

# **Lying with the Enemy: Militant Islam in the Global Arena**

Faisal Devji

New School for Social Research

Osama bin Laden's rhetoric has consistently voiced a desire for global equality between Muslims and Christians, or between the Islamic world and the West. Having accused America of hypocrisy as far as its advancement of this equality is concerned, Bin Laden turns his attention to the only form in which he thinks such equality is now possible: the equality of death. This is why he has repeatedly emphasized the need for an equivalence of terror between the Muslim world and America, as if this were the only form in which the two might come together and even communicate one with the other. For Al-Qaeda, terror is the only form in which global freedom and equality are now available. Terror therefore functions as the dark side of America's own democracy, as inseparable from it as an evil twin. So in the aftermath of the 2005 Madrid bombings, Bin Laden issued a statement in which he defined terrorism as an effort to universalize security as a human right, if only by refusing to accept its monopolization by the West. For equality demanded that security should be enjoyed by all or by none:

It is well known that security is a vital necessity for every human being. We will not let you monopolize it for yourselves [...]<sup>1</sup>

In adopting this stance, Bin Laden has done nothing more than recognize the unity of a globe in which no man can be separated from any other, each one being held responsible for his fellows, with whose suffering he must identify. Such is the humanitarian logic that characterizes global movements like environmentalism and pacifism as well. But this unity is made manifest by violence, which builds a bridge between enemies by demonstrating that all men are equal if in death alone. It is

as if this macabre equivalence has replaced the equality that is supposed to exist between men and unite them as part of a single humanity. The militant's violence, then, ironically links the world's people together in a web of mutual obligation and responsibility. It is this web of universal complicity, after all, that allows American or British civilians to be killed in recompense for the killing of Muslims in Iraq.

The worldwide web of war spun by Al-Qaeda exists as a kind of spectre of our global inter-relatedness, one that has as yet no specific political form of its own. And the militant's obsessive demands for equal treatment within this world, even if it be only in the form of a reciprocity of violence, represents the dark side of humanity's global brotherhood, whose reality is the product of our increasingly inter-connected universe. But this means that the same web of responsibilities and obligations linking the holy war to its enemies, also links them together as a community, even as a community of brothers. For are not Al-Qaeda's victims said to be merely the counterparts of innocent Muslims killed elsewhere? They are therefore in some perverse way brothers once removed, made even more like brothers by dying alongside suicide bombers and mingling blood.

In the global perspective adopted by militant Islam, the peoples of the world are bound together in a web of mutual relations and complicities. For the moment this intimacy expresses itself in the most murderous way, though even here it represents what I have referred to as the dark side of another, more benign kind of relationship, like that of universal brotherhood. Indeed Al-Qaeda's actions and rhetoric continuously invoke the spectre of a global community that has as yet no formal existence of its own. And this is what allows its war to draw upon the forms and even the vocabulary of other global movements such as environmental and pacifist ones, all of which are concerned with the fate of humanity as a whole. In his more ironical moments, Osama bin Laden takes this language of global community so far as to put Al-Qaeda and its American enemy on the same side of their mutual war, saying in a 2004 video that the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq

for power and profits contributed to the terror network's own aims:

To some analysts and diplomats, it seems as if we and the White House are on the same team shooting at the United States' own goal, despite our different intentions.<sup>2</sup>

It truly shows that al-Qaeda has made gains, but on the other hand it also shows that the Bush administration has likewise profited.<sup>3</sup>

Islamic militants exhibit a perverse humanity by addressing their victims in the language of intimacy, reciprocity and equivalence.

That this expression is not a merely rhetorical gesture becomes evident when we consider that such militancy, unlike all previous forms of terrorist or insurgent action, refuses to set up an alternative utopia for itself, something that even anarchists are prone to do. Unlike the members of religious cults or fringe political groups, few of Al-Qaeda's killers display signs of entering some closed ideological world by cutting themselves off from their families or everyday life. This suggests that the Islam they seek to defend is not conceived as an ideology at all because it does not provide a complete or alternative vision of the world into which the would-be bomber can retreat as into a fortress. Thus Bin Laden defines his own militancy merely as the obverse of the violence he attributes to the West, his refusal to claim autonomy for jihad making for a curious identity between Muslims and their enemies:

Since we have reacted in kind, your description of us as terrorists and of our actions as terrorism necessarily means that you and your actions must be defined likewise.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from strictly operational agreements, there is little unity of doctrine even between an Osama bin Laden and his lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri, while the religion they follow

possesses no established tradition, being made up of fragments snatched from differing Islamic authorities. There are at most very general patterns of thought that are neither codified nor propagated in any systematic way. Instead of being recruited to a well-defined movement, the jihad's disparate soldiers franchise Al-Qaeda's expertise and brand name for a variety of equally disparate causes that exist comfortably within the structures of everyday life. Rather than offering an alternative to the world as it exists, these militants would transform it by a kind of internal convulsion, bringing forth its latent humanity by their acts of sacrifice.

Earlier movements of resistance or terror had advanced critiques of existing conditions, such as capitalism or imperialism, and offered alternatives to them. This was the case with communists and anarchists as well as of nationalists and fundamentalists. Like the more pacific global movements that are its peers, Al-Qaeda offers no real criticism of existing conditions (apart from inveighing against them) and possesses no alternative to take their place. Deprived of the political and ideological unity available to regional or national movements, these latter-day militants live scattered among their enemies, whom they accuse only of heedlessness and hypocrisy. So Americans are accused of believing in the wrong religion or ideology, of being heedless and hypocritical about the beliefs they do hold. Global movements like Al-Qaeda's want not an alternative to America so much as the fulfilment of America's promise of freedom for all. Indeed by dying alongside their victims, Islam's militants demonstrate that they exist in the same world as these latter, and as members of the same humanity.

### **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Bruce Lawrence (ed.), *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 234.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 234.