

Bin Laden's war aims - some observations

One aspect of the current conflict which has been largely ignored by the media can be summed up in the question "What is it Bin Laden actually wants?" Bin Laden is doubtless a fundamentalist and almost certainly a mass-murderer. But there is no evidence that he is a fool. Understanding and answering this question will therefore be crucial if we are to have any chance of defeating him.

Bin Laden's faxed statement of yesterday (24/9/1) provides some useful pointers. First, he views the conflict in defensive terms: he is defending Islam against an on-going assault by the West. He doesn't see the World Trade Center attack as the opening shots in the war, but as Islam's response to previous US-led aggression. Secondly, in flat contradiction to the West's claims that this is not a 'clash of civilizations', Bin Laden sees the conflict in precisely those terms. To him, it is a "battle of Islam ... against the new Jewish and Christian crusader campaign that is led by ... Bush under the banner of the Cross."

Much ink will be expended on coming weeks on "understanding the Islamic psyche." I am not an Islamacist, so can only summarize what I understand the core issue to be. In the Middle Ages, the Islamic states were the economic equals of what became 'the West' and in the fields of literature, art, science and medicine, were arguably ahead. Since then, it's been downhill all the way. There is only one Islamic country - Qatar - which makes it even into the top forty of states measured under the UN's Human Development Index. In short, Islam just doesn't deliver. Centuries of angst, jealousy, 'loss of empire', and above all the need to identify foreign scapegoats for domestic economic or political failure, have, coupled with both perceived and actual 'insults' from the west, now boiled over.

As to how this struggle manifests itself on the ground, Bin Laden is characteristically vague. However, Mullah Mohammed Omar (the Taliban's spiritual leader) tells us in a statement coinciding with Bin Laden's fax that "if Americans want to eliminate terrorism, then they should withdraw their forces from the Gulf and put an end to the biased attitude on the issue of Palestine."

The prioritization is significant. What really gets under the skin of the fundamentalists is not Palestine/Israel - of which more in a moment - but US 'occupation' of the Islamic holy sites in Saudi Arabia and, by extension, US domination of the Islamic world through client regimes.

This explains why it should be relatively easy for the US to put together a coalition which, at least on paper, includes 'moderate' Muslim states. Their very continued existence depends on the containment of Islamic fundamentalism. If Bin Laden is able to destabilize these regimes through popular fundamentalist uprisings, he may swing the Islamic world round to his brand of extremism, and at least compel the Americans to prop up increasingly unpopular governments through direct military intervention. As we saw in Somalia, American expeditionary forces can become horribly exposed and can be locally defeated - in turn delivering fatal injury to the client regimes. America itself may no longer

be haunted by Vietnam, but moderate Islamic governments must be rightly terrified by the fate which befell the South Vietnamese government once its American 'guarantors' were humiliatingly helicoptered off the Saigon embassy roof.

Palestine is secondary. Bin Laden regards Yasser Arafat and the PLO as at best a busted flush and at worst collaborators with Israel. He has no use at all for an independent Palestine led by Arafat. Indeed, Arafat is probably genuine in his denunciation of the WTC attacks - like many other Muslim leaders, he stands more chance of an assassin's bullet from an Islamic extremist than he does from the Israelis. Bin Laden knows that the immediate beneficiary of the WTC attack will be Israel. No-one is going to complain too much if Israel now clamps down hard on Palestinian resistance. But from his stance this is a good thing: it will demonstrate the bankruptcy of Arafat's 'moderation' and swell the ranks of extremist organizations.

This is not to say, however, that Bin Laden has not learnt from the PLO and other groups. Both his targeting and choice of method reflect his profound study of the practical application of terror. The terrorist hijackings of the 1970s characteristically ended with the aircraft either being stormed by special forces (in which case the terrorists almost invariably perished) or with their negotiated surrender. Neither was particularly satisfactory as a means of achieving strategic aims. The use of suicide bombers prepared to crash an aircraft into its target has a perfect, if horrible, logic.

Similarly, the economic target identified by the Arab world in the 1970s - oil - proved to be generally ineffectual and would be even less so today when other sources are available. Bin Laden knows that, in 2001, you must attack the financial infrastructure of the Western economy, literally, the world trade centres.

In this respect, I fear he may have studied the success of our home grown terrorist movement, the IRA. British public opinion, and the British state, were able to tolerate a more-or-less permanent low-intensity war 'over the water' in Northern Ireland. Similarly, the US was able to view with relative unconcern the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, except on those occasions when it threatened to turn the Cold War hot. Now, however, terror has come home. It was the Canary Wharf bombing which convinced financial institutions and, by extension, the UK government (who were responsible for underwriting the multi-billion pound insurance claim) that the IRA war was simply too expensive. Bin Laden knows that a relatively few further well-placed blows will have the global financial institutions screaming at their respective governments for respite. It is in this that he sees his path to victory. He may yet be right.