

The Two Faces of Al Qaeda

by [Raymond Ibrahim](#)

From the issue dated September 21, 2007

When the September 11 attacks occurred, I was in Fresno, Calif., researching my M.A. thesis on the Battle of Yarmuk, one of the first yet little-known battles between Christendom and Islam, waged in 636 A.D. That battle, in which the Arab invaders were outmatched and yet still triumphed, would have immense historical repercussions. A mere four years later, Egypt and Mesopotamia, and all the land between, would become Islamic. A century later, all the land between southern France and India would be added to the House of Islam.

The next time I came across any reference to this pivotal battle was four years later, as I was translating the words of Osama bin Laden. Surprisingly, an event that seemed so distant, almost irrelevant, to the West was to bin Laden a source not only of pride but of instruction. For him it was not mere history but an inspiring example of outnumbered and under equipped mujahedin who, through faith-inspired courage, managed to defeat the Western empire of Byzantium. When the Arab and Afghan mujahedin, including bin Laden's nascent Al Qaeda — outnumbered and under equipped — defeated the Soviet invaders, history was repeating itself.

Yet why would this band, so reminiscent of their seventh-century forebears, attack the United States, its onetime ally against the Soviets, and in such a horrific manner? What was its motivation?

Finding answers seemed easy enough. From the start, the Internet — unregulated, uncensored, unfettered — has been Al Qaeda's primary mouthpiece. Then, as now, whenever Al Qaeda has wanted to communicate with the West, it has posted videotaped messages, some complete with English subtitles.

After the events of 9/11, my increased interest in Arabic language and history led me to enroll in Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies. Before and during my studies at Georgetown, I avidly read any and all posted Al Qaeda messages. The group's motivation seemed clear enough: retaliation. According to its widely disseminated statements, the West in general, and the United States in particular, had been — overtly and covertly — oppressing and exploiting the Islamic world. The accusations included: unqualified U.S. support for Israel at the expense of Palestinians; deaths of Iraqi children due to U.N. sanctions; U.S. support for dictatorial regimes in the Muslim world; and, most recently, Western occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. Every single message directed to the West by Al Qaeda includes most of these core grievances, culminating with the statement that it is the Islamic world's duty to defend itself. "After all this, does the prey not have the right, when bound and dragged to its slaughter, to escape? Does it not have the right, while being slaughtered, to lash out with its paw?" bin Laden asks.

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Even the 9/11 strikes are explained as acts of reprisal. After describing the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, where several high-rise apartment buildings were leveled, reportedly leaving some 18,000 Arabs dead, bin Laden, in a 2004 message directed at Americans, said: "As I looked upon those crumpling towers in Lebanon, I was struck by the idea of punishing the oppressor in kind by destroying towers in America — giving them a taste of their own medicine and deterring them from murdering our women and children."

Soon after relocating to Washington in order to attend Georgetown, I landed an internship, which later evolved into a full-time position, at the Near East Section of the African and Middle Eastern Division of the Library of Congress, where thousands of new books, serials, and microfilms arrive yearly from the Arab world.

Numerous Arabic books dealing with Al Qaeda passed through my hands in this privileged position. A good number contained not only excerpts or quotes by Al Qaeda but entire treatises written by its members. Surprisingly, I came to discover that most of these had never been translated into English. Most significantly, however, the documents struck me as markedly different from the messages directed to the West, in both tone and (especially) content.

It soon became clear why these particular documents had not been directed to the West. They were theological treatises, revolving around what Islam commands Muslims to do vis-à-vis non-Muslims. The documents rarely made mention of all those things — Zionism, Bush's "Crusade," malnourished Iraqi children — that formed the core of Al Qaeda's messages to the West. Instead, they were filled with countless Koranic verses, hadiths (traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad), and the consensus and verdicts of Islam's most authoritative voices. The temporal and emotive language directed at the West was exchanged for the eternal language of Islam when directed at Muslims. Or, put another way, the language of "reciprocity" was exchanged for that of intolerant religious fanaticism. There was, in fact, scant mention of the words "West," "U.S.," or "Israel." All of those were encompassed by that one Arabic-Islamic word, "kufr" — "infidelity" — the regrettable state of being non-Muslim that must always be fought through "tongue and teeth."

Consider the following excerpt — one of many — which renders Al Qaeda's reciprocal-treatment argument moot. Soon after 9/11, an influential group of Saudis wrote an open letter to the United States saying, "The heart of the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is justice, kindness, and charity." Bin Laden wrote in response:

As to the relationship between Muslims and infidels, this is summarized by the Most High's Word: "We renounce you. Enmity and hate shall forever reign between us — till you believe in Allah alone." So there is an enmity, evidenced by fierce hostility from the heart. And this fierce hostility — that is, battle — ceases only if the infidel submits to the authority of Islam, or if his blood is forbidden from being shed, or if Muslims are at that point in time weak and incapable. But if the hate at any time extinguishes from the heart, this is great apostasy! Allah Almighty's Word to his Prophet recounts in summation the true relationship: "O Prophet! Wage war against the infidels and hypocrites and be ruthless. Their abode is hell — an evil fate!" Such, then, is the basis and foundation of the relationship between the infidel and the Muslim. Battle, animosity,

and hatred — directed from the Muslim to the infidel — is the foundation of our religion. And we consider this a justice and kindness to them.

Bin Laden goes so far as to say that the West's purported hostility toward Islam is wholly predicated on Islam's innate hostility toward the rest of the world, contradicting his own propaganda: "The West is hostile to us on account of ... offensive jihad."

In an article titled "I was a fanatic ... I know their thinking" published by the Daily Mail soon after the London and Glasgow terrorist plots, Hassan Butt, a former jihadist, helps explain the Islamist dichotomy between the propaganda of reciprocity and the theology of eternal hostility toward the infidel: "When I was still a member of what is probably best termed the British Jihadi Network ... I remember how we used to laugh in celebration whenever people on TV proclaimed that the sole cause for Islamic acts of terror like 9/11, the Madrid bombings, and 7/7 was Western foreign policy."

One is reminded of the captured video showing bin Laden laughing and gesticulating soon after the 9/11 strikes, boasting that many of the hijackers weren't even aware that they were on a suicide mission. Butt continues:

By blaming the government for our actions, those who pushed this "Blair's bombs" line did our propaganda work for us. More important, they also helped draw away any critical examination from the real engine of our violence: Islamic theology. ... As with previous terror attacks, people are again saying that violence carried out by Muslims is all to do with foreign policy. For example, on Saturday on Radio 4's Today program, the mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, said: "What all our intelligence shows about the opinions of disaffected young Muslims is the main driving force is not Afghanistan, it is mainly Iraq."

Whatever position one takes as to why Al Qaeda has declared war on America, one thing is clear: We must begin to come to terms with all of Al Qaeda's rhetoric, not just what is aimed specifically at Western readers. We must particularly come to better appreciate the theological aspects that underpin radical Islam. As Butt puts it:

The main reason why radicals have managed to increase their following is because most Muslim institutions in Britain just don't want to talk about theology. They refuse to broach the difficult and often complex truth that Islam can be interpreted as condoning violence against the unbeliever — and instead repeat the mantra that Islam is peace and hope that all of this debate will go away.

When news of *The Al Qaeda Reader* leaked to the press in 2005, some on the left questioned whether the book would be a pseudo scholarly attempt to demonize Muslims. Others on the right worried that unfiltered exposure to the radical beliefs and propaganda of bin Laden and his cohorts might unintentionally lead to more converts or sympathizers.

My reply is simply this: Whatever one's position in regard to the "war on terror," understanding the ideas of our enemy is both a practical necessity in wartime and a fundamental liberal value. It is my hope that both sides in this bitter debate will profit from a deeper acquaintance with these

works. In any case, it simply will not do to dismiss Al Qaeda as an irrational movement without ideas.

Appeared in [Chronicle Review on 21 Sept, 2007](#)

Raymond Ibrahim is the editor of recently published [The Al-Qaeda Reader](#). He works for the Near East section of the Library of Congress. All translations in this article are from the book.