
Recent Statements of Islamist Ideology: Bin Laden and Zarqawi Speak

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THE CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIST MOVEMENT comprises a great variety of organizations and institutions. The history of the Islamist movement presents us with a similar variety as well as some diversity of ideological perspectives and formulations. Nevertheless, at the present time, Al Qaeda and its leadership occupy a central place in the Islamist ideology due to their public prominence.

Recently, Osama bin Laden, the worldwide leader of Al Qaeda, and Abu Musab al Zarqawi, the head of an Islamist terrorist group in Iraq originally called “Tawhid and Jihad,” but which recently adopted the position of Al Qaeda, both issued lengthy statements of importance. The pronouncements of these two terrorist leaders concerned not only operational matters—(terrorist activities in Saudi Arabia and Iraq, respectively)—but also fulsome statements or restatements of Islamist ideology.

Because of Al Qaeda’s prominence, as well as the political context in which they were offered—the then prospective Iraqi elections—these statements by bin Laden and Zarqawi are probably destined to play an important role in defining the framework of discussion for Islamist ideology in the near term. The following pages are therefore devoted to an analysis of these two statements.

American Policy and American Principles

Since September 11, 2001, Western analysts have posed and debated a crucial question: Is it American (or modern and Western) principles that have caused radical Islamic hostility to America or is it our policies—support for Israel, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, etc.—that are responsible?

The statements by bin Laden and Zarqawi seem to answer that question definitively. These terrorist leaders have declared that it is America’s principles, not our policies, that have made inevitable their war upon us and any Muslim allies that we might prove to have. Although both statements are

concerned with and tied to recent events in Saudi Arabia and Iraq, both are at pains to insist that these local events must be seen as expressions of a truly global struggle defined by fundamental differences of principle.

Bin Laden chooses to put the matter in terms of what he calls the worldwide struggle between “heresy” and the “Islamic nation.” The forces of heresy are led by the United States and include America’s allies, including Muslim allies who are “apostates” as a result of this alliance. The forces of the “Islamic Nation” are led by the mujahideen who serve as its vanguard. For bin Laden, nothing less than the fate of Islam and even of humanity is at stake in this titanic struggle.

For Zarqawi, the most important theme is democracy and what he asserts to be its fundamental incompatibility with the true foundations and principles of Islam. The forces of heresy are thus principally though not exclusively constituted by democratic principles and the American-led attempt to introduce them into the Muslim world.

Zarqawi’s argument requires one qualification, since many existing non-democratic Muslim regimes are also incompatible with proper and true Islamic political doctrine and practice. Because of his focus on the Iraqi elections, Zarqawi does not develop this aspect at length. Bin Laden, however, does, and he focuses his political critique on the monarchies or quasi-monarchies of the Arab Muslim world, beginning with an ideological assault on the Saudi monarchy that eventually embraces other Arab governments.

Because the two statements while compatible at their foundations have different foci, it will be useful to treat them separately in the following discussion.

Bin Laden: The Global Heresy and Muslim Apostasy

The immediate occasion for bin Laden’s statement was the terrorist attacks that had been carried out in Saudi Arabia in the name of Al Qaeda. These attacks naturally drew the response of the Saudi government, which in addition to carrying out raids and arrests, sought and received the support of at least some Saudi clerics. The latter condemned the attacks as violations of Islamic principles and law. Bin Laden’s statement is in the first instance aimed at rebutting this charge and indeed hurls it back at the Saudi regime and its clerical defenders. Although the bin Laden statement is particularly concerned with Saudi events and the Saudi regime—notably, its illegitimacy on Islamic grounds—it is at the same time and by bin Laden’s lights necessarily an elaboration of the general character of his ideology. For as he puts it, “this (Saudi) conflict is partly a local conflict but in other respects it is a conflict

between world heresy and with it today's apostates—under the leadership of America on the one hand, and on the other, the Islamic nation with brigades of the mujahideen in its vanguard.”

In bin Laden's view, the connection between the global Islamic struggle against heresy and Al Qaeda's local struggle against the Saudi leaders is that the Saudi regime “allied itself with Infidel America and helped it (in its war) against Muslims.” The sins of the Saudi government are many, but it is through its alliance with America that the Saudi government has finally rendered itself absolutely illegitimate, Islamically speaking. This, for bin Laden, now justifies and even requires according to Islamic law rebellion against and the overthrow of the Saudi government through attacks like the ones Al Qaeda has just recently carried out.

Bin Laden traces the reason for the Saudi embrace of its “unholy” alliance with America to the present dysfunctional character of the Saudi regime, headed as it is nominally by a ruler totally incapacitated by stroke. Both Islamic principles and other considerations render him unfit for rule and he should and would be replaced but for the rivalries within the ruling family. America, he alleges, is able to manipulate this situation and thus secure Saudi acquiescence to its nefarious purposes.

But bin Laden does not stop with the Saudi monarchy. He argues that even though circumstances in other Arab monarchies and also Arab quasi-monarchies like Egypt differ, in all of them America has found the means to manipulate their policies in its favor and against the well-being of the Islamic Nation and governance by true Islamic principles. In effect, bin Laden proposes uprisings against most if not all Arab regimes. The justification for this call of “internal Jihad” is that the Arab Muslim world is rapidly being drawn ever further into heresy and apostasy by America. “Therefore it is obligatory for all Muslims to take action for reform, taking into consideration the dimension of the conflict and the fact these regimes are nothing but a part of the system of global heresy.” One might say, though bin Laden does not use these terms, that the consequence of his analysis is to redefine the *Dar al Islam*—the Muslim world—as the *Dar al Harb*—the realm of war, or the realm of the Infidels.

Apart from bin Laden's discussion of Arab politics and his claim to represent the true teaching of Islam, he focuses on one other matter as important—education. According to bin Laden, America's or the “Crusader control over our country” now goes well beyond the control of Saudi Arabian politics and aims at changing “our school curricula—with the intention of disfiguring the identity of the Islamic Nation and westernizing its children.”

Bin Laden asserts that this is already an old American policy vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia, dating from the time of the first Gulf War, and even older elsewhere, as in Yemen and in Egypt. For bin Laden, “this Crusader intervention in the changing of the curricula is absolutely the most dangerous intervention in our affairs, because it is, in short, a change in religion.” “It is evident that the outcome of changing the religious curricula is damaging both to religion and to material interests. As for the damage to religion, you already know that it is blatant apostasy, and as for material interests, the (altered curricula) will eventually produce educated slaves in our country, who will be loyal to America, sell the interests of the country and smile in the face of the Americans, while they conquer the land and defile the (Muslim’s) honor, under the pretext of liberty, equality and the laws of the United Nations.”

Zarqawi: The Heresy of Liberal Democracy

Bin Laden cites no specific examples of American intervention in education so it is not exactly clear what he has in mind. Nor does he give specific information about the substance of the changes in education to which he objects except to refer generally to the process of westernization, secularism and western principles such as liberty and equality. Zarqawi seems to begin where bin Laden leaves off, offering a remarkably specific discussion of the vices of democracy. For Zarqawi asserts that “Americans have been playing with the *minds* of many peoples with the lie of ‘civilized democracy’” (*emphasis added*) and that democracy is as such “heresy.” Moreover, he understands the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to have been primarily motivated by this heresy: “The Infidel American administration declared war on Iraq and Afghanistan because it is the primary protector and guardian of democracy in the world.” Hence, for Zarqawi as for bin Laden, Islamist hostility toward America derives from principles rather than policies—or at least from the policies that flow directly and necessarily from American principles.

Zarqawi’s statement presents both general reasons why democracy is heretical as well as objections to specific aspects of a certain kind of democracy, which we would call “liberal democracy.” Although Zarqawi’s denunciation of democracy was much noted in the papers and referred to by President Bush, the thoroughgoing character of his attack and the fact that the object of his attack is not merely the democratic principle but liberal democracy in particular has received little attention. It thus deserves some brief elaboration.

For Zarqawi, the fundamental problem with liberal democracy is that it makes the will of the people sacred rather than the “divine law given by the Lord of the world” that alone deserves that distinction. In this way, liberal

democracy is not merely a political system but a “religion”—a religion, one might say, “of the people”—and it is thus heretical in at least two senses of the word. First, democracy is heretical because within a democracy, the legislator is man rather than Allah. This is the “very essence of heresy,” explains Zarqawi, for it is man, not God, who is “worshipped, obeyed and deified.” Second, liberal democracy in particular is that form of heresy known as “polytheism”—the very form of heresy which the Qur’an was revealed to combat. Liberal democracy is polytheism since it associates man as a “partner” with God. From this heretical democratic root grow many heretical branches—the variety of democratic freedoms that constitute what we call liberal democracy.

Zarqawi enumerates several of these liberal heresies, but the first and clearly the most important from his point of view is freedom of religion. Although he does not make his argument against freedom of religion altogether clear, it would seem that he thinks of it as the necessary corollary of democracy. For without freedom of religion, freedom could not enjoy sovereign legislative authority. Freedom of religion is then “patently false and perverse,” and bound to lead some to apostasy—a crime that, as Zarqawi hastens to remind his audience, is a capital offense in the Muslim context.

Zarqawi is aware of the possibility that one might maintain one’s religious ritual practice and worship in a democracy through the principle of separation of religion and politics, a principle upon which he claims democracy is based. But this principle, in Zarqawi’s view, amounts to telling Allah what is and what is not His prerogative. To the extent that this is not simply a democratic principle, Zarqawi implies that it is a Christian principle for it “renders to Allah what is Allah’s.”

Other democratic and civil liberties—such as freedom of expression, or freedom of association, and in particular the freedom to form political parties—are also if not quite equally as abhorrent as common democratic institutions like civil courts. Such courts, which owe their appointment to democratically elected legislatures, amount to making man the arbiter of governmental disputes, whereas by Zarqawi’s lights, it is Allah alone who has the right of arbitration.

Thus Zarqawi rejects liberal democracy, root and branch. In fact, the heretical character of liberal democracy demands resistance, although at the present time that resistance will be difficult and necessarily violent. For Zarqawi observes, with considerable lamentation, that the problem facing Islam is not only or no longer only Infidel adversaries. Many Muslims, he explains, “continue to admire democracy and defend it as though they were its owners and creators; their hearts are imbued with the love of democracy as the Chil-

dren of Israel were imbued with the love of the (golden) calf.” This is so even though “democratic experiments have had damaging consequences for the Muslims, causing weakness, controversy, division, and conflict.” In keeping with this view, Al Qaeda operatives in Iraq subsequently announced to Iraqi citizens before the elections: “Take care not to go near the centers of heresy and abomination, that is the election (stations). He who has warned has carried out his duty; (if something happens) do not blame us, but yourselves.”

Democracy vs. the Islamic Nation

Though the themes of both bin Laden and Zarqawi are not simply new, they place a particularly heavy stress on the actual or potential inner corruption of Muslim society—whether specifically in the case of Saudi Arabia and Iraq, or more generally in the wider Muslim world, especially the Arab Muslim world. It is this perceived potential for internal corruption that justifies the perpetration of violence against other Muslims. The crossing of this sometime red line requires concerted argument on its behalf, for as both bin Laden and Zarqawi know, the perpetration of this kind of violence, in contrast to violence directed solely against Infidel targets, is suspect by many Muslims and has recently been debated by Islamic legal authorities, including by those sympathetic to the Islamist cause.

In both cases, the strategy of their argument is to tie the necessity of this violence to a global struggle with democratic heresy. In bin Laden’s treatment, the “near enemy”—Muslim rulers—has now practically merged with the “far enemy”—America. In Zarqawi’s treatment, the very souls of Muslims are now merging with those of the Infidels.

In both cases, this strategy has the effect of breaking down the distinction between principles and policies—the theme of Western analysis and even Muslim analysis in times past. Though their statements are in the beginning and end obviously related to very specific countries and events, the link to the global seems first and foremost to be a reaction to the prospect of some real reform in the Arab Muslim world. Though Western analysts are still uncertain and much divided over the real prospects of such reform, bin Laden and especially Zarqawi seem to be persuaded that it is a genuine and serious threat. The Iraqi elections appear to have reinforced that belief.

Inasmuch as that requires Islamist discourse to put a particular stress on the issue of democracy, we are likely to see the idea of democracy as heresy play an even more prominent role in Islamist discourse than heretofore. While the most immediate bearing of this will be on the political life of mostly Muslim countries around the world, it also directly affects the minority Mus-

lim communities living within Western democracies. If it is determined to be illegitimate for Muslims to govern themselves democratically, the question will arise whether Muslims living in democratic countries can participate in democratic practice at all.