

Constitutional Rights Foundation

Islamist Terrorism From 1945 to the Death of Osama bin Laden

Despite Islamic teachings against suicide and killing innocent people in battle, terrorist groups like Al Qaeda have used a fundamentalist form of Islam to justify an unholy war of terrorism. In 1988, Osama bin Laden founded Al Qaeda. His death at the hands of U.S. military special forces on May 1, 2011 ended his leadership.

Over the years, Al Qaeda has committed terrorist acts killing many innocent men, women, and children. It was responsible for the September 11, 2001, suicide terrorist attacks on New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon, which murdered close to 3,000 people. On August 7, 1998, Al Qaeda terrorists almost simultaneously set off bombs 150 miles apart at U.S. Embassies in the East African countries of Kenya and Tanzania. The blasts killed 12 Americans and about 250 Africans, most of them Muslims. On May 12, 2003, Al Qaeda suicide terrorists set off bombs in three housing compounds in the capital of Saudi Arabia. The bombs killed 35 people, including 12 Americans.

Other terrorist groups, often linked to Al Qaeda, have been responsible for attacks around the globe. Bombings and of the underground subway in London in 2005 killed 56 people, and shootings and bombings in the Indian city of Mumbai in 2008 resulted in over 160 deaths. A bomber attempted to set off a car bomb in New York City's Times Square in 2010.

In a 1998 interview, Osama bin Laden called Americans "the worst thieves in the world today and the worst terrorists . . ." He went on to say that, "We do not have to differentiate between military or civilian. As far as we are concerned, they are all targets." He justified targeting Americans in the name of Islam. He said: "The terrorism we practice is of the commendable kind for it is directed at the tyrants and the aggressors and the enemies of God . . ."

The U.S. State Department maintains a list of terrorist groups. Included on the list are, to name a few, Lebanon's Hizbollah, Algeria's Armed Islamic Group, Egypt's Islamic Jihad, Palestine's Islamic Jihad and Hamas, Uzbekistan's Islamic Movement, the Philippines' Abu Sayyaf, and Pakistan's Jaish-e-Muhammad (Army of Muhammad) as foreign terrorist groups. Unlike Al Qaeda, most of these groups do not commit terrorism internationally. Instead, they use terrorism to help overthrow the regimes in control of their countries.

Although their goals differ, all these groups want to set up Islamist states, based on Islamic fundamentalism. (The political form of Islamic fundamentalism is sometimes called Islamism.) The vast majority of Islamic fundamentalists are not terrorists, but their teachings have been adopted by terrorist groups to justify their actions.

Islamic fundamentalism calls for a society ruled by Islamic law. It rejects most things Western (except technology). Islamists believe their culture has been infected by Western ideas and practices, which must be rooted out. They want a more equal society with less division between the rich and poor. They want women to return to their traditional role and dress. This can mean women taking care of the family, staying out of the political and business worlds, wearing a veil, and even dressing in garments that cover them completely. Fundamentalists call for a return to a strict, "pure" Islam as practiced in the seventh

century by the Prophet Muhammad and his immediate successors, the first four caliphs.

But the *Encyclopaedia of the Orient* states that:

. . . there are no Muslim sources indicating that the Islam of the Golden Age was as strict and conservative as the Islamists believe. All indications show that it was the liberal Islam that paved the ground for cultural, social and military achievements of those days—values foreign to all major Islamist groups. Hence, there is reason to say that the Islamist idea of the Golden Age is a dramatic falsification of history.

Islamist terrorists, like Al Qaeda, view themselves as following Muhammad's example. Muhammad in A.D. 622 had to flee from Mecca with a small band of followers. Yet in 630, he returned with an army of followers to conquer Mecca and then spread Islam throughout the Arabian Peninsula. The terrorist groups see themselves as small bands that will lead Islam to victory.

But terrorist tactics run against the basic teachings of Islam. The Koran, the holy scripture of Islam, set strict rules against suicide and killing women, children, and old people in battle. The overwhelming majority of Muslims deplore terrorist attacks and view them as violating the *Koran*. Even many fundamentalist Muslims believe terrorism violates Islamic law. Nonetheless, Al Qaeda and other Islamist terrorist groups draw their supporters from the ranks of Islamic fundamentalists.

Secular States After World War II

Islam is the religion of more than 80 percent of the people in North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia. Islamic empires controlled these areas for more than a thousand years. The last great Islamic empire—the Ottoman Empire—finally collapsed after World War I. During the 200 years it was crumbling, European nations were busy adding most of the heavily Islamic areas of North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia to their empires. Following World War I, they carved up most of the remaining parts of the old Ottoman Empire.

European control ended state by state. Most countries in this heavily Islamic area gained their independence shortly after World War II. Almost all the new leaders who emerged in countries like Iraq, Syria, and Egypt chose to follow a secular model of government pioneered by Turkey after World War I. Many adopted European or American legal systems and other Western ways, forcing Islamic law and culture into the background.

The most significant leader of the era was Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser. In 1952, he led a group of Egyptian military officers in overthrowing Egypt's weak monarchy, which was supported by the British. Nasser set Egypt on a secular path and tried to unify his people by promoting loyalty to the nation. Islam would

remain important, but no longer dominate government, the law, and education.

Egypt under Nasser adopted a socialist economic system and an authoritarian government with close links to the military. For a while, Nasser was an inspiration and hero to many Egyptians and others in the region. But poor management and corruption in the Egyptian government resulted in massive unemployment, increased poverty, and political repression. The same was true of most of the other newly independent states.

The Jewish State and the PLO

In 1948, the United Nations, with the strong support of the United States, partitioned the land then called Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. The surrounding Arab countries, however, rejected this partition and attacked Israel. They viewed the partition as another case of European colonialism, with Jews displacing Arabs and taking land that they had occupied for more than a thousand years. But Israel defended its new borders and even gained territory.

In 1967, Nasser asked the U.N. to remove its troops along the Egypt-Israel border, and he blockaded the Straits of Tiran to prevent goods from reaching Israel. When Egypt and Syria mobilized their troops in preparation for war, Israel attacked. This war lasted a mere six days and resulted in Israel occupying Egyptian land all the way to the Suez Canal as well as Jordan's West Bank, Syria's Golan Heights, and East Jerusalem. In 1973, Egypt and Syria attempted to defeat Israel in yet another war, but failed again.

The failures showed that the Arab states were too weak to overcome Israel, which was far more advanced economically and militarily. A new entity, the nationalistic Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), stepped in to take up the war against Israel. Founded in 1964 by Arab states, the PLO was set up as an umbrella organization to bring together the many Palestinian groups that had formed in Arab lands. The PLO set two goals: destroying Israel and establishing a secular, democratic state in its place. It never favored an Islamist state. Initially, the PLO launched guerilla attacks on Israeli military targets. But then factions of it started using terrorism—kidnappings, shootings, bombings, and hijackings. The two most notorious attacks were probably the hostage-taking and murder of 11 Israeli athletes during the 1972 Munich Olympics and the 1985 hijacking of the Italian cruise ship *Achille Lauro* and murder of a disabled American tourist on board. In 1988, the PLO renounced its goal of destroying Israel. (The PLO has consistently denied it was ever involved in terrorism.)

The Rise and Spread of Islamic Fundamentalism

For many years, two main forces have worked to spread Islamic fundamentalism. One is a grassroots, non-governmental effort. The other is sponsored by the government of Saudi Arabia.

One of the primary grassroots efforts has been through the Muslim Brotherhood (the Society of Muslim Brothers). Today, this organization exists in more than 70 nations in the world. It was founded in 1928 in Egypt, during British colonial rule. An Egyptian named Hasan al-Banna wanted to create an ideal government, based on Islamic law and society of the seventh

century. Before this ideal Islamist state could be achieved, he argued, the Muslim masses would have to be gradually brought back to a fundamentalist Islam that was unpolluted by Western ideas.

Al-Banna's Muslim Brotherhood preached self-help, generosity, family values, and restricting women to their traditional role in the home. The Brotherhood also worked to provide hospitals, schools, and other services for the poor that the secular government was failing to provide.

In the 1940s, Al-Banna created a secret organization within the Brotherhood that took part in attacks on police and British officials. In December 1948, a member of this group assassinated Egypt's prime minister. Al-Banna had not known about the plan and quickly denounced the killing. But the government retaliated by murdering Al-Banna two months later.

The Brotherhood splintered between those who advocated violence and those who wanted to work non-violently for an Islamist society. The same process has repeated itself in other countries, with the Brotherhood starting as a peaceful organization and sometimes splitting into more radical factions.

A second powerful force pushing fundamentalism has been the Saudi Arabian government. The home to about one-fourth of the world's known oil reserves, Saudi Arabia produces great wealth. The Saudi government supports a fundamentalist Islam called Wahhabism, named after a Muslim named Muhammad bin Abd al-Wahhab who lived in the 1700s. Wahhab led a religious movement to restore the purity of Islam in Arabia, the Muslim holy land where the Prophet Muhammad lived and died. Wahhab believed in the strict literal reading of the *Koran*. His movement became the model for many Islamic fundamentalists today.

Wahhab joined with the Saudi family of Arabia to violently suppress all Arab Muslims who resisted his fundamentalist version of Islam. After about two centuries of conflict, the Saudis and their Wahhabi allies established the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932.

Since the founding of the kingdom, the Saudi royal family has handed over control of religious, moral, educational, and legal matters to the Wahhabi clergy. Wahhabi Saudi Arabia has no elected government, and it allows no other religion and few human rights. The hands of thieves are still cut off as they were in Muhammad's time. Women have virtually no public life. They are even forbidden to drive automobiles.

Wahhabism is the basis for the Saudi education system. The curriculum and textbooks refer to infidels (unbelievers in Islam) as the enemy and promote the hatred of Jews, Christians, and Muslims who reject Wahhabi beliefs. (In 2002, the Saudi government promised to remove these passages and promote tolerance in its schools.)

The Saudi government has used money from its oil revenues to fund Wahhabi missionaries, mosques, and schools and to promote Wahhabism in dozens of countries, including the United States.

The Revolution in Iran

Two events beginning in 1979 promoted the spread of radical Islamism. The first took place in Iran. That year's Iranian Revolution, which overthrew the shah (king), electrified the

Muslim world. Many Muslims viewed the shah as a despot who had been put in power by the United States and Great Britain. Fundamentalists saw him as a Westernizer and traitor to Islam. During the turmoil that took place during the revolution, radical Muslim students seized the U.S. embassy and held American diplomats hostage for more than a year.

The galvanizing leader of the Iranian Revolution was a Shi'ite Muslim, Ayatollah (a religious title) Ruhollah Khomeini. (Shi'ite Muslims are a small minority—about 15 percent of all Muslims—but they constitute the majority in Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain and are about 40 percent of the population in Lebanon.) A fundamentalist, Khomeini seized power over other factions and created an Islamist state headed by a “Supreme Religious Leader.” Rejecting Western culture, he installed a political system with him as leader for life surrounded by other religious leaders. The new government did hold popular elections for other positions and even allowed women to vote and hold public office. But Shi'ite religious leaders control the military, law-making power, courts, education system, and all matters of public morality, which are enforced by a “morals police.”

Iran has also become a central source for arming and financing radical Islamist groups like Lebanon's Hizbollah (Party of God). In the 1980s in Lebanon, Hizbollah kidnapped a number of Westerners and was also responsible for the bombing that killed 241 U.S. Marines, sailors, and soldiers. Hizbollah also led an 18-year guerilla campaign against Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, which caused Israel to remove its troops in 2000.

But the Iranian Revolution has not improved the lives of many Iranians. Iranians are increasingly demanding democratic reforms.

From the Soviet War in Afghanistan to 9/11

The second event in 1979 that promoted Islamist radicalism was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a remote, mountainous, landlocked country with Muslim inhabitants. The Soviets invaded to help Afghan communists who had seized power. Muslims from around the world called for a jihad, or holy war in defense of Islam, to free the Muslim country from the invaders. Thousands from many countries volunteered to be *mujahedeen*, holy warriors. Saudi-funded religious schools (known as *madrasas*) in neighboring Pakistan produced many volunteers for the jihad.

Money poured in. The Muslim Brotherhood contributed heavily. But the two biggest backers of the jihad were Saudi Arabia and the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. The Saudis sent many volunteer fighters and spent untold millions of dollars. The CIA contributed more than \$3 billion, supplied more than 1,000 small, portable Stinger missiles (for shooting down helicopters and low-flying airplanes), and trained the *mujahedeen*. Afghanistan had become a battleground in the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States.

One of the Saudi volunteers was 25-year-old Osama bin Laden, a member of a wealthy Saudi family. He had attended Wahhabi schools and completed college studying engineering and public administration. In college, he had grown increasingly religious and had come in contact with radical elements of the Muslim Brotherhood. For the Afghan jihad, he raised money through his family connections, set up training camps, and commanded mujahedeen in battle against the Soviets. He also

organized his fighters into a network that became known as Al Qaeda (“the base”). After the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from Afghanistan in 1989, Bin Laden returned home to Saudi Arabia as a Muslim hero.

But in 1990, Iraq (led by Saddam Hussein) invaded Kuwait. Fearing that Iraq would next invade Saudi Arabia, Bin Laden offered to bring mujahedeen from Afghanistan to Saudi Arabia to help defend it from attack. Instead, Saudi King Fahd decided to rely on American military forces to defeat Iraq, and he allowed them to set up bases in the Muslim holy land.

The stationing of non-Muslim troops on Saudi Arabia's holy soil transformed Bin Laden. He viewed King Fahd as a traitor against Islam. From this point, Bin Laden became an outspoken enemy of the Saudi ruling family and its American defenders.

Saudi Arabia expelled Bin Laden in 1991. He went to Sudan, a country south of Egypt with a strict Islamist government. He took with him an estimated \$250 million, part of which he spent to fund terrorist training camps. Outraged with what he was doing, the Saudi government revoked his citizenship, froze his assets remaining in Saudi Arabia, and reportedly even tried to assassinate him in Sudan.

Back in Afghanistan, civil war raged among Muslim warlords, producing chaos and great loss of life. Then, in 1996, a group of former *madrasa* students, the Taliban, seized power and imposed a strict Wahhabi Islamist regime. (In Arabic, *talib* means “student.”)

Bin Laden had become an international outlaw, and Sudan, under pressure from the United States and Saudi Arabia, expelled him in 1996. The Taliban offered him sanctuary in Afghanistan where he provided the regime with financial aid and fighters. He also created training camps for his growing Al Qaeda terrorist network.

In 1998, Bin Laden proclaimed his jihad against Americans and Jews. He declared that since the Gulf War against Iraq in 1991, “the United States is occupying the lands of Islam in the holiest of its territories, Arabia, plundering its riches, overwhelming its rulers, humiliating its people, threatening its neighbors.” He also charged that the United States was destroying the Iraqi people with crippling economic sanctions and supporting Israel's occupation of Arab Palestine.

All of these acts, Bin Laden argued, added up to a “clear declaration of war by the Americans against God, His Prophet, and the Muslims.” Therefore, he concluded, “Jihad becomes a personal duty of every Muslim.”

A short time later, Bin Laden issued a “fatwa.” This a legal opinion issued by a Muslim religious authority. Since Bin Laden is not a religious authority, only his followers would take his fatwa seriously. Nonetheless, Bin Laden decreed that it was the duty of every Muslim “to kill Americans.” After Bin Laden issued his fatwa, Islamist terrorists began to strike American targets. In 1998, two U.S. embassies were bombed in Africa. In 2000, suicide bombers attacked the U.S.S. *Cole* warship off the coast of Yemen. In 2001, terrorist airplane hijackers killed almost 3,000 people in the United States.

The Hunt for Osama bin Laden

The United States responded to the September 11, 2001, attacks by declaring a war on terrorism. U.S. troops invaded

Afghanistan and overthrew the Taliban. In 2003, the United States and allies invaded Iraq and toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein, a brutal dictator, though not associated with Islamist ideas. By 2011, U.S. forces remained in both those countries.

Both Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama vowed to capture or kill Bin Laden. Obama made it a significant part of his 2008 presidential campaign and, in 2009, shifted military forces to Afghanistan in part to accomplish it. During these presidencies, U.S. forces and intelligence agencies were successful in targeting and killing numbers of Al Qaeda leaders, but Bin Laden remained elusive.

From time to time, Al Qaeda released video or audio recordings of Bin Laden to the news media. In these he taunted the U.S. or called on Muslims to attack Americans. In the meantime, a few reports surfaced that Bin Laden was either dead or dying, but his hateful messages continued. It was widely believed that he was hiding in the complex network of caves in the mountains on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Questions arose in recent years about how much actual control Bin Laden still exercised over Al Qaeda. The movement itself was decentralized and multinational, working through affiliates in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and elsewhere. To the world, however, Osama bin Laden remained Al Qaeda's figurehead and inspiration.

In August 2010, U.S. intelligence focused on a possible compound deep in Pakistan that had links to the terrorist leader.

After months of information-gathering, more evidence suggested that this was Bin Laden's refuge.

On April 29, 2011, after numerous briefings and security meetings, President Obama gave the order for Navy SEALs (Sea, Land, and Air team) to move in on the compound. On Sunday, May 1, they attacked and killed Bin Laden. In the firefight, four others were killed, including Bin Laden's son, one of his wives, and two other men. Upon hearing the news, President Obama reportedly said, "We got him." A ten-year hunt had ended.

Rejecting Terrorism

The overwhelming majority of Muslims reject terrorism and Bin Laden's call for a war on America. They view his beliefs as a perversion of Islam.

Bin Laden's only appeal was to those few who believe the United States is the enemy. In the last 25 years, Islamic fundamentalism has gained many adherents. It has attracted the poor, the unemployed and underemployed, and frustrated young people. Most of the states in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia have failed to improve the lives of their citizens. Some are brutally oppressive, and Islamist groups came to be seen as an alternative to the rulers.

Still there are signs that Islamist influence may be weakening. The uprisings in countries during the so-called "Arab Spring" have largely been led by those advocating secular-based, democratic reforms. It remains to be seen what role the Islamists will play and how Bin Laden's death may affect the situation.

For Discussion and Writing

1. What are "Islamic fundamentalism" and "Islamism"?
2. In 1929, British historian Arnold Toynbee wrote, "If you looked in the right places, you could doubtless find some old fashioned Islamic Fundamentalists still lingering on. You would also find that their influence was negligible." Why do you think that was true then and no longer true today?
3. What do you think accounts for the rise of Islamist terrorist groups?
4. What effect do you think Bin Laden's death will have on Al Qaeda and Islamist terrorism?
5. Some Americans have said that the killing of Osama bin Laden strengthens the case for withdrawing U.S. troops from Afghanistan. Do you agree? Why or why not?

For Further Reading

Esposito, John L. *Unholy War, Terror in the Name of Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

"Hunting Bin Laden." Frontline (PBS). 2001.

Lewis, Bernard. *The Crisis of Islam, Holy War and Unholy Terror*. New York: The Modern Library, 2003.

Wilson, Scott, Craig Whitlock, and William Branigin. "Osama bin Laden Killed in U.S. Raid, Buried at Sea." *Washington Post*, May 2, 2011.

ACTIVITY

Islamist Terrorism: What Should We Do About It?

Although Osama bin Laden is dead, the United States still faces the dangers of Islamist terrorism. What should we do about this?

1. Below are listed some policies that the United States might adopt to try to counter Islamist terrorism. Form small groups to discuss these policies.
2. Each group should choose what it considers to be the most important policy for the United States to adopt now. Groups may develop their own policy choice if they wish.
3. Each group should then defend its policy choice before the rest of the class.

Proposed Policies

1. Remove all American military forces from Iraq and Afghanistan.
2. Remain in Iraq and Afghanistan to develop democracy as a model for other Muslim countries.
3. Encourage and support secular democratic movements in such countries as Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, and Libya.
4. Provide foreign aid to Muslim countries in order to reduce unemployment and poverty.
5. Give foreign aid to countries that curb Islamists.
6. Work to achieve security and justice for Israel and Palestine.
7. Lessen our dependence on Mideast oil.