



NEWPORT PAPERS

A Series of Point Papers
from the Naval War College and the
Navy Warfare Development Command
For Senior Leadership
In Response to Critical Issues

Strategy / CONOPS / Doctrine / Decision

United States Naval War College
Navy Warfare Development Command
Newport, Rhode Island

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THE STRATEGY OF USAMA BIN LADEN AND *AL QAEDA*

Purpose: To develop an understanding of Usama bin Laden and *Al Qaeda's* strategy for achieving their objectives.

Background: Usama bin Laden (UBL) and *Al Qaeda* have adopted a number of very ambitious goals (see *Newport Paper* No. 08). Despite U.S. successes in Afghanistan, UBL and *Al Qaeda*, or their successors, can be expected to fight on. The multifaceted and well-articulated strategy they have developed still requires our attention.

Discussion: Based on a careful reading of UBL's statements, declarations, and edicts, nine central components of the strategy adopted by UBL and his organization can be identified.

1. Peaceful means do not work. UBL and his followers discount peaceful ways of achieving their goals. They believe, first, that Muslim rulers have become subservient to the West. Moreover, the physical presence of American forces in and around the Islamic world makes it difficult for Muslim rulers to stand up to the West. Second, current Muslim leaders are not responsive to the advice proffered by leading members of their societies and rely on imprisonment and torture to control their populations. From UBL's perspective, these rulers must be overthrown. However, left to themselves, the masses in Muslim countries are not capable of organizing and sustaining armed struggle. What is needed, in UBL's view, is a dedicated revolutionary vanguard focused on armed struggle against the enemy. Third, UBL does not believe that the Islamic community is capable of implementing a successful economic boycott against the Western-dominated global economy. The Islamic community is not mobilized, organized or developed enough to undertake a boycott or do without Western goods. Since peaceful means will not work, Islamists must resort to armed struggle.

2. Focus on the "enemy who is afar" (i.e., "Zionist-Crusaders") before turning to the "enemy who is near," the taghut (oppressive domestic ruler). Until recently, Islamic fundamentalists saw the world in terms of a triad of enemies, of which one, the Communists, have disappeared. UBL and his Afghan war veterans are convinced that they played the key role in the defeat and eventual collapse of the Soviet enemy. There are two enemies left: the Zionist-Crusaders and the oppressive domestic Muslim rulers. The West and its "artificial" creation, Israel, known to UBL and other fundamentalists as the "Zionist entity," cannot be separated. Traditionally, Israel represented the spearhead of the Western-crusader presence in the region. Sometimes it acted in the interests of the West in the region, and sometimes the West acted in Israel's interests in the region. The result is a symbiotic relationship, hence the term "Zionist-Crusaders." The Zionist-Crusader alliance has been augmented by the establishment of a physical presence by the

United States. The presence of both the Zionist entity and of "infidel" forces in the heart of the Islamic community is not only an act of aggression justifying self-defense; it also buttresses the oppressive ruler at home or, as on many occasions, prevents him from acting in the interest of the community. In the final analysis, not only is the enemy who is afar more powerful, he is no longer afar; indeed, he has never really been afar, he is *in* the region. That is why this enemy needs to be engaged first. Hence UBL "applauds" the attacks by Muslims against American forces in or around the holy land (Dhahran in 1995, Khobar in 1996, U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam in 1998, and the U.S.S. Cole in October 2000).

3. Develop flat non-centralized networks with autonomous cells and establish links with like-minded groups. This refers, first, to how *Al Qaeda* is structured and second, to its links with other groups like *Islamic Jihad*. *Al Qaeda* was established as a clearing-house in 1988 for Muslim volunteers going to the war in Afghanistan; it was not a rigid hierarchical organization, but rather a flat one. It has evolved into a flat, decentralized network with loosely affiliated members all over the globe. These loosely affiliated members can come up with a plan of attack which *Al Qaeda* blesses by providing organizational skills, training, money, and weapons as well as assistance in deception, denial and operational security. Second, *Al Qaeda* has established strong links with other longer established Islamic groups; in the case of the Egyptian faction from *Islamic Jihad*, they seem to have merged. The structure of *Al Qaeda* and its links with other violence-oriented Islamist groups have given UBL a far greater reach globally than he would otherwise have. It also makes *Al Qaeda* potentially very resilient and survivable, even when key nodes and cells are destroyed.

4. Sponsorship of states. While *Al Qaeda* has established cells in more than fifty countries worldwide and links with many other terrorist organizations, it has also had a physical location for its headquarters and leadership. Since May 1996, that location has been Afghanistan. The relationship between *Al Qaeda* and Afghanistan's Taliban regime was not simply, or even predominantly, one of state support or sponsorship of a terrorist organization. The *Al Qaeda*-Taliban relationship was symbiotic. *Al Qaeda* received sanctuary. But it provided the Taliban regime with financial resources, military support that provided an effective combat edge against the Taliban's internal opponents, and military training. While the *Al Qaeda*-Taliban relationship was one of mutual dependency, the Taliban was more dependent on *Al Qaeda* support than *Al Qaeda* was on Taliban support. This was a case of a terrorist-sponsored state rather than merely a case of state-sponsored terrorism. *Al Qaeda* can be expected to survive the downfall of the Taliban. It can also be expected to search for a new refuge. Countries with weak, failing, or failed states provide *Al Qaeda* with its most likely targets of opportunity.

5. Wage a "defensive Jihad"(armed struggle). A defensive *Jihad* is justified when the Islamic community is under attack from aggressive forces—as it is now in UBL's view. In his August 23, 1996 "Declaration of War Against the Americans who occupy the Land of the Two Holy Mosques," UBL stated unequivocally that the community was under attack:

...[T]he 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. Their blood was spilled in Palestine and Iraq. The horrifying pictures of the massacre of Qana, in Lebanon are still fresh in our memory. Massacres in Tajakestan, Burma, Cashmere, Assam, Philippine, Fatani, Ogadin, Somalia, Erithria, Chechnia and in Bosnia-Herzegovina took place, massacres that send shivers in the body and shake the conscience.¹

A defensive *Jihad* means that it is incumbent upon all individual Muslims to strike back. UBL enunciated this clearly in the February 22, 1998 edict signed under his name, called "Declaration of the World Islamic Front for *Jihad* Against the Jews and the Crusaders," in which he stated:

To kill Americans and their allies, both civil and military, is an individual duty of every Muslim who is able, in any country where this is possible, until the Aqsa Mosque and the Haram Mosque are freed from their grip and until their armies, shattered and broken-winged, depart from all the lands of Islam, incapable of threatening any Muslim.²

UBL implicitly highlights here the difference between an offensive and a defensive jihad. When the *umma* (Islamic community) goes on the offensive, war is conducted by professional soldiers and volunteers; however, when it is under attack, the defense of the *umma* becomes the obligatory duty of every *individual* Muslim. It is also a clever strategy on the part of UBL; he can claim that he is not responsible when outraged individual Muslims vent their anger against the United States but that he can understand their actions.

6. Guerrilla Warfare and Terrorism. What does holy war consist of at this stage? Notwithstanding his disdain for the United States, UBL does not underestimate the difficulty of fighting the United States. He is quite aware of the technological superiority of the United States:

...[I]t must be obvious to you that, due to the imbalance of power between our armed forces and the enemy forces, a suitable means of fighting must be adopted i.e. using fast moving light forces that work under complete secrecy. In other words to initiate a guerrilla warfare, where the sons of the nation, and not the military forces,

¹ Usama bin Laden, *Declaration of War (I)*, as translated by MSANEWS, 12 October 1996.

² From Bernard Lewis, "License to Kill: Usama bin Ladin's Declaration of Jihad," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 6, November-December 1998, p.15.

take part in it. And as you know, it is wise, in the present circumstances, for the armed military forces not to be engaged in a conventional fighting with the forces of the crusader enemy....³

From the evidence of *Al Qaeda* operations, we must be wary of viewing UBL's concept of fast-moving, light forces within the traditional framework of guerrilla warfare. *Al Qaeda's* concept of operations includes infiltrating alien societies, losing oneself in an urban environment, and using the enemy's technological and social vulnerabilities to one's advantage. It also involves the salutary application of terror as part of the strategy of *counter-terror*. UBL argues that the activities of America and Israel in the Muslim world constitute terror. It is thus permissible to respond to terror with terror. Initially, UBL's conception of terror was limited to the targeting of uniformed U.S. personnel on Muslim soil; however, he made no distinction between unarmed or armed military personnel; hence the killing of off-duty American military personnel was legitimate. Two years later, in 1998, he argued that American civilians anywhere were a legitimate target.

7. *Seek other means of military power.* UBL believes that it is incumbent upon Muslims to ultimately acquire whatever kind of weapons are required for the *umma* to be able to deter aggression, defend itself in case of attack, and retaliate. Islamic warfare traditions entertain notions of establishing and maintaining a correlation of forces and of deterrence. In 1998, UBL expressed an interest in the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction:

Acquiring weapons for the defense of Muslims is a religious duty. If I have indeed acquired such weapons [WMD], then I thank God for enabling me to do so. And if I seek to acquire these weapons, I am carrying out a duty. It would be a sin for Muslims not to try to possess the weapons that would prevent the infidels from inflicting harm on Muslims.⁴

In early November 2001, UBL claimed that *Al Qaeda* has nuclear weapons and that it would use them if the U.S. used weapons of mass destruction against *Al Qaeda*. In this context, UBL has adopted a deterrent posture. It is not clear whether his claim is accurate or mere propaganda. *Al Qaeda*, however, has long been suspected of seeking a nuclear capability. Indeed, while it may not have been able to acquire *bona fide* nuclear weapons, reports indicate that it has sought and may have acquired radiological weapons (i.e., "dirty" nuclear weapons).

8. *Multi-layered and redundant financial network.* Any organization needs finances to be able to implement its goals. It was the great Roman statesman Cicero who said that "the sinews of war are unlimited finances." The common perception in the media is that

³ Usama bin Laden, *Declaration of War (II)*, as translated by MSANEWS, 13 October 1996.

⁴ Rahimullah Yusufzai, "Conversation with Terror," *Time*, January 11, 1999, p. 39.

UBL is the "rich uncle of terrorism," bankrolling attacks through a personal multi-million dollar inheritance. This is incorrect; in fact, it is not clear how much *personal* wealth UBL has and it is not clear that he uses it solely or primarily to finance terror operations. Instead, he relies on two concepts familiar to Americans: the establishment of legitimate businesses and companies and the use of other people's money. While he was in Sudan from the early to the mid-1990s, UBL set up companies that engaged in legitimate business. His organization also gets funds from "pass the hat donations" provided by individuals after prayers on Fridays and from a large number of charities, some of which are unwitting accomplices.

9. Develop a broad-based appeal. UBL and *Al Qaeda* have established a nexus between those who hate America for *what it is* and those who hate it for *what it does*. Islamic fundamentalists will always hate America for what it is: a successful, secular, open and material society. There is not much that could be done to assuage this kind of hatred. There are also many more who detest America for its allegedly unjust policies—its support for tyrannical and unrepresentative governments in the Arab and Islamic worlds and its support for Israel. UBL's focus on the Palestinian and Iraqi situations and America's perceived hypocrisy is masterful because it resonates among secular Arabs and mainstream Muslims who otherwise view his ideological agenda with disdain. He has shown Arab and other Muslim leaders to be spineless and has outflanked Saddam Hussein, the Arab media, and intellectuals.

Actions/Recommendations: Policymakers must develop a basic understanding of the strategy of UBL and *Al Qaeda*. Understanding their strategy is a prerequisite to successfully countering it in the continuing war against terrorism.

Annex A

The Worldview and Motivations of Usama bin Laden

Purpose: To provide an analysis of the worldview and motivations that have shaped the objectives and strategy of Usama bin Laden and *Al Qaeda*.

Background: Terrorism directed against the United States is not a new phenomenon; Americans and American interests globally have been frequent targets of terrorism. In 2000 almost half of terrorist acts worldwide were directed against Americans and American interests. UBL and his shadowy *Al Qaeda* network represent a new and deadlier form of terrorism that could be a portent of things to come. Many terrorism experts have pointed to the emergence of a deadly religious or millenarian terrorism which, in contrast with the secular terrorism of the 1970s, seeks to inflict massive casualties, is technologically more innovative, and often undertakes suicide missions. Policymakers must be aware of the worldview and motivations that drive the enemy in the new war on terror.

Discussion: Usama bin Laden's worldview and motivations can only be understood in the context of the turmoil-ridden environment in the Arab and Islamic worlds and his role in the war waged by the Afghans against the Soviet invasion and occupation of their country between 1979 and 1989. Conditions in the Arab and Islamic worlds helped shape the views of Islamist ideologues such as the Palestinian Abdallah Azzam and the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri, two men who have had a deep ideological impact on UBL. His experiences in Afghanistan further shaped UBL's worldview and helped him develop a flair for organizational and managerial skills.

The Political, Socio-Cultural, Economic and Ideological Context. The Arab and Muslim worlds' fifty year fling with Western secular ideas has not led to significant development or modernization. Instead, these worlds have been rocked by societal breakdown, crises of cultural identity and political legitimacy, failing economies that are incapable of providing jobs for burgeoning populations, and collapsing infrastructures that cannot provide for basic human needs.

The failure of Western secularism to address Arab and Muslim needs has provided a fertile ground for Islamic fundamentalists, who have gained strength over the years. That failure justifies their opposition to regimes which have relied on *hulul mastawrada*, or "imported solutions." Their alternative is the *Nizam Islami*, or Islamic order. For fundamentalists the virtues of their solution are self-evident. Islam is both a religion and socio-political system. There is no separation between church and state. The Prophet Muhammad was both a religious figure who received the Koran as a revelation from God and a political leader who conducted affairs of state, engaged in diplomacy, and fought wars. But since the death of Muhammad, Muslims have never really been able to implement a virtuous Islamic order for any sustained period of time. During times of crisis, of which there have been many in Islamic history, fundamentalists or reformers have risen to promote their solution.

The fundamentalists call for the implementation of *hakimiyat allah*, or God's rule, under which the divine law, the *Sharia*, would hold sway. An Islamic divine order is characterized by the sovereignty of God alone; it stands in stark contrast to the secular order created by mere mortals in the West and imported over the course of several centuries into Islamic lands. Muslims living within man-made secular orders are living under a modern *jahiliyyah*, a Koranic term that describes the state of ignorance and barbarism that prevailed in Arabia before the revelation to the Prophet Muhammad. The modern day *jahiliyyah* is illegitimate and good Muslims cannot go on living under such systems.

What is to be done? Taken to its logical conclusion the political vision of most Islamic fundamentalists inevitably implies a violent confrontation with the state and its supporters. The most vivid and clear expositions of violent confrontation with and overthrow of the existing systems are to be found in the writings of two Egyptian fundamentalists, Sayyid Qutb who wrote *Ma`alim fi al Tarik* (Signposts) and Muhammad Abdel Salam Farag who wrote *Al Faridah al Gha`ibah* (The Neglected Duty).

Men like Sayyid Qutb and Farag believed that their vision faced a triad of enemies: the existing Arab state, the Western-Zionist nexus, and the Communists. An armed struggle, characterized as *jihad*, must be waged against this triad. In the 1960s and 1970s, most Islamic fundamentalists argued that the main and critical battle was against the "enemy who was near," the Arab state. This view was well articulated by Farag in his manifesto: "We must begin with our Islamic country by establishing the rule of God in our nation...the first battle for *jihad* is the uprooting of these infidel leaders and replacing them with an Islamic system from which we can build."⁵

But fighting the Arab state has posed major problems. Notwithstanding its decay and corruption, the Arab state has a formidable apparatus of law and order in the shape of large security services and paramilitary forces. Both Sayyid Qutb and Farag lost their lives in their struggles against the Egyptian state. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 provided many fundamentalists and novices with the opportunity to fight a deeply unpopular country and system. One of these novices was the Saudi Usamah Bin Laden.

Usama bin Laden: The Rise of a fundamentalist. There is little in UBL's early life to suggest that he would emerge as the Islamist leader of a terrorist network. It was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 that constituted UBL's "conversion on the road to Damascus." That "conversion" contributed to the evolution of his worldview in four ways.

First, it provided the opportunity to fight one of Islam's triad of enemies, a particularly godless one, on the side of the Afghan *mujahideen*, the religiously inspired warriors. The visible external enemy—the Soviet Union—was a substitute for an internal oppressive enemy. It is not clear that UBL had formulated any distaste or even deep-seated hatred

⁵ As quoted in Asaf Husain, *Political Terrorism and the State in the Middle East*, London: Mansell Publishing Company, 1988, p. 86.

for the ruling *Al Saud* family at that stage. He had not yet adopted a fundamentalist point of view. His family and business links to Saudi Arabia were too strong to cut. And the *Al Sauds* had not yet committed the unholy of unholies—inviting the infidels into the Arabian peninsula. However, the war in Afghanistan served as UBL's introduction into the world of Islamic fundamentalism. In addition, his strategy of focusing on the external enemy first, in contrast with Farag's focus on the enemy who was near, appears to have emerged from his experience in Afghanistan.

Second, the *jihad* in Afghanistan brought UBL face to face with the military and technological strength of a superpower. He was impressed yet disdainful at the same time. UBL thought that the Soviets were ruthless but also a paper tiger because, while they had material power, they lacked faith. He contrasted that lack of faith with the faith of the Afghan freedom fighters and the thousands of other Muslims who joined them. In UBL's view, his new superpower enemy, the United States, despite its impressive military capabilities, is similarly afflicted with a lack of faith.

Third, UBL's identification of the United States as an enemy dates to the Afghanistan war. According to a French journalist who interviewed him in 1995, UBL stated then that after the Soviet Union, the "next target was America... This is an open war to the end, until victory." In UBL's view the fact that he and the Afghan guerrillas were aligned with the Americans was simply due to the fact that they were fighting a common enemy, not because they shared common ideals. For UBL and *Al Qaeda*, the lack of ideological affinity need not rule out operational collaboration.

Fourth, the war in Afghanistan allowed UBL to develop a set of political and organizational skills which were to be put to great use in the post-Afghan war era when he turned his attention to the United States. Contrary to journalistic analyses, UBL did not rush into Afghanistan with an AK-47 to battle the Soviets. The *jihad* was not only about killing and dying in the name of God. It required extensive preparation, the construction of a logistical infrastructure, the solicitation of funds and of allies, and the recruitment of Muslim volunteers from other parts of the Islamic world, mainly the Arab world. UBL set up *Al Qaeda* ("the Base") to facilitate these activities, particularly the recruitment of volunteers from the Arab world.

UBL entered Afghanistan as a *dilettante*; he left a mature and experienced veteran of the war, even if he did not fight in more than two major battles. Among the most important lessons he apparently absorbed were a belief in superpower vulnerability and the belief that spiritual fervor and extensive preparation could be more than a match for the material and technological superiority of the other side.

Certain characteristics now associated with UBL emerged at that time: he was a facilitator and fund-raiser whose organization acted as a clearing-house for Muslim volunteers for the war against the Soviets. What is noteworthy is that UBL had not yet developed an articulated fundamentalist vision, one dedicated to overthrowing the enemy close to home, the Saudi ruling family, and the setting up of an Islamic system. Indeed, UBL solicited and received Saudi aid in fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. Nor did

UBL emerge with an articulated vision of change in the wider Islamic world. His philosophical views were probably embryonic, but it is possible that the Palestinian thinker Abdullah Azzam, who was killed in 1989, and Ayman al-Zawahiri, his second in command and a committed Egyptian Islamist, contributed to the development of his religious zeal.

When UBL returned to Saudi Arabia he began to focus his attention on an enemy that *was* close at hand—not the Saudi regime but Saddam Hussein of Iraq. UBL saw the Iraqi leader as an aggressive and greedy secular Arab nationalist leader who might threaten the sanctity of the two holy places, Mecca and Medina. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990 and seemed to threaten Saudi Arabia, UBL suggested that the kingdom rely on its defenses and augment them with thousands of war-hardened veteran Afghan Arabs. To his consternation, the Saudi ruling family invited in the Americans to defend the two holy places. In the 1998 declaration of the "World Islamic Front for *Jihad* against the Jews and Crusaders," UBL's dismay at this betrayal by the Saudis was palpable:

Since God laid down the Arabian peninsula, created its deserts, and surrounded it with its seas, no calamity has ever befallen it like these Crusader hosts that have spread in it like locusts, crowding its soil, eating its fruits, and devouring its verdure; and this at a time when the nations contend against the Muslims like diners jostling around a bowl of food.⁶

This episode was a critical milestone in the maturation of UBL's Islamic worldview. It prompted him to question the political legitimacy of the *Al Sauds*. One of the key duties of an Islamic ruler is to be able to defend the Islamic community from aggression. UBL also began formulating the idea that the American presence in the land of the two holy places constituted an act of aggression against Islam. In 1995, UBL issued a major critique of the Saudi royal family for its lack of commitment to Islam, its squandering of public funds, its inability to defend the country, and its subservience to the Americans. He also began advocating attacks on the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia.

The Saudis exiled UBL and stripped him of his nationality. He set himself and his organization up in Sudan, a friendly Islamic state. He spent much of his time there engaged in setting up companies, establishing sources of funding, and providing safe haven for the veterans of the Afghan war. It is not clear what he learned about Islam from Hasan al-Turabi, Sudan's urbane and polished Islamic thinker and at that time the real power in the Sudan. Notwithstanding his bleak reputation in the West, Turabi's writings have had great influence in Sunni Islamic thought. Sudan under Turabi became a haven for some of the more extreme Islamists, particularly those from Algeria and Egypt who were convinced of the necessity of overthrowing regimes in the Islamic world by force.

⁶ Usama Bin Laden as quoted in Bernard Lewis, "License to Kill: Usama Bin Laden's Declaration of Jihad," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 6, November/December 1998, p. 14.

Aware of the bloody and to date futile struggles of the most extreme Islamic groups fighting the regimes in Algeria and Egypt, UBL apparently became further persuaded of the necessity of focusing first on the external enemy that propped up oppressive regimes. The enormously altered geopolitical context of the 1990s reinforced that shift in strategic focus. The downfall of the Soviet Union allowed UBL to focus on the United States as *the* external enemy.

Recommendations/Actions: Policymakers must be cognizant of UBL's worldview and motivations if they are to comprehend his objectives and strategy and formulate a successful counter-strategy in the war against the perpetrators of terror.