The Deep Intellectual Roots of Islamic Terror

Osama bin Laden and His Followers Represent the Latest Twist in a Tradition They Use to Justify Murder

By ROBERT WORTH

Long before Osama bin Laden appeared on television screens with an AK-47 by his side, he released earlier videotapes in which he appears in the guise of a holy man, sitting peacefully in front of a wall of books. That scholarly backdrop is an important symbol for Mr. bin Laden's terrorist movement as he tries to legitimize his extremist views of Islam.

"Many Americans seem to think that bin Laden is just a violent cult leader," said Michael Doran, a professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. "But the truth is that he is tapping into a minority Islamic tradition with a wide following and a deep history."

Although many Muslims are horrified at the notion that their faith is being used to justify terrorism, Mr. bin Laden's advocacy of jihad, or holy war, against the West is a natural extension of what some radical Islamists have been saying and doing since the 1930's. These radicals were jailed, tortured and often executed in their home countries, particularly in Egypt during the 1950's and 60's, for their attacks on Western influences and their efforts to replace their own regime with an Islamic state.

The Muslim extremists, members of Islamic Jihad, who assassinated the Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in 1981, for instance, left behind a 54-page document titled "The Neglected Duty" that provided an elaborate theological justification for what they had done. Addressed to other Muslims rather than to the West, the document drew on earlier thinkers in arguing that rebelling against one's rulers — which is forbidden by most Islamic authorities — is in fact a duty if those rulers have abandoned true Islam.

Mr. bin Laden, whose Al Qaeda movement merged with Islamic Jihad several years ago, has taken the same tack, drawing on medieval authorities to argue that killing innocents or even Muslims is permitted if it serves the cause of jihad against the West.

The roots of Mr. bin Laden's worldview date back to a school in medieval Islam that spread throughout the Arab world in the 20th century, known as the Salafiyya, said Bernard Haykel, a professor of Islamic law at New York University. Its name comes from the Arabic words al-salaf al-salih, "the venerable forefathers," which refers to the generation of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. The salafis believed Islam had been corrupted by idolatry, and they sought to bring it back to the purity of its earliest days.

"Salafis are extreme in observance, but they're not necessarily militant," Mr. Haykel said. The official Wahhabi ideology of the Saudi state, for instance, as well as the religious doctrine of the Muslim Brothers fall under the banner of Salafiyya.

Early salafi reformers believed they could reconcile Islam with modern Western political ideas. Some argued that Western-style democracy was perfectly compatible with Islam, and had even been prefigured by the Islamic concept of shura, a consultation between ruler and ruled.

That optimism began to fade after World War I, when the Western powers carved up the remains of the Ottoman empire into nation-states. A crucial step came in the 1930's, when some radicals began to argue that Islam was in real danger of being extinguished through Western influence, said Emmanuel Sivan, a professor at He-

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Rashid Rida (circa 1930) equated Western culture with the barbarism that existed before Islam.

Mr. Qutb, who began his career as a modernist literary critic, was radicalized by a roughly yearlong stay in the United States, between 1948 and 1950. In a book about his travels he cites the Kinsey Report, along with Darwin, Marx and Freud, as forces that have contributed to the moral degradation of the country.

“None one is more distant than the Americans from spirituality and piety,” he wrote.

He also narrated, with evident disgust, his observations of the sexual promiscuity of American culture. Describing a church dance in Greenwood, Colo., he writes: “Every young man took the hand of a young woman and these women had just been singing their hymns! Red and blue lights, with only a few white lamps, illuminated the dance floor. The room became a confusion of feet and legs: arms twisted around hips; lips met; chests pressed together.”

Ultimately, Mr. Qutb rejected democracy and nationalism as Western ideas incompatible with Islam. Even pan-Arabism, which was tremendously popular in the Arab world, was simply an obstacle to the foundation of an Islamic state.

Perhaps even more important, Mr. Qutb was the first Sunni Muslim to find a way around the ancient prohibition against overthrowing a Muslim ruler. “Qutb said the rulers of the Muslim world today are no longer Muslims,” Mr. Haykel said. “He basically declared them infidels.”

He did so, Mr. Haykel added, in a particularly persuasive way, by reinterpreting the works of a medieval intellectual named Ibn Taymiyya. A towering figure in the history of Muslim thought, Ibn Taymiyya lived in Damascus in the 14th century, when Syria was in danger of domination by the Mongols.

Mr. Qutb equated Ibn Taymiyya’s intellectual and political struggle against the Mongols with his own struggle against Gamal Abdel Nasser and the other Arab rulers of his day. It was a risky move, because Islamic tradition states that if one Muslim falsely calls another an infidel, he could burn in hell. Mr. Haykel said. It may also have sealed his death warrant, because Egypt’s rulers did not take such threats lightly.

But decades after his death, Mr. Qutb’s equation continues to inspire radicals like Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, who was convicted of conspiring to blow up the United Nations and other New York City landmarks, and Osama bin Laden. Mr. bin Laden quotes Ibn Taymiyya in the same way, arguing that the Saudi government — which earned his wrath by expelling him and serving as host to American troops during the Persian Gulf war — is illegitimate.

“By opening the Arab peninsula to the crusader, the regime was acting against what has been enjoined by the messenger of God,” Mr. bin Laden wrote in his 1996 “Declaration of War against America.” In so doing, the Saudi leaders ceased to be Muslims, he concluded.

That message resonates even with Muslims who do not share Mr. bin Laden’s extreme views, largely because many Arabs see not just the West but the entire political order in the Arab world today as tyrannical and corrupt, said John Voll, a professor at the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University.

“In his most popular book, ‘Signs on the Road’ (1964), Mr. Qutb wrote: ‘This is the most dangerous cause many Arabs see not just the Western enemy — a serious departure from the doctrine of Qutb and even Sadat’s killers, who argued that the internal struggle was the one that mattered.

Books and learning, as this 13th-century manuscript shows, were important to Muslim life in the Middle Ages.

But that may be merely a shift in tactics, not in overall strategy. “Osama bin Laden is using the U.S. as an instrument in his struggle with other Muslims,” Mr. Doran said. “He wants the U.S. to strike back disproportionately, because he believes that will outrage Muslims and inspire them to overthrow their governments and build an Islamic state.”