⁰ The bottom line, however, was just the same: Saudi Arabia's external security was entirely dependent on the U.S., and this became a huge liability in 1990, when Saddam Hussein's formidable military machine devoured neighboring Kuwait.

Given their military weakness, the Saudi government feared that it was next on Saddam's chopping block, and the Bush administration had similar concerns. Dick

¹⁰For comparison, in 1989 Bulgaria had an army of about 153,000 with a population of about 9 million. The size of the army to total population was 1.7% vs. the Saudi 0.36%; i.e., nearly five times higher.

Cheney flew in to ask the King to allow the U.S. to defend the Kingdom against a possible Iraqi invasion. After the King was reassured that the American troops would stay only as long as necessary and only until told to leave, the Saudi government formally invited the infidel troops into the birthplace of Islam.

It was a humiliating spectacle to call upon Christians and Jews to defend Islam, and bin Laden was furious about that. He had personally tried to dissuade King Fahd from this strategy: the presence of infidels in Arabia violated the injunction of the Prophet to keep the peninsula with only one religion.¹¹ Bin Laden produced his own plans to stop Saddam: he would organize his Arab Afghan volunteers and the hordes of Saudi unemployed to assemble an army of 100,000 in 3 months. When the Head of Saudi Intelligence, Prince Turki, sarcastically asked him what he intended to do when Saddam “lobs missiles at you with chemical and biological weapons,” bin Laden responded, “We will fight him with faith.” The prince pressed bin Laden about his tactics: Iraq had over a million of trained and battle-hardened men, hundreds of tanks, an air force, and there were no caves in Saudi Arabia to hide in; how did bin Laden intend to survive long enough to wage the style of guerilla warfare the Afghans had used against the Soviets? Bin Laden just retorted that his fighters had forced the USSR out of Afghanistan. The prince, who was far better informed about the reality of the Afghan Arab involvement in that war, simply laughed. But it was no laughing matter for bin Laden had clearly bought into his own hype. The Saudi government proceeded with its plans, and the Americans deployed in Operation Desert Shield.

Bin Laden remained harshly critical of the presence of U.S. troops in the Kingdom, and only became more irritated as time went by and the Americans showed no signs of leaving. In 1992, the Saudi government gave bin Laden his passport back so they could send him on an errand: he was to travel to Pakistan and Afghanistan, where he was to mediate between the two opposing warlords. After going there, however, bin Laden made his grievances publicly known when he did not back the side favored by the Saudi government. This assertion of independence made him a *persona non grata* in Saudi Arabia. Afraid to go back, bin Laden accepted the invitation of the Sudanese government to set up shop in that country.

The Islamic government of Sudan had brought down its civilian and democratically elected predecessor in a coup in June 1989. It saw itself as the vanguard of a world Islamic revolution (the Domino Theory again) and its global vision sat well

¹¹There is a disagreement as to what this means. Bin Laden’s interpretation was literal in the sense of the injunction not allowing any non-Muslim to set foot in Arabia. This is still the reasoning behind the bans on non-Muslims for traveling to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. But as a blanket rule for all of Arabia it was clearly too extreme: after all, there were many non-Muslim foreigners in the country who had been instrumental in its development. Thus, the narrower interpretation is that no other religion can be established in Arabia. As long as the Saudi government held to Islam and did not permit the practice of any other religion within the Kingdom, the injunction would be fulfilled. In the event, the Americans were supposed to keep out of sight so as to not irritate the locals too much.

with bin Laden. When he relocated to Sudan in 1992, bin Laden brought significant investments and construction machinery. It was not, however, all roses. Bin Laden profoundly disagreed with the Sudanese project to unify the Shia and the Sunni Muslims, but for now he had little choice in the matter. With the government throwing its borders open to any Muslim who wanted to come, all the prospectless Arab jihadists from Afghanistan (where a civil war now raged) flocked to Sudan. They were not the only ones: a veritable who's who of the terrorist world now set up shop in Sudan — Hamas, Hezbollah, Abu Nidel — if the organization was Islamic terrorist, it was there.

When the U.S. troops went to Somalia (the unwelcome engagement that President Bush had tried hard to avoid), al-Qaeda's leadership interpreted it as a cunning strategic plan to gain a foothold in the horn of Africa. Apparently, the U.S. wanted to link this to its presence in the Gulf in order to control the Red Sea! Sudan was going to be next. It was the Crusades all over again. Sudan would be crucial for the evolution of al-Qaeda in three ways: it was here that al-Qaeda became firmly anti-American, it was here that it acquired some competent personnel that made it far more dangerous than the outfit it had been up to that point; and it was here that through its association with al-Jihad, al-Qaeda would embrace suicide attacks.

It was in Sudan that bin Laden redirected al-Qaeda from its original goal of fighting communists through guerilla warfare to stopping the Americans. It was no longer godless Marxism that was the principal threat but the vapid Christianity embraced by the U.S. all while exporting corporate secular commercial capitalism that undermined the spirituality of Islam and corroded Islamic societies. But unlike the Soviets who had obliged by fighting in Afghanistan where al-Qaeda could wage traditional asymmetric warfare, the Americans were everywhere. Since they were also powerful beyond belief, another tactic had to be devised. American power was enormous but not without its limits, and these limits were usually political rather than physical. The U.S. had to be dragged into a global conflict that even it could not win. This would be al-Qaeda's role, and its chosen tactic was terrorism that would swing public opinion against interventions around the globe. To defeat the U.S., al-Qaeda did not have to win a military victory, and not even outlast it in guerilla-style war of attrition. It had to hit hard, and it had to hit repeatedly: it would be the American public that would grow tired of the incessant attacks, and it would be the American public who would curb the military and political power of the U.S. around the world.

Moreover, it was in Sudan that al-Qaeda became more expertly dangerous because of the Egyptians. Although its operative core was Egyptian, al-Qaeda's financial and theological muscle was not. The Egyptians wanted to fight the near enemy in Cairo, and the others wanted to fight the distant one, now in Washington, D.C. The Egyptians had maintained their own organization parallel with their involvement with al-Qaeda. Al-Zawahiri's al-Jihad had established its own training camp in Sudan even before bin Laden arrived. Al-Jihad was still pursuing its goal of

toppling the Mubarak regime. In August 1993, its suicide bomber blew himself up in an attempt to assassinate Egypt's Minister of the Interior, who had been cracking down on Islamic radicals. The Egyptian public had been steadily turning against the Islamists because of the incessant terror of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, which had already killed over 200 people. When al-Jihad made another assassination attempt in November (this time against the Prime Minister) but only managed to injure over 20 innocent bystanders and kill a schoolgirl, the public turned decisively against them. The government lost no time: it arrested several hundred al-Jihad members and executed six. Al-Jihad was teetering on the brink of bankruptcy and to save his organization, al-Zawahiri went on bin Laden's payroll. The Egyptians brought competence into al-Qaeda but were in bin Laden's debt, and so ended up having to accede to his global vision.

Al-Jihad was the first Sunni organization to use suicide attacks (in its August 1993 operation). The tactic had a long history, but it had been used either in asymmetric warfare (e.g., in the Philippines by the Moros against the Spanish, the Americans, and the Japanese) or in regular war (e.g., by the Iranians against the Iraqis), and even then it was not common (for instance, there had been no instances of suicide attacks during the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union). It was the Shia Hezbollah that initiated a new wave of suicide attacks in Lebanon, where it killed over 650 people in 36 separate attacks between 1982 and 1986. Even then, the practice had remained confined to that group for a decade. After al-Jihad, suicide attacks spread to other Sunni groups, like the Palestinian Hamas. Their use escalated rather rapidly during the 1990s as the range of admissible targets expanded dramatically: it was first American and Israeli soldiers, then Israeli civilians, including women and children, then American civilians, then Muslims of the other denomination, then Muslims, including women and children. Today, there seems to be absolutely no constraint as to whom Islamic suicide attacks could target: it is Westerners and Muslims alike, military and civilian alike. Between 1982 and 2015, there have been 4,814 suicide attacks by Islamic radicals, who have killed 48,465 people and wounded 122,606. Of these, al-Qaeda would be responsible for 20 attacks, with 3,390 killed and 13,053 wounded.¹²

It was also from Sudan that al-Qaeda launched its first known terrorist attack. It targeted U.S. service personnel en route to Somalia for Operation Restore Hope. The troops were reportedly staying at a hotel in Aden, Yemen, so al-Qaeda bombed the resort on December 29, 1992. One Australian tourist and one Yemeni died in the attack, but no Americans were hurt.

¹²Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism, *Suicide Attack Database*, <http://cpostdata.uchicago.edu>, accessed March 6, 2016.

5 Financial Ruin

Al-Qaeda financed the operations of **Omar Abdul Rahman**, the blind sheikh, in America, where the Egyptian was ostensibly looking for asylum. His followers planned simultaneous bombings of several New York City landmarks — the George Washington Bridge, the Lincoln and Holland Tunnels, the Federal Plaza (where the FBI is), and the U.N. headquarters — along with a string of assassinations of prominent politicians. These were going to be in retaliation for U.S. support for Hosni Mubarak, who had been persecuting the Islamic extremists mercilessly. On February 26, 1993, an al-Qaeda-trained follower of Rahman, Ramzi Yousef, detonated a bomb in the underground garage of the World Trade Center. The explosion created a 200-ft wide crater and was the largest improvised explosive device (IED) the FBI had ever seen (although it was only slightly smaller than the one used by home-grown terrorists in the Oklahoma City Bombing). Yousef had hoped that the tower would topple onto the other, and that both would collapse, killing the 50,000 people who worked there as well as many of the 200,000 daily visitors. But the building held and even though nearly 1,000 were injured, only 6 were killed. The attack did not hurt America and did not provoke the hoped-for massive retaliation that the terrorists expected to inflame the Muslim world and turn its masses to their cause.

Al-Qaeda sent operatives to Somalia but they accomplished nothing, and even complained that the Somali militias did not respect them. They witnessed the fire-fight in Mogadishu in October 1993 only to flee on the following day. This did not prevent bin Laden from claiming that al-Qaeda was responsible for downing the helicopters (it was not) or from appropriating the credit for the subsequent American withdrawal. The message he hammered home was that for all its apparent military power, America was cowardly and weak, and that it did not take much to put it on the run. Somalia had (seemingly) proven him right, so he doubled down on the strategy to train and inspire disparate Islamic groups to strike at the U.S. Nationalists came to learn and obtain weapons, and in the process many became indoctrinated in al-Qaeda's vision through the heady mix of fact and fiction bin Laden peddled. Consistent with the ambitious scope of that vision, al-Qaeda repeatedly tried to acquire nuclear weapons. In 1993, bin Laden bought a container of what he believed was highly enriched uranium (HEU) for \$1.5 million. He got scammed.

Despite his close links with the Sudanese government, bin Laden's days in Sudan were numbered. His various operations in Yemen, Algeria, and Egypt finally caused all respective governments to lean on King Fahd of Saudi Arabia to rein in the man who was financing the murderous instability in their countries.¹³ On April 9, 1994,

¹³In Algeria, bin Laden gave \$40,000 to the rebels who were resisting a military coup that had robbed them of electoral victory in 1992. The rebels had not been doing well and were on the verge of opening negotiations with the military government when al-Qaeda intervened. Bin Laden's money helped his radical Afghan Arabs take over the leadership of the rebels, and they rejected any compromise with the government under the takfir doctrine. The bloody civil war that ensued would

the Saudi government revoked bin Laden's citizenship and froze his assets. His extended family abandoned him and, on government orders, seized his share of the family fortune. This plunged al-Qaeda into a financial crisis for all of bin Laden's numerous other ventures were business failures. His only real source of income had been his Saudi holdings, and even this had been exaggerated. He used to have perhaps \$7 million in shares in the Saudi Binladen Group, and between \$150,000 and \$300,000 per year from its earnings. His annual income was probably not more than \$1 million, not trivial, of course, but a far cry from the hysterical \$300 million in assets reported after 9/11. Interestingly, after the loss of his assets, bin Laden would come to rely exclusively on donations. . . to the tune of over \$30 million per year! But this was in the future. In the present, al-Qaeda was broke.

By the end of 1994, bin Laden was cutting salaries of al-Qaeda members, and the organization began to lose cohesion. One of bin Laden's most trusted lieutenants absconded with \$100,000 (he eventually sold his testimony for another \$1 million to the Americans in 1996). His treasurer defected to the Saudis as well. In 1995, the organization came under sustained attack because of al-Zawahiri's activities in Egypt. Al-Jihad was still busy trying to assassinate important political leaders, and on June 26 targeted Hosni Mubarak himself. The plot failed but it triggered a furious Egyptian response. When al-Zawahiri executed two teenage sons of senior al-Jihad members for spying for the Mubarak regime, the Sudanese government became incensed that al-Jihad was operating as a state within the state and expelled the organization from the country. On top of that, al-Jihad's suicide bombing of the Egyptian embassy in Pakistan (November 19) provoked a crackdown there, as well as widespread denunciations of suicide operations. Bin Laden went to Pakistan to take the deported Afghan Arabs back to Sudan but to his chagrin many remained loyal to al-Zawahiri.

Bin Laden was increasingly isolated in Sudan and now al-Qaeda had lost its hard core of Egyptian members of al-Jihad. The situation only got worse. In April 1996, the international community slapped sanctions on Sudan in retaliation of its government's complicity in plots to blow up the U.N. headquarters in New York and assassinate Hosni Mubarak. The sanctions bit fast, and the government inquired with the U.S. what it would take to get the country removed from the Department of State's list of sponsors of terrorism. Among the things the U.S. demanded was a list of all mujahideen bin Laden had imported into Sudan and the expulsion of the man himself. The Sudanese government complied and confiscated more or less everything bin Laden owned, to the tune of up to \$30 million. Coming on the heels of the loss of his Saudi holdings, this was a devastating financial blow. Bin Laden could not even afford the plane ride that would take him out of the country (the Sudanese government paid for it). Al-Qaeda disintegrated as many of

claim the lives of over 100,000 people. Egypt was also suffering from al-Qaeda-funded terrorism that was murdering people almost daily.

its members were handed their buy-out checks and plane tickets home. But where was bin Laden to go? Since there was no hard evidence for his role in various terrorist activities, at least not evidence that could be used to prosecute him, neither the U.S. nor Saudi Arabia wanted him. The Somalis were not too keen on Arabs, and Egypt was considered unsafe. No normal government was going to welcome him, which meant he would have to go somewhere else. That left Afghanistan, and this is where bin Laden flew on May 18, 1996.

6 In the Land of the Taliban

The **Taliban** (“Students”) was a new group that had formed in 1994 in an attempt to put an end to the vicious civil war and the depravity of the mujahideen rule that had succeeded the Soviet-backed regime in April 1992. The Taliban drew on popular support from the citizenry that longer for order — any order — at almost any price. Armed, supplied, and trained by both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, they made rapid progress and were in control of most of the country by the time bin Laden showed up. The Taliban did not know what to do with the famous Arab who was now, however, penniless and without many followers. They consulted with the Saudis, who told them to keep him in Afghanistan and make sure he stayed out of trouble. Bin Laden found himself in the hands of **Mullah Mohammed Omar**, an Arab-speaking veteran of the war who had founded the Taliban and had now declared himself the supreme leader of all Muslims.

The Taliban relied on Saudi Arabia and Pakistan for weapons, but it was Afghan refugees who provided a vast pool of potential recruits. There were nearly 3 million of them in Pakistan alone, and most men were enrolled in Saudi-financed **madrassas** (religious schools), where they imbibed a steady diet of Wahhabi extremist doctrine. Within 6 months of their founding, the Taliban grew from 53 men to 12,000, and this number more than doubled in another 6 months. As they established their hold on most of the land, the Taliban permitted locals to grow and export opium so that they could levy a 10% tax on it to fund their operations. (They also smuggled electronics.) When Kabul fell in 1996, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United Arab Emirates recognized the Taliban government. They would remain the only three countries to do so before the regime was swept away in 2001.

As a government, the Taliban went to town and imposed a particularly harsh version of Sharia. They banned anything they considered unclean, and they considered unclean a great many things: computers, movies, music players, VCRs, TVs, alcohol, chess, statues, kite-flying, and pictures, among others. Public executions and flogging became common. They forced men to wear long beards and banned women from going to school or working outside their homes. Women constituted 70% of elementary school teachers, 50% of government service providers, and 40% of doctors. With their expulsion from the professions, schooling, public administra-

tion, and healthcare collapsed. Women were prohibited from leaving home without a male relative, and risked being beaten or killed for doing so. They massacred civilians, often by slitting throats and skinning people, starved tens of thousands of children, burned vast areas of fertile land, destroyed thousands of houses.

It was from this chaotic place, while living in a cave, deprived of his wealth and abandoned by many of his followers, while in the hands of an unfamiliar group with close ties to the government that had exiled him, that bin Laden declared war on America on August 23, 1996.¹⁴ The so-called **First Fatwa** asserts a main grievance: “the people of Islam had suffered from aggression, iniquity and injustice imposed on them by the Zionist-Crusaders alliance and their collaborators; to the extent that the Muslims blood became the cheapest and their wealth as loot in the hands of the enemies.” It then proceeds to list purported examples of this, most of which would tax the patience of any reader who knows a bit of history. Among the alleged aggression against Muslims by Zionist-Crusaders were Bosnia-Herzegovina (where the U.S. had been helping the Muslims fight Christian Serbs), Chechnya (where the Russians were fighting separatists), Somalia (where the U.S. had intervened to prevent mass starvation and was not fighting anyone except one warlord who had broken the peace agreement), Kashmir (where Pakistan and India were locked in a contest over the territory), Tajikistan (the reference was presumably to the civil war that followed the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and that was fought by factions with different clan loyalties), and the Philippines (where the Muslim separatist group, the Moro National Liberation Front, had just signed a peace agreement with the government after a 24-year-old fight to establish an Islamic state in Mindanao). How the U.S. was responsible for any of that was anyone’s guess, but bin Laden baldly asserted that all of this was “a clear conspiracy between the USA and its’ allies and under the cover of the iniquitous United Nations.” This was also ironic since the U.S. had refused to pay its dues to the U.N. (from 1985), was running arrears to the tune of \$1.3 billion, and was negotiating to reduce the assessment rate (the U.S. has always been the most heavily assessed member of the U.N.).

Whatever the dubious merits of the long list of imagined grievances against Muslims worldwide, bin Laden’s focus is really on Saudi Arabia, or, rather its government, who was guilty of “suspension of the Islamic Shari’ah law and exchanging it with man made civil law”, as well as guilty of being unable “to protect the country, and allowing the enemy of the Ummah — the American crusader forces — to occupy the land for the longest of years.” Since numerous peaceful petitions to get the King to alter his policies had gone unheeded, the regime has “pushed the people toward armed actions. . . which is the only choice left for them to implement righteousness and justice.” But the Saudi regime was merely a puppet; the true enemy was America, which had to be fought and defeated, as it had been before:

¹⁴Osama bin Laden, “Declaration of War Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places,” August 23, 1996. An English translation can be found at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/military-july-dec96-fatwa_1996/, accessed March 6, 2016.

But with the grace of Allah, the majority of the nation, both civilians and military individuals are aware of the wicked plan. They refused to be played against each others and to be used by the regime as a tool to carry out the policy of the American-Israeli alliance through their agent in our country: the Saudi regime.

[...]

If there are more than one duty to be carried out, then the most important one should receive priority. Clearly after Belief (Imaan) there is no more important duty than pushing the American enemy out of the holy land. [...] The presence of the USA Crusader military forces on land, sea and air of the states of the Islamic Gulf is the greatest danger threatening the largest oil reserve in the world. The existence of these forces in the area will provoke the people of the country and induces aggression on their religion, feelings and prides and push them to take up armed struggle against the invaders occupying the land; therefore spread of the fighting in the region will expose the oil wealth to the danger of being burned up. The economic interests of the States of the Gulf and the land of the two Holy Places will be damaged and even a greater damage will be caused to the economy of the world. I would like here to alert my brothers, the Mujahideen, the sons of the nation, to protect this (oil) wealth and not to include it in the battle as it is a great Islamic wealth and a large economical power essential for the soon to be established Islamic state, by Allah's Permission and Grace.

[...]

It is out of date and no longer acceptable to claim that the presence of the crusaders is necessity and only a temporary measures to protect the land of the two Holy Places. Especially when the civil and the military infrastructures of Iraq were savagely destroyed showing the depth of the Zionist-Crusaders hatred to the Muslims and their children, and the rejection of the idea of replacing the crusaders forces by an Islamic force composed of the sons of the country and other Muslim people.

[...]

The regime is fully responsible for what had been incurred by the country and the nation; however the occupying American enemy is the principle and the main cause of the situation. Therefore efforts should be concentrated on destroying, fighting and killing the enemy until, by the Grace of Allah, it is completely defeated.

[...]

Few days ago the news agencies had reported that the Defence Secretary of the Crusading Americans had said that "the explosion at Riyadh and Al-Khobar had taught him one lesson: that is not to withdraw when attacked by coward terrorists".

We say to the Defence Secretary that his talk can induce a grieving mother to laughter! and shows the fears that had enshrined you all. Where was this false

courage of yours when the explosion in Beirut took place on 1983 AD (1403 A.H.). You were turned into scattered pits and pieces at that time; 241 mainly marines soldiers were killed. And where was this courage of yours when two explosions made you to leave Aden in less than twenty four hours!

But your most disgraceful case was in Somalia; where — after vigorous propaganda about the power of the USA and its post cold war leadership of the new world order — you moved tens of thousands of international force, including twenty eight thousands American soldiers into Somalia. However, when tens of your soldiers were killed in minor battles and one American Pilot was dragged in the streets of Mogadishu you left the area carrying disappointment, humiliation, defeat and your dead with you. Clinton appeared in front of the whole world threatening and promising revenge, but these threats were merely a preparation for withdrawal. You have been disgraced by Allah and you withdrew; the extent of your impotence and weaknesses became very clear. It was a pleasure for the “heart” of every Muslim and a remedy to the “chests” of believing nations to see you defeated in the three Islamic cities of Beirut, Aden and Mogadishu.

[...]

Terrorising you, while you are carrying arms on our land, is a legitimate and morally demanded duty. It is a legitimate right well known to all humans and other creatures. Your example and our example is like a snake which entered into a house of a man and got killed by him. The coward is the one who lets you walk, while carrying arms, freely on his land and provides you with peace and security.

In the fatwa, bin Laden says that only the “collective movement of the Muslim people” can push back the enemy, and therefore it was “a duty on the Muslims to ignore the minor differences among themselves.” Bin Laden violently disagreed (and would continue to do so) with those who argued that it was permissible to attack other Muslims, whether because they were apostates or merely Shia (or, perhaps, Alawites, since bin Laden’s own mother was one). He also warns against using conventional military tactics against the enemy’s superior power, opting instead for operations done with utmost secrecy.

In May 1997, al-Zawahiri joined bin Laden in Afghanistan after spending a year on the run, part of it apparently in a Russian jail. His focus was still on Egypt but Mubarak’s government had been devastatingly effective in rounding up the extremists: nearly 20,000 were in custody and thousands killed by the security forces. In June, al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya worked out a deal with the authorities in Cairo: it formally renounced violence in exchange for the release of 2,000 of its members from prison. This move split the Islamic movement: those in Egypt wanted peace, favored the deal, and wanted to cooperate with the government while those outside wanted to continue the struggle, denounced the deal (al-Zawahiri called it “surrender”), and would have nothing to do with the regime. Al-Jihad worked with al-Islamiyya extremists to derail the reconciliation. On November 17, 1997 they

carried out the **Luxor massacre**, an operation funded by bin Laden, in which six men trapped tourists at the Temple of Hatshepsut near Luxor and systematically slaughtered 58 foreigners and 4 Egyptians. This was the worst terrorist act in modern Egyptian history, but the effect was opposite of the terrorists' intent: the enraged public turned decisively against them and deprived them of any base for operations. The terrorists had killed over 1,200 people in Egypt over the past 5 years, but now their attacks ceased. Al-Zawahiri's dreams to overthrow Mubarak's regime and establish an Islamic rule in Egypt evaporated, as had a large part of his organization. With all his hopes for Egypt dashed for the foreseeable future, al-Zawahiri committed fully to bin Laden and his global jihad against America.

On February 23, 1998 al-Zawahiri issued a joint fatwa with bin Laden, which was also signed by leaders of several Islamic groups. Although known as the **Second Fatwa** of al-Qaeda, it was not actually signed on behalf of the group. Unlike the first one, which was a rambling 30-page screed, this fatwa was brief and to the point.¹⁵ It reiterated "three facts that are known to everyone":

First, for over seven years the United States has been occupying the lands of Islam in the holiest of places, the Arabian Peninsula, plundering its riches, dictating to its rulers, humiliating its people, terrorizing its neighbors, and turning its bases in the Peninsula into a spearhead through which to fight the neighboring Muslim peoples. If some people have in the past argued about the fact of the occupation, all the people of the Peninsula have now acknowledged it. The best proof of this is the Americans' continuing aggression against the Iraqi people using the Peninsula as a staging post, even though all its rulers are against their territories being used to that end, but they are helpless.

Second, despite the great devastation inflicted on the Iraqi people by the crusader-Zionist alliance, and despite the huge number of those killed, which has exceeded 1 million. . . despite all this, the Americans are once again trying to repeat the horrific massacres, as though they are not content with the protracted blockade imposed after the ferocious war or the fragmentation and devastation. So here they come to annihilate what is left of this people and to humiliate their Muslim neighbors.

Third, if the Americans' aims behind these wars are religious and economic, the aim is also to serve the Jews' petty state and divert attention from its occupation of Jerusalem and murder of Muslims there. The best proof of this is their eagerness to destroy Iraq, the strongest neighboring Arab state, and their endeavor to fragment all the states of the region such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Sudan into paper statelets and through their disunion and weakness to guarantee Israel's survival and the continuation of the brutal crusade occupation of the Peninsula.

¹⁵Ayman al-Zawahiri, "World Islamic Front Against Jews and Crusaders," February 23, 1998. An English translation can be found at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/military-jan-june98-fatwa_1998/, accessed March 6, 2016.

All these crimes and sins committed by the Americans are a clear declaration of war on God, his messenger, and Muslims. [...] On that basis, and in compliance with God's order, we issue the following fatwa to all Muslims:

The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies — civilians and military — is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy mosque [Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim. [...] We — with God's help — call on every Muslim who believes in God and wishes to be rewarded to comply with God's order to kill the Americans and plunder their money wherever and whenever they find it. We also call on Muslim ulema, leaders, youths, and soldiers to launch the raid on Satan's U.S. troops and the devil's supporters allying with them, and to displace those who are behind them so that they may learn a lesson.

Most of the remaining members of al-Jihad now quit in disgust — they saw no reason to fight America when their goal was Egypt. The ones that stayed formed a small but dedicated group entirely focused on hurting the U.S.

The fatwa, however, piqued **Saddam Hussein's** interest. Bin Laden had been supporting Iraqi dissidents opposing the dictator's secular rule but now they seemed to have a common enemy. In fact, the first fatwa had already moved al-Qaeda toward possible collaboration with any regime willing to oppose the Americans, and Iraq had been a natural choice. In it, bin Laden specifically asserted that "more than 600,000 Iraqi children have died due to lack of food and medicine and as a result of the unjustifiable aggression (sanction) imposed on Iraq and its nation. The children of Iraq are our children." He had also very specifically sanctioned cooperation with those who fight without pure intention but "for the sake of leadership (personal gain)" and perhaps even "do not observe some of the rules and commandments of Islam." That was because "to repel the greatest of the two gangers on the expense of the lesser one is an Islamic principle which should be observed." In other words, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, and that friend could be Iraq. The Iraqis had already talked to bin Laden, and al-Zawahiri had even met personally with Saddam in 1992 to hammer out a deal that would have allowed al-Qaeda to relocate to Iraq and obtain weapons, but that had fallen through.

Now the talks resumed but even though several senior members favored moving to Iraq, bin Laden did not trust Saddam. Still, al-Zawahiri traveled to Baghdad and set up a terrorist group of Kurdish fundamentalists with the assistance of the Iraqi Intelligence Services. He also met **Abu Musab al-Zarqawi**, a Jordanian who would lead **al-Qaeda in Iraq** (AQI) in the insurgency against the U.S. from 2004, and whose group would become the first incarnation of the **Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham** (ISIS).

7 The Road to 9/11

Bin Laden's fatwa had made him famous: money and volunteers poured into al-Qaeda's camp in Afghanistan. The operation, initially funded by Pakistani intelligence, now gathered steam and was running on funds raised abroad. At this point, al-Qaeda was yet to carry out a significant attack on its own (excepting its 1992 fiasco in Yemen), and it had not killed a single American directly. Few in the U.S. knew or cared about bin Laden, and that despite an interview that ABC did with him at the camp.

The Saudis, on the other hand, became increasingly worried and tried bribing the Taliban into turning bin Laden over to them. They sent money and hundreds of pickup trucks, and the Taliban used these resources to capture Mazar-e-Sharif on August 8, 1998 and slay over 6,000 civilians, hundreds of them baked alive in containers they left in the desert.¹⁶ Bin Laden stayed in Afghanistan.

The CIA managed to obtain al-Qaeda's organizational charts from al-Jihad terrorists it had kidnapped in Azerbaijan and Albania. The breakthrough came a little too late: on August 7, 1998 — the anniversary of the 1990 arrival of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia — al-Qaeda struck its first blow: simultaneous suicide bombings of the American embassies in **Nairobi** (Kenya) and **Dar es Salaam** (Tanzania). The blast in Kenya killed 213 people, 12 of them Americans, and injured 4,500; the one in Tanzania killed 11 people and injured 85, none of them American. Three other U.S. embassies had been targeted during the operation but these plots had been foiled. Al-Qaeda had entered the war against America openly. At this point, the FBI, which had been tasked with investigating the bombings, had a total of 8 agents who spoke Arabic.

The Clinton administration, heavily embroiled in the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal, retaliated by destroying a pharmaceutical plant in Sudan (based on incorrect information that bin Laden was part-owner of the plant and was developing chemical weapons there), and launching missiles at al-Qaeda's training camp in Afghanistan. **Operation Infinite Reach** cost \$750 million and killed five low-ranking al-Qaeda members. Neither bin Laden nor al-Zawahiri were hurt. They did, however, recover an unexploded *Tomahawk* missile and sold it to the Chinese for \$10 million. Al-Qaeda also set up a lab to produce biological and chemical weapons (ironically, after hearing Western media becoming hysterical over how reportedly easy it was to make them). Bin Laden did not like these weapons — he preferred nukes.

The U.S. demanded that the Taliban hand over bin Laden. Mullah Omar responded by saying that it would be best if Clinton resigned. The Saudis and the Pakistani, having found out that bin Laden was behind the bombings and that Saudi

¹⁶This atrocity was in retaliation for another, this time perpetrated on the Taliban by the warlord ruler of the city in May and July 1997, who is said to have brutally murdered up to 3,000 Taliban prisoners.

citizens had carried them out, also demanded that the Taliban give him up. Astonishingly, Mullah Omar defied his two main supporters and refused.

Between 1996 and 2001, al-Qaeda trained anywhere between 10,000 and 20,000 recruits in Afghanistan. Their goal was to fight to establish Islamic governments and very likely die for the cause while killing as many enemies as possible. The new recruits were middle and upper class, college educated (most with science or engineering degrees), many had lived in the U.S. and Europe, and were not particularly religious. They were urban, spoke several languages, and were good with computers. Most joined jihad while living in countries not of their births, and where they had failed to integrate despite their skills. Too modern for their homelands, but too alien for the societies they lived in, they had been marginalized and often sought consolation at the local mosques, many of which were funded by Saudi Arabia and preached Wahhabi intolerance. To these people, jihad gave a new identity.

In November 1999, four friends arrived for training from Hamburg, Germany. Their timing was great because bin Laden had been planning an operation to attack America using planes but did not have men with the requisite characteristics. These four volunteers — **Mohammed Atta** among them — were perfect: they spoke English, they had lived in the West, they could easily get visas, and they were educated enough to acquire the necessary piloting skills. They would form the core of the suicide team.

What followed was a series of astonishingly short-sighted and even silly decisions by the CIA, which had tracked the al-Qaeda operatives to a meeting in Malaysia, obtained copies of a passport with a U.S. visa for one of them, and discovered that another had already entered the U.S. on January 15, 2000 through Los Angeles (two weeks later he moved to San Diego to stay with a Saudi student). But the CIA told no one, not the State Department, which would have denied entry to both, not the FBI, which would have tracked them in the U.S. The ostensible reason for this was CIA's fear that the FBI would mishandle classified information. Supposedly, because the Bureau's focus was on prosecuting criminals, it would proceed accordingly and gather evidence for a trial. This, however, could jeopardize intelligence operations. It mattered little that the FBI did, in fact, have procedures to safeguard against this very problem. There were also personal animosities and petty rivalries that impeded cooperation between the teams tasked with al-Qaeda in the two agencies. There was also the usual problem of intelligence chatter: there were many, many warnings about possible threats daily, and these just did not seem either important or urgent. Now, more than year and a half before 9/11, two known al-Qaeda operatives were freely roaming about the U.S., preparing for their attack.

On October 12, 2000, al-Qaeda launched suicide bombers against the destroyer USS *Cole*, which was being refueled at the port of Aden in Yemen. The blast killed 17 sailors and injured 39 more.¹⁷ When the FBI investigation in Yemen uncovered

¹⁷In 2007, a U.S. federal judge ruled that the government of Sudan was complicit in the bombing

the al-Qaeda link, it inquired with the CIA whether there had been another meeting in the region — there was evidence of money going to another operation. The Agency said nothing. The U.S. ambassador in Yemen even booted out the senior on-scene FBI agent out of personal dislike.

In Afghanistan, the success of the attack proved bountiful and money poured in. Despite vowing to “find out who was responsible and hold them accountable,” President Clinton did not even bother to retaliate this time. Ironically, this angered bin Laden, who had hoped for a disproportionate response that would lead to an invasion of Afghanistan, where the jihadists would bleed the U.S. white like they had the Soviet Union. The flawed Soviet analogy loomed in his reasoning: bin Laden actually hoped to destroy the U.S. with the same strategy that had allegedly destroyed the USSR.¹⁸ He would just have to keep poking; a series of careful hits in vulnerable spots would do the trick.

Warnings flew to the U.S. — from Mubarak, from the Taliban foreign minister (who was afraid that an al-Qaeda attack would lead to the destruction of his country), from Jordan — but to no avail. The new Bush administration even downgraded terrorism to a lower priority. On August 6, 2001, the **President’s Daily Brief (PDB)** — the top secret document prepared by the CIA each morning for the President — was titled “Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in US”.¹⁹ It warned that al-Qaeda had engaged in suspicious activities consistent with preparations to hijack U.S. aircraft although it implied that the purpose of the hijacking would be to secure the release of the “Blind Sheikh.”

A little over a month later, the long and patient preparations of al-Qaeda bore their deadly fruit. On September 11, 2001, it carried four coordinated suicide attacks on American soil targeting symbolic landmarks and civilians. They struck both towers of the World Trade Center, which subsequently collapsed, dragging other buildings down with them. They struck the Pentagon, causing the partial collapse of its Western side. And had it not been for the courageous passengers on United Flight 93, whose struggle to take back control of the plane forced the terrorists to crash it in Pennsylvania, they would have hit another target in Washington, DC

because al-Qaeda might not have been able to carry it out without its substantial prior involvement. Another ruling released \$13 million of Sudan’s assets frozen by the U.S. government to pay the relatives of the victims. By May 2008, all defendants convicted in the attack in Yemen had either escaped from prison or freed. Several were later captured by the U.S. or killed in drone or air strikes.

¹⁸As we have seen, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan had nothing to do with the jihadists — and it was exceedingly unlikely that al-Qaeda would be able to organize anything on a massive enough scale to cause serious attrition after an American invasion. Moreover, the war in Afghanistan itself had very little to do with the dissolution of the Soviet Union either.

¹⁹All PDBs are classified, and the existence of this one only became known when it was leaked and CBS reported about it on May 15, 2002. It was declassified for use by the 9/11 Commission in 2004, and made public on July 22, 2004 as part of its report. This was the first time that a sitting President released a PDB to the public. The declassified text of the PDB can be found at <https://fas.org/irp/cia/product/pdb080601.pdf>, accessed March 6, 2016.

(either the White House or the Capitol). This time bin Laden would get his wish: the U.S. response would be quick and it would be massive. It would not, however, have the effect he had hoped for. The U.S. would get involved in Afghanistan but far from being bled to death, it would drive the Taliban from power. The U.S. would also get involved in Iraq, where it would similarly topple Saddam Hussein's regime. But despite the quagmire that followed, the thousands of casualties, and the billions of dollars spent over a decade and a half of near constant war, the U.S. did not share the fate of the Soviet Union. It did not collapse and despite serious discord about the wisdom of the latter war, the U.S. public still supports the fight against terrorism. How President Bush shaped the U.S. response to 9/11 and how public opinion coalesced to generate the first post-Cold War consensus on grand strategy are the subjects of our next lecture.