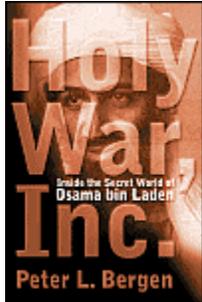




Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden

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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Who is Osama bin Laden? In 1996, the State Department called him "the most significant financial sponsor of Islamist extremist activities in the world" and today, five years later, he is the most wanted man on this planet.

To millions of people in the Western world, he is viewed as the personification of evil. Yet, if you approach the man on the street in Cairo, in the mountains of northern Pakistan and even in the air-conditioned luxury homes of his native Saudi Arabia, he has many admirers who sing his praise—some in secret, others more overtly.

But for his enemies and supporters alike, there is much about Osama bin Laden—the man at the epicenter of a loose-knit organization of Islamic terrorists spanning over 40 countries—that remains enigmatic and contradictory.

Peter Bergen helps us see bin Laden's organization in a radically new light: as a veritable corporation that has exploited 21st century communications and weapons technologies in the service of a medieval reading of the Koran and holy war.

For anyone trying to understand tomorrow's terrorist threats and the militant Islamist movements that could determine the fate of governments and human lives the world over, it is essential to have a better understanding of the man and his operations. To help us in this quest, we are very fortunate to have as our guest speaker a journalist who has actually met and interviewed bin Laden, and has spent several years researching the man and his operations.

After graduating from Oxford, Peter Bergen moved to New York in 1984. He worked first for ABC News and later for CNN, for which he produced a variety of news stories and documentaries, including one on the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. Our guest's interest in Afghanistan was sparked in 1983 when he made a documentary about the millions of Afghan refugees pouring into Pakistan following the Soviet invasion of their country. A decade later he traveled to Afghanistan to explore the links between the CIA-funded rebels who fought the Soviets, and the 1993 bombing of New York's World Trade Center.

As the man of the hour, I am sure many of you have seen Mr. Bergen on CNN and the McNeill-Lehrer Report, and listened to him on NPR [National Public Radio], as he educates us about terrorism or shares with us his first-hand observations based on his interview with bin Laden. His articles have appeared in various publications, including *The New Republic*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The Times* of London. He has received numerous honors including the Leonard Silk Journalism Fellowship, and he was a Pew Journalist in

Residence at Johns Hopkins University.

We are delighted that you are with us today. Please join me in giving a very warm welcome to our guest, Peter Bergen.

Remarks

PETER BERGEN: I'd like to thank Joanne very much for the very kind invitation and the very distinguished audience. Hopefully, I will not disgrace myself.

I'd like to pick up on some of the things that Joanne has said to start. Is bin Laden the personification of evil?

First of all, I'd like to say that my appearance here today is as the author of a book [[Holy War, Inc.: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden](#)]. I am not speaking on behalf of CNN or any other organization that I report for.

Is bin Laden the personification of evil? You know, some people have tried to compare him to Hitler. I think that is a great disservice to Hitler's millions of victims. Clearly, bin Laden is an evil man, in the sense that the Koran is very explicit in the protections afforded to civilians, even in time of holy war. His campaign is un-Islamic at its core. The Jews and Christians that he declared a holy war against have very specific protections in the Koran. The "people of the book" are repeatedly given special protections, not only in the Koran but in other Islamic works.

Joanna mentioned his support in Cairo, Peshawar and places like that. One thing struck me in all this. We have seen the demonstrations on television. Karachi is a town of 15 million people. You can have hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets, millions even. When [Benazir Bhutto](#) came back to fight an election in 1988, hundreds of thousands of people came to greet her, up to a million. So you are not seeing huge outpourings of popular sentiment.

I think that the events of September 11th—obviously, Osama bin Laden became a popular person in the Muslim world as a result of, really, in some sense, the cruise missile attacks against him, which to some degree turned him from a marginal figure into a global celebrity. But you are not seeing vast numbers of people taking to the streets in Karachi or Cairo, which in the past may have been expected. I think it is because people understand that the events of September 11th, whatever your feelings about American policies in the Middle East, were absolutely inexcusable.

"Enigmatic and contradictory" Joanne also said. It's hard enough to understand ourselves sometimes, or even other people, so trying to understand Osama bin Laden is difficult. Ultimately understanding him is going to be very, very difficult. In my book I made an attempt.

I am suspicious of psychological explanations of people's activity, particularly when you've only spent a limited time with them; in the nature of the reporting of this book I was able to speak to people within his family. This is a family living in one of the most closed societies in the world. This is a family which doesn't speak to the press.

The best example of this is if there was any moment for [Bakr bin Laden](#), Osama's older brother, to go on "60 Minutes" and say in a public sense, "We reject him," this would be it. They have made statements like that in the past, but they have chosen not really to speak to the media, at least the real inner core of the family.

But my stab at trying to understand him psychologically: Bin Laden's father died in an airplane crash in 1967, when bin Laden was ten, which clearly would have a big impact on any person. Bin Laden has said that in his view he is continuing—his father said one of his sons is going to fight the enemies of Islam, and bin Laden has said, "In my view, I am the only son who is doing so."

If you look at his life, a number of older men, very often religiously radical men—bin Laden's father, by the way, was very devout—have influenced him profoundly.

The first, [Abdullah Azzam](#), was actually his teacher at university. Abdullah Azzam founded essentially the international jihadist network that was seen as an anchor for his al-Qaeda today.

Let me just detour very briefly and explain who Abdullah Azzam was, because he is vital to understanding not only bin Laden but the whole movement. Abdullah Azzam was born in 1941 in Palestine. He was born near Jenin. Their lands were taken from his family for the creation of Israel. He fought himself in the 1967 war against Israel. He studied at the Oxford of Islamic learning, [Al-Azhar University](#).

Let me permit myself a parenthesis here. It's interesting. If you look at bin Laden's organization, none of them are Islamic scholars of any type or description. The older generation of Islamic radicals, like Abdullah Azzam and Sheikh [Omar Abdel-Rahman](#), studied at Al-Azhar. So they actually had the religious credentials in a way to produce a *fatwa*.

Bin Laden's credentials as a religious scholar are essentially zero. He has used other clerics to give him kind of clerical cover, if you will—Pakistani clerics, Afghan clerics, and Saudi clerics - that he invokes, or subsequently say very similar things to what he said in his *fatwas*. But I think it is important for our understanding to realize that his credentials as a religious scholar are nonexistent. That's the end of the parenthesis.

Going back to Abdullah Azzam, Abdullah Azzam eventually ended up in Saudi Arabia, where he taught bin Laden Islamic studies. The significance is very significant because the two teachers that bin Laden had of Islamic studies were (a) Abdullah Azzam, whose view of—basically, when the Afghan war happened, he said, "It's not just about taking back Afghanistan; it's about taking back Tashkent and Samarkand; and even Andalusia", which is southern Spain, which after all hasn't been Muslim territory for a long time. So it's a very expansionist view of jihad.

Add to that the fact that his other teacher was [Muhammad Qutb](#), who is the brother of somebody called [Sayyid Qutb](#), whose book, *Milestones*—or *Signposts*, depending on how it is translated [*Ma'alim fi'l-Tariq*]*—has sometimes been said to be the "What is to be done?"—the Lenin as it were, of the world's Islamic movement. Sayyid Qutb was executed by Sadat in 1966, but his book Signposts was a "how-to" primer about destroying Sadat's regime. He never mentions Sadat by name, but basically he came up with a rather novel interpretation, which is really the interpretation bin Laden has, that not only that jihad should not be defensive but it should be offensive. There are verses in the Koran for all sorts of things, just as there are verses in the Bible for all sorts of things.*

But he took the most offensive, as it were, interpretations and said that even in Muslim societies, if they were living in a state of what's known as *Jahliya*, which is a state of pre-Islamic ignorance, that we should fight a jihad against these people. This is important, because basically people read between the lines and saw that that was really calling for an attack on Sadat and his regime. Qutb was essentially saying that Sadat and his regime were apostates from Islam. This, by the way, is very much the same view that bin Laden has about the Saudi regime. He talks about them being traitors to Islam.

So these are the intellectual roots, if you will, of the movement.

1979 was a year of vital importance to the Muslim world for all sorts of reasons. First of all, it was the dawning of a new century, which is always a time of change. Secondly, the [Shah of Iran](#) left Tehran and [Ayatollah Khomeini](#) came. Thirdly, there was an attack on the holy of holies at Mecca when a Saudi Islamist extremist that bin Laden actually admires took over Mecca and fought a week-long, at least, pitched battle, leaving hundreds of people dead. Finally, of course, it was the year that the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, which was huge.

There were three transforming events in bin Laden's life in my view. One is the death of his father. Two is

the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. I'll tell you the third—I think you can guess what that is—later.

With the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, bin Laden voted with his feet and his wallet and went to Pakistan, aged a rather young 22, to Peshawar, to start the Afghan mujahideen there. Basically, he was helping with construction in the mountains.

One of the things that is pertinent today is there were hundreds of tons of construction equipment used in the early 1980s to build rudimentary bases in the mountains for the Afghan guerrillas and rudimentary hospitals. It is to these structures that he has undoubtedly, in my view, disappeared. He knows these; he built them himself. They were built over the course of some years. So it would make sense that this is where he would go. These places were designed to withstand Soviet air assaults, so they are perfectly designed to some degree—although the United States obviously has a better arsenal, they are protective to some degree.

In 1986 bin Laden fought on the front lines. Mary Anne Weaver is here. She did a brilliant piece in *The New Yorker* some time ago. I looked into the question of did bin Laden fight, because, after all, this is rather important to his legend, and I talked to people who were eye witnesses to the battle involved.

A journalist by the name of Essam Deraz, an Egyptian, was one of the first journalists to start documenting bin Laden's activities, which was important because he has been sort of lionized in the Middle East as a result of some of the journalistic reports that started in 1986-1987 about his activities. Essam Deraz very specifically said that the battle took place, I think it was, in April of 1987. It was a week-long event.

The significance of the battle was that bin Laden and a group of 35 to 50 of his men basically held their position against the Soviets. I think this is relevant for this evening's discussion because you have to understand the psychology of somebody who has been under an aerial assault by helicopter from the Soviets and been under attack from Russian special forces units, which I dare say are certainly not as good as American special forces, but nonetheless the [Spetsnaz](#) special forces were deployed against bin Laden.

Now, this may be part of the myth of bin Laden, but it seems to me from the reporting that I did that a battle took place, they held their ground, and it lasted a week. It goes to the whole question of his psychology, which is very relevant tonight as well, I think.

To one person he described coming under a Russian bombardment and the missiles going off within 30 meters of his position. He said that he felt so at peace that he fell asleep.

Now, this is a very different kind of person than [Saddam Hussein](#). Saddam Hussein obviously folded his cards, was interested in pursuing his own self-preservation. I don't think bin Laden is interested in his own self-preservation. I think he has decided to die, unfortunately, in a perhaps spectacular way. I'm not exactly sure about the way. I will get back to that in a minute.

The third transforming event, of course, is the introduction of U.S. troops into Saudi Arabia on August 7, 1990, for Operation Desert Shield, which became Operation Desert Storm [[The Gulf War](#)]. It is not, obviously, a coincidence that exactly eight years after to the day, U.S. embassies in Africa, in Kenya and Tanzania, are blown up within nine minutes of each other. Blowing up one embassy is hard, but blowing up two within nine minutes of each other is an order of magnitude harder.

This to me goes to another thing that I want to say, which is about the rising graph of bin Laden's activities.

It starts in 1992 with the bombing of a couple of hotels in Yemen, which were housing U.S. servicemen transiting the Gulf for [Operation Restore Hope](#) [the U.S. military intervention in Somalia, 1992-1993]. Bin Laden's followers blew up a bomb outside two hotels in Yemen. They went off, killing a tourist but no

Americans. That little-noticed bomb was the opening salvo in an ever-deadly and more complicated conflict.

If we take bin Laden and the U.S. government more or less at face value, bin Laden's men were involved in some way with what happened in Mogadishu on the nights of February 17 and 18, 1993, when 18 Americans were killed.

Who exactly killed the American servicemen, who exactly trained them, will never be clear, but in one of the very rare areas that the U.S. government and bin Laden basically agree, the U.S. indictment against bin Laden mentions Somalia. And bin Laden's military commander, the now apparently departed Muhammad Attaf, trained men in Somalia in how to bring down American helicopters. So with Somalia the graph rises a little further.

Riyadh, in 1995, the bomb goes off outside a joint U.S.-Saudi facility. Five Americans are killed. Three out of the four men who did the bombings said they trained in Afghanistan. They mentioned—they were probably tortured to get these confessions, but they have a ring of truth—bin Laden by name as influencing their thinking.

In 1998 you're all familiar with the U.S. embassy bombing attacks.

Last year the devastating attack on the USS COLE, one of the most sophisticated warships in the U.S. Navy, killed 17 American sailors and inflicted a quarter-million dollars damage on the COLE.

And then, of course, September 11th.

Let me add a parenthesis in the middle there, something that didn't happen, which is equally important. In a way, if you throw enough darts at a dartboard, eventually one will hit. Bin Laden has had a lot of operations which haven't gone right for him, not least of which was the millennium plot, which involved bombing Los Angeles Airport in the middle of the very busy Christmas tourist season.

There was the arrest at the Seattle border of Mr. Ressam. At the time, people thought he was going to bomb the Seattle Space Needle. No one was really clear. Ressam basically kept silent for 14 months about what his real target was. Facing 130 years in prison, he had a moment of truth and basically he explained that Los Angeles International Airport was the target.

That was part of a larger operation also to bomb tourist sites in Jordan and a U.S. warship in Yemen, which they failed at the first time. They came back for a second time.

Let me address that first U.S. warship in Yemen because there is another significance here as we look forward. It's Ramadan. The U.S. warship in Yemen, the USS SULLIVAN, was supposed to be bombed the night of January 3, 2000, which was the 27th night of Ramadan, which is the night that the Prophet Muhammad received the first verses of the Koran. Dying on that night is a special mark of Allah's favor, and the bombers who tried to bomb the USS SULLIVAN surely understood that if you die on that night you have extra tickets to paradise, as it were. The bombing did not work out. The boat they had was filled with explosives, and they sunk it and it didn't work out. They came back for more.

The reason I mention it at all is that the 27th night of Ramadan is coming up. Depending on where you are in the Muslim world, I think it might be December 14th. Since they have tried to attack American targets on that day, I think it would behoove decision makers to realize that that is a live possibility coming up in the future.

Let me throw out some other ideas.

There were several reasons I called the book *Holy War, Inc.*—like any metaphor, it doesn't really work after a certain point, but it's the best I could come up with.

First of all, bin Laden does operate to some extent like a CEO: he sets out general policy, other people implement it, it goes down the chain of command. The people who implement his policy may never have met him. I'll give you a couple of good examples.

The suicide bombers in the Kenya attacks had never gotten direct orders from bin Laden. One of the people who was convicted in Manhattan in the Tanzania attack, Mr. K. K. Mohammed, (a) had never met bin Laden and (b) had never heard of al-Qaeda—which would be unlikely now, but when he was interrogated by the FBI, he wasn't even aware there was an al-Qaeda operation.

So the people further down the totem pole, the gofers on the ground who would do your work, generally don't know what happens. The m.o. [*modus operandi*] usually has been that the people who plan the operation come in, and disappear a few days before the bombing. In a way, [Ramzi Yusef's](#) disappearance after the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993 seems very similar to me. The more you think about it, the more the Trade Center bombing in 1993 was really a dress rehearsal for what happened on September 11th.

Why else is it "Holy War, Inc.?" Joanne mentioned the integration. Here are a couple of good examples I think.

The declaration of war against the Crusaders and the Jews speaks for itself, as if the Crusades are still alive. That declaration of war was written on an Apple Mac computer, it was faxed to his supporters in London and Pakistan; they, in turn, made it available to Arabic-language newspapers, which beamed it by satellite to printing plants in the Middle East and New York. So a pre-modern message that was delivered by post-modern means.

Other examples: Al Badr was one of their main training camps. That was the training camp that was hit by the cruise missile attacks in 1998. Al Badr is one of the Prophet Muhammad's key battles. At Al Badr camp people learned how to use C4 high explosives, learned how to manage their cells in the most disciplined and modern ways, as it were.

So that's sort of why I call the book *Holy War, Inc.* But, like any metaphor, it collapses at a certain point, because al-Qaeda is *sui generis* at the end of the day, it is a slippery phenomenon, and that was my best shot at trying to explain it.

One of the other things I say is that it operates a bit like a holding company. Holding companies tend to be made up of wholly owned subsidiaries. Egypt's jihad group is a wholly owned subsidiary.

In fact, let me just talk about Egypt's jihad group for one second. If you really think about what this organization is, it is basically an Egyptian terrorist group with a very well-known Saudi at its head. [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#), of whom we've heard quite a lot about recently, the number two, is an Egyptian, a very bright man, speaks excellent English, a former surgeon. Many of the people I talked to said that he has been the brains or the mind of bin Laden. He founded Egypt's jihad group in 1973. He has been, as it were, a professional revolutionary/terrorist his entire adult life. He has radicalized bin Laden. That's Egyptian number one.

Egyptian number two, Muhammad Attaf, the military commander, now departed apparently, was a former Egyptian police officer. He has also played a key role in the organization.

The man who made the bombs in both the Kenyan and the Tanzanian attacks is an Egyptian. The people who organized both the Kenyan and Tanzanian attacks are Egyptian.

Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman, now in prison in Minnesota, both of his sons are members of the

organization. The brother of the assassin of Anwar Sadat, Khaled al-Islambouli, is also part of the organization. So again and again and again we see Egyptians playing very prominent roles in this group.

One thing that is interesting, however, is that of the 19 hijackers that attacked on September 11th, 15 of them are Saudi. To me that indicates that these were almost a kind of Praetorian Guard, because it's the Saudis and the Egyptians who are really the most important part of the organization.

Looking forward a little, one thing that is obviously of immense concern right now is the nuclear question. My view is that bin Laden's statements have been the best guide to his actions, so I think paying attention to them is a very good idea.

On October 7th, in the six minutes he had in the videotape that went around the world—when you think about the actual outcome of that videotape, it was the most widely distributed political statement probably in history, other than Mao's [Little Red Book](#); I mean hundreds of millions of people must have seen that videotape—why did he only choose to mention a few things? One of them was, of course, Saudi Arabia, the land of the Prophet Muhammad. The other was Palestine. But he also referenced America's nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Again, in [his interview with Hamid Mir](#), the Pakistani journalist, recently, he says he has nuclear weapons. We know the group is trying to acquire them. They were willing to spend \$1.5 million in 1993 to buy fissile bomb-grade uranium. It's not clear if that transfer ever happened. But it is clear that (a) they have made efforts to buy the stuff, (b) that bin Laden has said repeatedly that "it's no crime for us to get this stuff" and (c) that "we've got it now."

And finally, they are in the part of the world where it is very easy to buy this kind of material. In the course of reporting a story on Russian nuclear smuggling in 1997, I was approached through an intermediary by an Afghan who claimed that he was selling bomb-grade uranium. It turned out to be a hoax. But he was certainly selling something radioactive—maybe hospital waste, maybe something else—because he apparently was developing health problems.

Anyway, this sort of material is floating around Afghanistan. Bin Laden has the money and the motivation to get it. Now that he says he has it, I think it would be wishful thinking of the first order to presume he doesn't. We are not talking about an atomic weapon, clearly, but we are talking about some kind of radiological device, something that would be, in effect, a terror weapon.

One thing about his interview with Hamid Mir which is also interesting is he said, "I have nuclear or chemical weapons." What he did not say is, "I have biological weapons." I thought that was interesting that right at the moment that he could have said it he did not.

I'm going to wind up here.

Looking forward, I think that bin Laden has decided to die in the struggle, and I think that he has thought through what was happening up to this point. It may be a surprise to him how quickly the United States was able to defeat most of the Taliban. But I think he is looking to go out on a cloud of glory, and it may be a radioactive cloud, unfortunately.

One of the final things: The hallmark of this organization is to do things that require a lot of planning. The 1998 bombing of the embassies in Africa they started planning in 1993. The planning of the attack on the USS COLE started immediately afterwards. In fact, one of the people who was convicted in Manhattan, who was going to be the suicide bomber, told investigators that their next target would be a U.S. warship in Yemen. Unfortunately, that piece of information apparently was not provided by the FBI to the Pentagon. So the hallmark of this group is patience. They spend a lot of time planning things.

The other hallmark is to do something utterly unexpected. No one expected U.S. embassies in Africa to be targeted; everybody was expecting attacks in the Middle East. Nobody expected a U.S. warship to be

bombed. Clearly, no one was expecting September 11th. So my view is, just from what we know of their past activities—I'm not speculating here—that they plan things for a long time, they do things that are very unexpected. I think it would be, again, wishful thinking to presume that they don't have something else being planned.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: I would like to hear from you about the motivation of the followers of bin Laden. I don't mean the upper echelons, but the masses, the tens of thousands of soldiers. Is it religious fanaticism or is it desperation because of poverty?

PETER BERGEN: I'm a little suspicious of explanations that somehow poverty causes all these things, because it seems to me there is a lot of poverty around the world and it doesn't necessarily produce terrorism.

Let me give you a concrete example of a follower and why he came. K. K. Mohammed, who was one of the people implicated in the Tanzania attack, saw some videos at his mosque in Tanzania apparently of atrocities being conducted against Bosnians and also Chechens. Apparently, that was enough to get him to Afghanistan to train.

I think that, looking forward, closing these terrorist training camps is important, because it's one thing to have a rather inchoate hatred either of the United States or a feeling that Muslims are under attack, and it is quite another to go to Afghanistan and be trained about how to manage your cell and how to use high explosives and meet people who can help you. If the training camps are closed, I think that will go some way to changing the situation.

People do things for all sorts of reasons. I just mention that one example as being the kind of person who might come on the lower echelons.

QUESTION: What was the relationship between bin Laden and the host country? What kind of independence and opportunity did he have in the country? Was it a sort of defense between the [inaudible]?

PETER BERGEN: The relationship between the Taliban and bin Laden was good. [Mullah Omar](#) welcomed him to Afghanistan more or less as he arrived. He admired him for his role in the jihad against the Soviet Union. They are ideologically similar.

But leaving aside all those questions, we all know that bin Laden has provided men and money. One of the reasons that Mullah Omar said, "Handing over bin Laden is like giving up a pillar of Islam"—i.e., impossible—is that they are Pashtun, and the [Pashtunwali code](#) places a huge amount of emphasis not only on giving hospitality, but refuge.

In fact, I spoke to a Taliban official, who made the following interesting observation. During World War II, Afghanistan, which was seen as a sort of Aryan nation, there were a number of Germans there that the Allies wanted handed over. The Afghans, according to a Taliban official, did not hand them over. He said, "Look, these were non-Muslims. So for us, handing over bin Laden is impossible."

Even leaving aside the fact that they are ideologically similar—the money, the men, the common links—I think it would have still been very hard for the Taliban to hand over bin Laden, a bit like in the Middle Ages when, if somebody was seeking refuge in your church, for a priest to hand over a criminal would have been very difficult.

QUESTION: Peter, you have said that you think bin Laden has decided to die, probably in a spectacular way, perhaps on a nuclear cloud of glory. Can you amplify that a bit?

PETER BERGEN: Let's look at the set of statements he has made. First of all, he has fought on the front lines against the Soviet Union. He was willing to die in that struggle. He said he was willing. I told you the story about being willing to fall asleep.

He told Hamid Mir, the Pakistani journalist, "Just as Americans love life, we love death." I don't think it's just rhetoric. I think his words have always been basically kind of a reliable guide to his actions.

Then, finally, nation-states build atomic weapons, and clearly I don't think he has one. I will admit I have no way of knowing. But I think when he does say these things, I think the notion that he might have some dirty nuclear bomb is well within his technical possibilities.

QUESTION: [inaudible].

PETER BERGEN: Yes. The West has open countries. I think that one of the interesting things that bin Laden has been able to do is to produce this kind of coalition, this holding company as it were, which incorporates all these groups.

It's hard to blame the West for September 11th—I mean I don't think that was your intent—but the fact is that some of the countries—Britain, the United States, Germany, Italy—are some of the places where this group has had its largest penetration.

I think the Algerian example is an interesting one because (a) you've got a group which is not a wholly owned subsidiary of al-Qaeda. This is an independent group that will continue to function whether al-Qaeda is around or not, but they were willing to cooperate with bin Laden. For instance, in the Los Angeles attack, Mr. Ressayre was a member of the GIA Islamic group, and he was willing to cooperate, and they were willing to cycle through those camps. So one of bin Laden's geniuses, as it were, was to be able to bring together this sort of transnational alliance of all these different people. That's why I think eliminating or capturing bin Laden and the top leadership will go a long way, because these are the people with the organizational skills to bring this off.

But the fact is that these people were in the West. One of the people that in the book that I look into in great detail is Ali Muhammad, who was a member of Egypt's jihad group. He arrives in this country in 1985, joins the U.S. army, lectures U.S. special forces—perhaps even some of the senior officers, ironically, may have even received lectures on Afghanistan from Ali Muhammad in 1989. His neighbors, of course, say he was nothing out of the ordinary, he seemed like a usual guy. At the same time that he is training bin Laden's bodyguards in Sudan, he is also training in Afghanistan, military training for bin Laden's military commanders, traveling all around the world on al-Qaeda business. He is a rather sobering template for the people who arrived on September 11th, because this is a guy who lived here from 1985 until his arrest in 1998, basically one of the more senior military advisers to bin Laden.

QUESTION: Would the deaths of bin Laden and al-Qaeda dry up the money? What would happen to all these subsidiaries [inaudible]?

PETER BERGEN: I think the death of bin Laden would have a huge impact, because (a) he's the shorthand and the metaphor and the leader and the rhetorician and the ideologue and all these other things, and also the CEO. But also, when we say the death of bin Laden, we also mean the death of the entire leadership, or the capturing of the entire leadership. The U.S. government is keenly aware that it's not just bin Laden who has organized this group. So I think that would impact them a lot.

Will there be another Osama bin Laden? It's hard to tell.

But in terms of the money, I want to mention something about the money. The money is, I think, basically a red herring. If you think about what happened on September 11th, the general cost was \$500,000. It sounds like a lot of money, but it's really very, very little when you think of the amount of

chaos it caused.

Terrorism is by its nature a very inexpensive warfare. The bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993 was generally regarded to cost somewhere between \$3,000 and \$10,000. When Mr. Ressam came here to bomb the Los Angeles Airport, he was given \$12,000 by the group. And also, these people have their own money. They survive on, in Ressam's case, petty crime and welfare fraud and those sorts of things.

The reason ultimately that it's a red herring is that there is no amount of money in the world that will persuade somebody to fly a passenger jet into a large building. It comes down to belief. It's not clear how many of those 19 men actually knew that they were going to die in that operation. We'll never know. But at least six of them apparently must have understood that they were going to die. If you take away the willingness of people to die in these operations, you don't have September 11th, obviously, and you don't have the attack on the USS COLE, which was a martyrdom-suicide operation, and you don't have the bombings of the U.S. embassies, which were again martyrdom-suicide operations.

So it's bin Laden's ability to recruit people who are willing to die in his cause that is his priceless commodity. It doesn't really matter if he has \$2 million or \$35 million or \$500 million, whatever.

QUESTION: Where is Saddam Hussein in all of this? Is he connected directly or indirectly with him?

PETER BERGEN: In my view he isn't. If there was any administration in history that had a compelling reason to get the job done, it would be this administration. If you think about it, George Bush is well aware that his father was the subject of a very serious assassination attempt by Saddam Hussein, so serious that the Clinton Administration responded militarily. Obviously, the group of people around this Bush Administration we're all familiar with.

If Iraq was involved, if there was a scintilla of evidence—or scintilla might be too much—but if there were really indications that Iraq was involved, I don't think there is any American administration in history that has a stronger motivation to go and do it, the public will to go and do it.

I'm not a military analyst, but I am just saying this from a commonsensical point of view. It hasn't happened. To me that indicates that there isn't anything.

What we do know is that bin Laden met with a senior Iraqi intelligence guy in 1998. We also know that [Mohamed Atta](#), the leader of the September 11th attacks on the Trade Center, met with an Iraqi intelligence agent in Prague. But you and I all have meetings with people we don't do business with. I think that bin Laden also met in 1993 or 1994 with [Imad Mugniyah](#), who is the head of the Hezbollah, regarded as being the mastermind of the 1983 Marine barracks bombing.

As far as bin Laden is concerned, the Iranians are apostates of the worst order because they are Shia Muslims. And Saddam Hussein [a Sunni, like bin Laden, but a secularist], quite obviously, is not a good Muslim.

So I just think it fails the commonsense test. I'm not saying that it may not have happened, but it seems pretty thin right now.

QUESTION: Good morning. Could you comment on the relationship, or inter-relationship, if any, between the suicide bombers in the Middle East and the practices of Osama bin Laden?

PETER BERGEN: I don't know that much about the suicide bombers in Palestine or Israel, but it seems to me that one thing is really striking about the people who came and flew those planes into those buildings. Mohamed Atta was studying for his Ph.D., ironically enough in urban preservation, and he presided over the—This is a man who obviously spoke good English. And they had the technical capabilities to fly these planes. That just seems very different from what you've seen in the suicide bombers out of the Palestinian refugee camps.

It would be comforting, I think, for us to think that somehow the people who come and attack us are in some way very different from us, but it turns out that—this is why Ali Muhammad I think was a very good example to look at in the book. Here's a guy who speaks four languages, he's studying for a doctorate in Islamic jurisprudence and Islamic thought, he got a degree in psychology, he was an Egyptian army major, he worked as a computer network specialist in California, he had a leather import-export business, he pays his rent on time, and his neighbors thought he was a great guy. He was the guy who was really training a lot of people. He actually conducted weapons training in the New York area for people who were associated with some of the earlier terrorism attacks.

So it seems to me that certainly the people in the top echelon of this group are very different, and different from what our expectations would hope them to be. They are not people who are sort of "no hopers" and maybe getting some kind of a cash deal for their family as a result of a suicide attack. It's quite different.

QUESTION: The Bush Administration and many European nations are busy freezing the assets of many [inaudible] groups around the world who have been funding some of these operations. Can you discuss that to a greater extent?

PETER BERGEN: I think it's a "feel good" measure that will have little impact. It feels like you're doing something. I think as an investigative tool it makes a lot of sense because you follow the money and you find out the trade center. But there are several reasons it's a "feel good" measure.

First of all, the Clinton Administration—I mean I'm not totally *au fait* with exactly what the measures have been, but they seem very similar to me to what the Clinton Administration did in 1998.

There isn't an Osama bin Laden terrorist account in some bank in Switzerland. It doesn't work like that, and it never has. Bin Laden objects to banks on the very obvious grounds that they charge interest [which is against Sharia law], so 99% of the world's banks are out.

So I just think it's one of these things that feels good. As an investigative tool I think it makes sense. But I think, in terms of bringing down the operation, I don't see it being that fruitful.

QUESTION: I'd like to ask you a little bit about the home front. It's estimated that there are hundreds or up to a thousand sleepers in this country. First of all, I wanted to know if you accept that order of magnitude.

Second of all, the FBI has come in for a lot of criticism about its ability—or inability—to uncover these people. Do you feel that their inability to do that is due to their incompetence or to the competence of the so-called sleepers in laying low?

PETER BERGEN: It's difficult to speculate on how many people are out there. What I can say is that when Ali Muhammad did his plea bargain with the U.S. government, he said in 1998 that there were a lot of sleeper al-Qaeda agents out there. At the time, I thought maybe he was just trying to get a better deal for himself or that maybe that wasn't true, because it seemed so unlikely that there would be a lot of other sleepers out there.

When I was doing the research for the book, I think I counted about eight members or associates or al-Qaeda that I could really say existed. Obviously, on September 11th it was suddenly clear there were a lot more.

As to the competence or otherwise of the FBI, I don't want to talk about that. But I think it does go to the competence of the plotters. One of the things that strikes me about this group is they didn't brag about what they were doing; they didn't get arrested for some minor infringement that would get them deported, since a lot of them had overstayed their visas. It was an incredibly disciplined group of people.

It seems that only this guy who was arrested in Minnesota was the one person who brought attention to himself by acting suspiciously at a flying school. So I think it goes to the competence of the plotters as much as anything else that they were not arrested.

QUESTION: What do you see as the ultimate objective of bin Laden? Is it the extermination of all of Israel? Is it the establishment of an Islamic world empire? Is it the conversion of us into Muslims? What does he want?

PETER BERGEN: I think bin Laden could care less what we do. If you look at the tens of thousands of words on the record about what his war is all about, there are some very significant omissions. He never mentions Hollywood. He never mentions the West's tolerance for homosexuality, the kinds of things you might expect him to object to, like drugs and alcohol. As far as he is concerned, we are infidels and we can do whatever we want in our backyard.

He has always been extremely consistent about what he actually wants, which is basically a change in American policies. But, unlike terrorist groups like the IRA, which had a rather defined set of political objectives, bin Laden's are so all-encompassing.

What he wants and what his followers want is the restoration of the Caliphate that pertained in the 7th century when the perfect Islamic state was from the north African Coast of the Atlantic to northern India. As a political program, that has about as much hope as the restoration of the Holy Roman Empire in Europe. But it does exercise a lot of grip on his followers.

There was a very interesting videotape that was circulating this summer in which bin Laden really laid it out I think in a most explicit way. He sees Afghanistan as the [Medina](#) of the 21st century and he sees in his own mind that he, like the Prophet Muhammad—this is getting rather grandiose in his thinking—who made the [Hijra](#) from Mecca to Medina to fight against the pagans of Mecca—he very specifically invokes that. He says, "You should all make Hijra to Afghanistan and come to the perfect Islamic state where Mullah Omar, the commander of the faithful, has created this perfect state."

That actually raises an interesting thing, which is: Is bin Laden running Mullah Omar or vice-versa? The answer is, I think (a) Mullah Omar told Arnaud de Borchgrave in a very interesting interview in *The Washington Times* that bin Laden has sworn an oath of allegiance to him, and (b) bin Laden in his videotape refers to Omar as "commander of the faithful," which is basically the nearest thing to God on earth. So I think that Mullah Omar always had the power to basically say to bin Laden, "Your time is up, Osama, you are causing us too many problems," and chose not to.

So what is his war about? That's really the question in the end. I think his war has always been the same: it's about getting Americans out of Saudi Arabia, U.S. support for Israel, U.S. support for Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the U.S. bombing campaign against Iraq. It has always been these issues that have exercised him.

But even if you wanted to negotiate with bin Laden, which you obviously don't at this point, these are non-negotiable. And his demands are so all-encompassing that as a political program it just seems rather ridiculous at the end of the day.

QUESTION: What has been difficult for me to understand is this. The focus is on one individual and his terrorist organization, financing and so on. But in any corporate structure, holding company, and so on, you have not only the organic factors, but feeding into that and under that are your suppliers, your banks, all of these elements. Is it possible that there are those that are supporting this organization that are common in various governments that are not visible, that somehow or other there are powers behind the throne, somewhere in the various countries there are people who are supporting this but you don't know who? This is one of the things that has never been brought out. The financing, things like that—yes, you can freeze funds and so on. But there has to be some powers, key individuals, who are assistants.

PETER BERGEN: It would maybe be comforting if there were, but I don't think there are. Let me explain why.

Every Middle Eastern government that might be expected to—during the Gulf War, Yemen and Jordan either sat on the sidelines or effectively were on Saddam's side in one way or another. Jordan has been enthusiastically going after members of al-Qaeda. Yemen is cooperating in the fight against al-Qaeda. But, as these governments understand, al-Qaeda represents as much a threat to them as to anybody else. I think the notion that a government is supporting al-Qaeda doesn't make sense because it would be very counter-productive. Of course, in Mary Anne Weaver's—

QUESTIONER: Excuse me. I am not saying a government. I am saying elements within various governments. It doesn't have to be confined to the Muslim Middle Eastern states.

PETER BERGEN: I don't know about that.

But let me just carry on about individuals within certain governments.

We know that the Saudi government is basically, in Mary Anne Weaver's phrase, *realpolitik*. They funded the Taliban. There are 7,000 members of the Saudi royal family. Bin Laden's family itself has several hundred members.

Certainly, there has been money flowing from people in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf to bin Laden. To what extent they are members of their government I don't know. But the Saudis have tried to assassinate bin Laden on several occasions, so it's hard to imagine that their government would be funding him.

I think it would be comforting to have a sort of *Deus ex machina* that was really behind bin Laden, but there isn't. I mean, it just is what it is. It's *res ipsa loquitur*—the thing speaks for itself.

He is an individual who happens to have recruited a lot of people from around the world. One thing is they have gone to Afghanistan, which is great for many of these governments. One of the reasons this fails the commonsense test is that these governments were delighted to get rid of these people. They all went to Afghanistan and they were kind of isolated, in the governments' mind.

In Egypt, as [Mary Anne Weaver points out in her very good book](#), you are under sentence of death if you train in Afghanistan. It is a capital crime to have trained in Afghanistan. So I think the notion that there are other governments out there funding bin Laden just doesn't fly. It's very hard to prove a negative, but there is no indication to show it's the case.

QUESTION: Assuming the absence of a visible link between bin Laden and Iraq but looking at the Iraqis and looking at the Iranian Hezbollah, there are three sources of terrorism against us, Hezbollah probably being the best-financed and operated out of Iran. Now, would it be appropriate, in terms of the elimination of terrorism, after a successful effort with bin Laden to then go after the Iranians—and not necessarily militarily [inaudible] Hezbollah and then rolling out to the Iraqis? So we could consider this the first stage of a three-stage campaign.

PETER BERGEN: I don't want to comment on that because there's no reason to do it right now. I mean Hezbollah isn't attacking the United States. Hezbollah is a political party in Lebanon. I'm not trying to defend them. Iran is looking for closer links with the United States. Iraq apparently isn't involved. There is no reason to bomb them just because we don't like them. And clearly, it's not going to happen anyway.

But let me just go to this whole question about governments because it keeps coming up. One of the reasons I call it "Holy War, Inc." is, like a lot of state-supported industries in the 1980s which became privately held, basically terrorism moved from being a government-sponsored activity to essentially being privatized. All these groups—the Algerian Islamic group, bin Laden's al-Qaeda—don't need governments to function. All you need in a rapidly globalizing world is the Internet, a little bit of money, and that's it.

You don't need to rely on governments to sponsor you.

The [Abu Nidal](#) organization—he was sort of a bin Laden of the 1970s and 1980s—needed Iraq, Syria, and Libya to function. Bin Laden doesn't need these people.

QUESTION: If bin Laden was caught and put on trial, I think we always assume that there would be sufficient convincing evidence to convict him of being criminally responsible for the events of September 11th. But what would that convincing evidence be in your view?

PETER BERGEN: I think that's a very, very good question.

I think (a) a trial of bin Laden would behoove all of us. I think that would be the best possible outcome. I don't think it's necessarily likely, but I think that that would put everything out in the open in a way which would be useful to all concerned.

One thing is interesting. After the U.S. embassy bombing attacks in August, bin Laden was indicted within three months. It's curious to me that he hasn't been indicted already. Now, I know that there are people who say the usual set of things—"We don't want to show our intelligence gathering," etc., etc., etc.—but it seems to me that it would be useful from a public relations perspective, apart from anything else, to have an indictment against bin Laden.

What would that indictment consist of? Well, his own statements on the subject and the statements of his spokesmen have been pretty forthright. He actually said in videotapes that *The Daily Telegraph* reported on that the Trade Center was selected as a preeminent symbol of political and economic might, which seems like a fairly good part of that indictment.

Also, four of the hijackers were trained in Afghanistan. There were cell phone calls in Germany apparently on the day between al-Qaeda members basically indicating that they were involved.

Ultimately, also, when the second plane hit the Trade Center, it was obvious to me it had to be bin Laden. I mean what group or organization in the world has (1) a group of people willing to martyr themselves and (2) the technical ability to fly commercial passenger jets? Well, the answer is only one.

Bin Laden has constantly recruited commercial pilots. He had a number of pilots on call in the Sudan. He bought a jet in the United States in 1993 in Tucson, which was flown to the Sudan. He flew to Afghanistan from the Sudan in his personal jet. This is an organization that has jet pilots on call.

But secondly, the whole thing about the willingness to die. So just by process of elimination, it seemed to me obvious it was bin Laden, which I know is not an indictment or evidentiary. But you have to ask yourself, "If not him, who else?"

QUESTION: Some argue that this whole phenomenon is related to, at least in the case of Egypt, the collapse of secular state nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s. It leads to those who decide to [inaudible]. I'm just curious. Since some may question how effective that whole state [inaudible] Middle East [inaudible] today, how likely are we to see this phenomenon continue in various forms, even if he goes out in a blaze of nuclear glory?

PETER BERGEN: I think he is going to be a very bloody footnote in history. It's hard for us to understand that right now, but he is very much going against the tide of what is happening in the Middle East. If you look at country after country—in Iran, in Egypt—there is a cease-fire agreement that has held since 1998 by the very groups that bin Laden—in Egypt, the only ones who are not in a cease-fire agreement are in Afghanistan right now. The people inside Egypt, in the Islamic group which was behind the Luxor massacre apparently and various other attacks, these people have signed a cease-fire agreement.

In Yemen, where I visited for the book, the [Islah Party](#), which is the reform party, the Islamist party,

composed of the [Muslim Brotherhood](#) and [Hashid](#), which has been quite anti-American in the past perhaps, are regularly participating in elections.

The irony is that in the core Middle East there is actually a movement away from a sort of terrorist militancy. It is really on the fringes, as it were, like in Afghanistan or Chechnya or Kashmir, that some of these groups are still operating to a greater degree.

It's hard to predict the future, but it seems to me that in a sense the groups that were attacking [Hosni Mubarak](#)'s regime, the Islamic group and the jihad group, basically they lost every shred of popular support by acts of terrorism.

It is my understanding from a very good book by [Geneive Abdo](#) that the professional unions in Egypt have been taken over by the former Islamist radicals. In a way, that ultimately may threaten or may change Egyptian society much quicker than the terrorist groups that tried to.

JOANNE MYERS: Unfortunately, our time has come to an end, but I invite you to continue the conversation. Thank you very much for being here.

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