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What Do the Terrorists Want?

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JAMES L. PAYNE

The mayhem of 9/11 has been the attention-getting event of modern times, the exclamation point that marks the end of security and the beginning of an age of anxiety. Alas, attention does not imply analysis. The very notoriety of the 9/11 attacks made us all feel we were experts on terrorism, leading us to bypass the need for background research. We knew what the terrorists were up to just by consulting our guts.

Unfortunately, in a stressful conflict situation, guts are a poor guide to understanding the enemy. Participants who respond emotionally are inclined to imagine the worst about opponents and attribute to them all sorts of evil, threatening designs. Then, on the basis of these fears, they take extreme measures that compound the conflict. U.S. policy toward Islamic terrorism is today entrapped in this cycle of misperception and escalation.

The George W. Bush administration and the neoconservative architects of its foreign policy have from the beginning insisted on demonizing the terrorist enemy. Swept up by the shock and hysteria of 9/11, this camp leaped to the conclusion that the terrorists are out to conquer the world. Prominent neoconservatives David Frum and Richard Perle put this view bluntly in their 2003 book *An End to Evil*. “The terrorists,” they say, “espouse an ideology of conquest, just as the Nazis and Soviets did” (277–78). “A radical strain within Islam has declared war on us. This strain seeks to overthrow our civilization and remake the nations of the West into Islamic soci-

James L. Payne, now an independent scholar and writer, has taught political science at Yale, Wesleyan, Johns Hopkins, and Texas A&M.

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eties, imposing on the whole world its religion and its law. . . . In militant Islam, we face an aggressive ideology of world domination” (42–43).

President Bush expressed this view shortly after 9/11 in a speech to a joint session of Congress: “Al Qaeda is to terror what the mafia is to crime. But its goal is not making money; its goal is remaking the world—and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere” (Bush 2001).

What Does Osama Say?

What evidence supports the idea that the terrorists seek to impose their doctrines on the West? The reader of Frum and Perle’s book is surprised to find that to back up their assertion that terrorists seek world domination, they do not present even one quotation from a terrorist leader announcing this aim. This gap in *An End to Evil* ought to arouse our curiosity. Are terrorists making lots of “we’re going to conquer the world” statements that Frum and Perle just didn’t bother to collect, or are they saying something else?

To seek an answer, I undertook an analysis of Osama bin Laden’s statements. In a useful book, *Messages to the World* (2005), editor Bruce Lawrence has brought together all of the important and certifiably genuine statements bin Laden issued over the period from 1994 to 2004, twenty-four documents altogether. Using obvious categories, I coded each page, or part thereof, according to the theme bin Laden raises. The results are presented in table 1.

The first surprise is that the topic of imposing fundamentalist Muslim beliefs and practices on the West is essentially absent. With one inconsequential exception—a rote call to Islam, discussed later—this theme does not appear at all. There is no mention of how Western societies should be turned into Muslim ones, and no thought given to what they would look like if they were.

Table 1
Content Analysis of Osama bin Laden’s Statements and Interviews

Theme	Number of Pages
Criticism of U.S./Western/Jewish aggression, oppression, and exploitation of Muslim lands and peoples	158.75 (72%)
Criticism of Saudi leadership, especially for allying with the United States and allowing U.S. troops in country	45.75 (21%)
Religious comments, exhortations to martyrdom	10.00 (5%)
Bin Laden’s personal life	2.75 (1%)
Criticism of American society and culture	2.50 (1%)
Invitation to Islam, spreading Islam to the West	0.50 (0.2%)
Total	220.25 (100%)

Source: Compiled from Lawrence 2005.

The topic that does appear on page after page, amounting to 72 percent of the total, is criticism of the United States and other Western countries for their aggression against Muslim lands and the need to defend against and punish this aggression. “What America is tasting today,” wrote bin Laden shortly after the 9/11 attack, “is but a fraction of what we have tasted for decades. For over eighty years our umma [Islamic community] has endured this humiliation and contempt. Its sons have been killed, its blood has been shed, its holy sanctuaries have been violated, all in a manner contrary to that revealed by God, without anyone listening or responding” (Lawrence 2005, 104). The “Crusader-American alliance,” says bin Laden, is “tearing the Islamic world apart and plundering the wealth of Muslims in an unprecedented manner” (89).

Bin Laden may be rigid and subjective in his perceptions, but his point of view is not without substance. Great Britain was the colonial master of many Muslim lands, including Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and especially Palestine, which, with the approval of the United States, the British turned over to the Jews for the state of Israel in 1948. U.S. military aid and military advisors have blanketed the Middle East for generations. The U.S. military has bases in Djibouti, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. It sent troops to Lebanon twice, in 1958 and 1983, and to Somalia in 1992. The U.S. Sixth Fleet, with forty ships and twenty-one thousand servicemen and women, patrols the eastern Mediterranean, and the Fifth Fleet, with fifteen thousand personnel, patrols the Persian Gulf. Its Carrier Strike Group and Expeditionary Strike Group are poised to deliver military might anywhere throughout the region. This great show of military power may have achieved little in the way of domination, but to a local Muslim it can certainly look vicious and threatening.

Furthermore, American leaders have proclaimed the goal of spreading the American conception of democracy to the world. The neoconservatives have frankly urged the U.S. government to use military force to carry out this goal (see, for example, Kristol and Kagan 1996; Frum and Perle 2003, 278). Some might say this talk about spreading democracy by force is empty rhetoric for the most part, but to the man on the street in the Middle East it can certainly look like an aggressive program to impose American social and cultural values on Muslim lands. Shortly after 9/11, Bush described his war on terrorism as a “crusade,” a point that bin Laden didn’t miss: “The odd thing about this is that he has taken the words right out of our mouth [that America is waging a crusade against Muslim lands]” (Lawrence 2005, 121).

The second most prominent theme in bin Laden’s statements, criticism of Saudi leadership, extends the “defense of Islam” issue. Saudi Arabia implements fundamentalist Muslim doctrines more fully than perhaps any other country in the world. Therefore, a fundamentalist ought to view this regime with approval. Prior to 1990, bin Laden did approve of the regime and was a respected member of the Saudi elite. However, in 1990, at Saudi rulers’ invitation, the United States deployed troops to that country. This deployment horrified bin Laden. “Ever since God made the Ara-

bian peninsula flat, created desert in it and surrounded it with seas,” he says, “it has never suffered such a calamity as these Crusader hordes that have spread through it like locusts, consuming its wealth and destroying its fertility” (Lawrence 2005, 59). As bin Laden himself reports and his associates confirm, this event caused him to become an implacable America-hater and a sworn enemy of the Saudi leadership, keen to condemn everything about Saudi Arabia’s policies and practices.

“The Religion of Showing Kindness”

Most faiths endorse the idea of spreading the doctrine to nonbelievers. The Korean Christians who were seized in Afghanistan by the Taliban in the summer of 2007 were missionaries. The Mormons have some fifty-three thousand missionaries at work in the world, trying to attract adherents. Islam, too, endorses spreading the faith. One of the obligations on the believer is *dawah*, the act of inviting others to Islam. Writings and statements by Islamic extremists will occasionally contain statements about inviting others to the faith and pronouncements about the entire world’s becoming Islamic.

An American reader with the vicious violence of Islamic terrorists in his mind might at first interpret these statements as reflecting a plan of world domination. However, a closer examination reveals that they have a superficial, unimportant status in the speaker’s mind. They are brief, form a minuscule part of the speaker’s thoughts, and are couched in vague, formal terms, indicating that the speaker has not really thought much about them.

Bin Laden’s “messages to the world” contain one statement in this category of *dawah*. It appears in a 2002 letter entitled “To the Americans.” The first five pages of this letter dwell on U.S. “attacks” in Palestine and Somalia. Bin Laden focuses on Iraq, where he claims that U.S. sanctions led to the death of “more than 1.5 million Iraqi children” (Lawrence 2005, 164), U.S. support of Russian atrocities in Chechnya, Indian oppression in Kashmir, and “Jewish aggression against us in Lebanon” (163). Then the letter asks, “What are we calling you to?” It answers, “The first thing that we are calling you to is Islam. . . . It is the religion of the Unity of God, sincerity, the best of manners, righteousness, mercy, honor, purity, and piety. It is the religion of showing kindness to others, establishing justice between them . . . and total equality between all people, without regard to their colour, sex, or language” (166). This half-page of religious boilerplate is as close as bin Laden ever comes to voicing an aspiration of world domination. After these lines of ritualistic *dawah*, the five pages of the rest of the letter are spent denouncing the United States and its aggressions against Muslims.

Another theme that receives surprisingly little attention is criticism of American culture. Fundamentalists deplore modern Western culture, with its materialistic values and sexual freedom, and we know that bin Laden shares this critical perspective. As the page count indicates, however, this matter is not a salient theme for him. The

9/11 attack was not about punishing us for our morals and values. It was not aimed at destroying “our whole way of life,” as some U.S. commentators have put it. It was a reaction against our intrusive foreign policy in the Middle East.

Is Bin Laden’s Islam a World-Dominating Religion?

In analyzing ideologies and motives, it can be more significant to note what is *not* said than what is. In examining bin Laden’s statements, we encounter omissions that would be difficult to explain if his thinking were focused on spreading fundamentalist Islam to the whole world.

One gap is his lack of interest in Muslims in Western countries. If Islam were to take over the United States, France, Denmark, and so on, the local Muslims would have to carry out the transformation, either through political agitation within the democratic framework or through revolutionary violence. Therefore, a Muslim pre-occupied with world domination would be keenly interested in these local groups. He would note their success and growth, identify commendable tendencies, and criticize backsliders and apostates.

No such concern surfaces in bin Laden’s statements; indeed, he never mentions Western Muslims. An interesting glimpse into his perspective on Western Muslims came in a November 2001 interview, when a reporter pointed out that hundreds of Muslims were killed in the 9/11 attacks. In responding, bin Laden first ignored the point to reiterate the defense-of-territory theme: “If the enemy occupies an Islamic land and uses its people as human shields, a person has the right to attack the enemy. . . . The United States and their allies are killing us in Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir, Palestine [*sic*], and Iraq. That’s why Muslims have the right to carry out revenge attacks on the US” (Lawrence 2005, 140).

After delivering this denunciation, he nodded toward the reporter’s question with this afterthought: “Islamic law says that Muslims should not stay long in the land of infidels.” In other words, “real” Muslims should not have been in the Twin Towers in the first place. The obvious implication is that, for bin Laden, an American Muslim who lives and works in New York is not a “real” Muslim.

This narrow conception implies a nonuniversal view of Islam. To bin Laden, Islam is not a creed that applies to all peoples equally. It is, principally, a tribal religion, the creed of the Arabs (whose holy documents are valid only in Arabic). In this respect, it parallels Judaism, which is also a territorially based religion, and one that does not aim to convert the rest of the world. In several letters, bin Laden summarizes his message of resistance by repeating one of Muhammad’s death-bed commands, “Banish the polytheists from the Arabian Peninsula” (Lawrence 2005, 24, 187, 264, 271)—hardly a catchy slogan for a movement of world conquest.

Bin Laden’s parochial focus also shows up in his view of history. Speaking of ancient invasions of the Middle East, he says: “We find that when they invaded *our countries* more than 2,500 years ago they did not have a sound religion or ethics. Their

motive was to steal and plunder. Our ancestors in Bilad al-Sham [the area comprising modern-day Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, and Palestine] remained under occupation for more than ten decades. We defeated them only after the mission of our Prophet Muhammad. It was the true commitment to Islam that reshaped the Arab character, liberated it from pre-Islamic concepts, enlightened hearts and minds, and released energies” (Lawrence 2005, 217, emphasis added). Thus, in bin Laden’s (chronologically tangled) thinking, the territory and the tribe existed first, centuries before the religion appeared on the scene. For bin Laden, Muhammad’s religion is not a gift to all of humanity; its function was to strengthen the Arab tribe in defending its territory.

This fixation on territory can be difficult for a Western audience to appreciate. Modern culture has an international vision, cherishing values that apply worldwide, such as civility, reason, and tolerance. In a traditional culture, however, these values are unfamiliar, even meaningless. The focus is on the tribe, on the god that lays out dogmatic rules for the tribe, and on the territory that gives the tribe its livelihood and identity.

Another indication of bin Laden’s narrow conception of Islam is his lack of interest in Turkey. In 1924, Turkish leader Kemal Atatürk abolished the caliphate, the institution that established one head of Islam as successor to Muhammad (analogous to the papacy in Christianity). For fundamentalists, the dissolution of the caliphate marks a dark day in the history of Islam. Atatürk also set aside Islamic religious law, the sharia, and outlawed many fundamentalist customs about dress for both men and women.

If bin Laden were deeply interested in fundamentalist Islam as a universal faith to be spread to the entire world, we would expect him to be extremely hostile toward Turkish leaders because they, perhaps more than any other rulers in the world, “polluted” the traditional, fundamentalist creed. Surprisingly, however, he never mentions Turkey: it is entirely off his radar. This neglect squares with the hypothesis that he views Islam principally as an Arab, territorial religion. Turkey is a non-Arab country, and therefore what the Turks do in connection with Islam holds little interest for him—indeed, no more interest than the practices of American Muslims.

Another country never mentioned is Iran. A fundamentalist revolution occurred there in 1978, and one supposes that anyone seeking to foment the rise of fundamentalist Islam around the world would be eager to comment on this revolution, as either a good or a bad example. Yet bin Laden appears to have no interest at all in Iran’s Islamic regime.

Another sign that bin Laden is not interested in spreading a particular creed is his lack of interest in doctrine and practices. Fundamentalist Islam involves a long list of taboos and strictures, covering everything from details of dress and grooming to diet and relations between the sexes. Bin Laden scarcely touches on these matters. For example, when the Taliban controlled Afghanistan, he praised that country as “the only Islamic country [in the world]” (Lawrence 2005, 143), but he never mentioned

any policies followed by the Taliban that earned it this accolade. The reader is left wondering—to take a specific example—if bin Laden actually believes in the “total equality” of women (as he claimed in the pro forma statement quoted earlier) or endorsed the Taliban’s ferocious subjugation of women.

The Taliban also banned filming, movies, and television, yet bin Laden was eager to be filmed, and he watched TV in his compound (Bergen 2006, 180, 256, 284, 318). Is TV anti-Islamic or not? Bin Laden does not appear to care about the issue.

One also notes that bin Laden is uninterested in Islamic practices around the world. There are some fifty Muslim countries, and they vary widely in the degree to which they apply fundamentalist dogmas in law, economics, and customs, yet bin Laden takes no interest in these variations. For example, although it is a core tenet of fundamentalist creed that a Muslim country’s legal system be based on sharia, the Islamic law traced to the Koran, bin Laden never notes the issue, neither to praise the countries that have adopted sharia nor to condemn the ones that haven’t.

He does take Saudi Arabia to task for allowing usury—lending money at interest—but it is clear that his anger on this point has little to do with Islamic dogma. Every Muslim country allows the charging of interest under some kind of face-saving euphemism, so there is no reason to single out Saudi Arabia on this score. Clearly, it is not Saudi religious impurity that provokes his hostility. His real complaint is that the Saudis have collaborated with the “crusader” enemy seen to be attacking Muslim lands.

Not Seeking to Win Hearts and Minds

A particularly interesting indication that bin Laden does not view Islam as a doctrine intended for export to white, Western peoples is his disregard for techniques of winning converts. Here we need go no further than 9/11. A verse of the Koran enjoining *dawah* asks the faithful to “[i]nvite all to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious.” Even bin Laden can see that murdering thousands of people is not “beautiful preaching” or a “most gracious” way to invite Americans to Islam. The deed would fatally alienate them.

Bin Laden shows no disposition to apologize for 9/11 in order to court Western converts. He does not attempt to minimize the deed; in fact, he gloats about the extent of the damage. And he does not try to woo the American masses by drawing a distinction between Americans and their leaders: “Given that the American Congress is a committee that represents the people,” he says (in a touchingly naive interpretation of American politics), “the fact that it agrees with the actions of the American government proves that America in its entirety is responsible for the atrocities it is committing against Muslims” (Lawrence 2005, 141).

It seems obvious that bin Laden does not care whether Americans adopt Islam.

His goal is revenge, to punish the United States for its attacks and interference in the Muslim world.

Other Studies' Findings

Other researchers support this picture of bin Laden's motives gleaned from content analysis of his statements. Michael Scheuer, the former head of the CIA's Bin Laden Unit, has studied Al-Qaeda pronouncements for many years. He finds overwhelming evidence that bin Laden is motivated by the "belief that the United States is intent on destroying Muslims, their religion, and the Islamic world" (2006, 4). The idea—widely repeated by the media and U.S. leaders of both parties—that the terrorists hate and attack us "for what we are" (our freedoms, democracy, civil liberties, and so forth) goes so obviously against the facts, Scheuer says, that it merits "only scorn and contempt" (x).

Another scholar who has analyzed bin Laden's statements, Marine colonel John Jandora, comes to a similar conclusion. He sees the terrorists as reacting to the shame of U.S. intrusions: "He [bin Laden] builds a theme of erasing shame by constantly mentioning situations of enduring humiliation and disgrace and prospects of restoring honor and dignity. He brings up this theme over 75 times in 18 of his major statements" (2006, 44).

Reporter Peter Bergen, who has spent many years studying Osama bin Laden and interviewing people who have known him, concurs. Bin Laden, he says, "has never . . . expressed an interest in attacking the West because of our 'freedoms'" (2006, xxvii).

Other Islamic terrorists also exhibit bin Laden's lack of interest in world conquest. In *The Looming Tower*, an exhaustive survey of the roots of Al-Qaeda, Lawrence Wright finds that the terrorists haven't even thought about governing single countries, let alone the world: "The radical Islamist movement has never had a clear idea of governing, or even much interest in it" (2006, 280). In case after case, Wright details how Islamic radicals were drawn into the movement by perceptions of territorial intrusion. For example, Mohammad Atta, the leader of the 9/11 plot, had no real ideology beyond "vaguely socialist ideas." What enraged him and caused him to sign up for a suicide operation was the 1996 Israeli attack on Lebanon (Wright 2006, 345, 347). Ramzi Yousef was the first Islamic terrorist to attack the U.S. homeland, blowing a two-hundred-foot crater in the basement of the World Trade Center in 1993. Was he hoping thereby to impose Islam on the United States? There is no sign that the thought ever occurred to him. "Not a particularly devout Muslim," reports Wright, Yousef was aiming to topple the Twin Towers in order to cause 250,000 deaths, "a toll he thought equaled the pain the Palestinians had experienced because of America's support of Israel" (2006, 202).

Jessica Stern has interviewed Islamic terrorists in different parts of the world, and her account of their views, *Terror in the Name of God* (2003), shows the same pattern

seen in bin Laden's documents. Beyond brief, ritualistic *dawah*, the radicals show little interest in the conquest and conversion of the West, but on the subject of Western aggression and oppression they are verbose and emphatic.

Political scientist Robert Pape has developed an interesting methodology for discerning terrorists' motivation by studying their backgrounds. He collected biographical details of 462 suicide terrorists who participated in 315 attacks from 1980 to 2003. He found that the most consistent factor behind suicide terrorism was military intrusion in the individual's homeland. He found, for example, that "al-Qaeda suicide terrorists are ten times more likely to come from Muslim countries where there is an American military presence for combat operations than from other Muslim countries" (2005, 103–4). He concludes: "There is little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism. . . . Rather, what nearly all suicide terrorist attacks have in common is a specific secular and strategic goal: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland" (4).

The idea that terrorists seek to destroy the institutions of Western civilization is erroneous, a demonizing of the enemy that has no empirical basis. The idea of imposing sharia on Cleveland, forcing Queen Elizabeth to wear the burka, and letting George Bush have multiple wives is as ridiculous to them as it is to us. Instead, the terrorists are inflamed by the perception that the United States is committing aggressions against Muslim lands and undermining true Islam in these countries.

How to Deal with Islamic Terrorism

A correct understanding of the terrorists' aims and motivations is essential to crafting a sound policy toward terrorism. The Bush administration's approach involves "taking the fight to the terrorists themselves," as the president put it a month before invading Iraq (Bush 2003). This assertive strategy assumes that the number of terrorists is finite and fixed and has nothing to do with U.S. foreign policy. It assumes that once we have chased down the existing terrorists and put them out of action, the war against terrorism will have been won. Karl Zinsmeister of the American Enterprise Institute stated this view frankly in his 2003 book *Boots on the Ground*, a work of on-scene reporting that strongly endorsed the invasion of Iraq: "There is no painless solution to the devilish costs imposed by the terror masters. But there is a solution: Kill the killers. Quickly. And completely. That's where my campmates, the 82nd Airborne (and company), come in" (11; Frum and Perle take the same position [2003, 9]).

This approach is mistaken. The size of the terrorist ranks is not fixed. Their numbers are a function of the perception of American intrusion. Hence, a policy of projecting military force around the Middle East, of "taking the fight to the terrorists themselves," actually stimulates the creation of more terrorists. As an approach to countering Islamic terrorism, it is like trying to put out a fire by spraying it with gasoline.

Many analysts have noted how U.S. intrusion into Muslim lands feeds terrorism. Pape says, “American military policy in the Persian Gulf was most likely the pivotal factor leading to September 11” (2005, 104). Marc Sageman makes the same point (2004, 40). Stern puts the theory in general terms: “Our military action becomes the evidence our enemies need to prove the dangers of the New World Order they aim to fight. . . . Terrorist leaders tell young men that the reason they feel humiliated is that international institutions like the IMF [International Monetary Fund], the World Bank, and the United Nations are imposing capitalism and secular ideas on them with the aim of exterminating traditional values” (2003, 279, 283). Former CIA expert Scheuer echoes the point: “For bin Laden, the most effective recruiting tool imaginable is for the United States to keep doing what it has been doing in the Islamic world for the past thirty years. The invasion of Iraq and the subsequent insurgency there is icing on the cake for al Qaeda” (2004, 134).

The terrorist leaders themselves understand that anxiety about territorial violation drives their movement. Bin Laden’s deputy, Ayman al Zawahiri, made the point in a secret July 2005 letter that was intercepted by U.S. forces: “The Muslim masses . . . do not rally except against an outside occupying enemy, especially if the enemy is firstly Jewish, and secondly American” (qtd. in Bergen 2006, 366). Understanding the mechanism of radical recruitment, Bin Laden viewed the American invasion of Iraq with delight: “I am rejoicing in the fact that America has become embroiled in the quagmires of the Tigris and Euphrates” (Lawrence 2005, 208).

This is not to say that if the United States pulled out of Iraq and other Middle East involvements, the terrorists would lay down their arms. Their perceptions of “oppression” are somewhat subjective, and once their hatred has been kindled, it may not be amenable to rational adjustment. It is significant to note, for example, that bin Laden makes no comment about the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Saudi Arabia in 2003, an event that logically ought to have reduced his antipathy toward the United States and Saudi leadership. It may well be that the man is now so lost in hunger for revenge that he no longer cares about an issue that originally stoked his hostility.

Policy toward terrorism must therefore continue to grapple with the hatred felt by existing terrorists and the violence they intend to perpetrate against Western targets. But policy must also avoid increasing the ranks of America-hating killers. Many millions of partially radicalized Muslims in the world today are almost ready to believe that the United States is an aggressive nation seeking to attack, exploit, and abuse Muslims. U.S. behavior that strengthens this perception will add to the ranks of terrorists who feel a religious duty to slay Americans in defense of the Muslim homeland.

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