

The Salafist Group for Call and Combat's leaders said on 11 September 2003 that it would follow bin Laden's "direction" and henceforth focus attacks on U.S. interests. In a field where objective, scientific data are hard to come by, the polling work of Gallup and the Pew Trust and the BBC also has provided a rare insight into how U.S. words and deeds, and those of bin Laden, have combined to yield a result greatly favorable to al Qaeda's goal of focusing Muslim anger on America. A Gallup poll in February 2002, for example, found 53 percent of Muslims worldwide had an "unfavorable" view of America, and among the most frequently chosen words to describe Americans were "ruthless, aggressive, conceited, arrogant, easily provoked, [and] biased."³⁵ Then, in March 2002, Gallup found that 80 percent of Pakistanis thought U.S. military action against al Qaeda and the Taleban was "largely or totally unjustifiable." Gallup also reported that the Pakistanis' response was mirrored by 86 percent of Moroccans, 89 percent of Indonesians, and 60 percent of Kuwaitis.³⁶ Finally, in June 2003, the Pew Global Attitudes Project found that majorities in seven of eight Muslim countries feared a U.S. invasion; that anti-U.S. sentiment had "drastically deepened" in Nigeria and Indonesia; and, overall, "the bottom has fallen out of support for America in most of the Muslim world."³⁷ Given this scientific snapshot of reality, we can only conclude that—for now—the following guidance from bin Laden is being followed. "The priority in this fight and at this stage," he advised in fall 2002,

should be given to the pagans' leaders, the Americans and Jews who will not end their aggression and stop their domination over us except with jihad. . . . Take care not to be pushed into fragmenting your efforts and squandering your resources in marginal battles with the lackeys and parties but concentrate the blows on the head of the unfaith[ful] until it collapses. Once it collapses, all the other parts will collapse, vanish and be defeated.³⁸

The Importance of Afghanistan

While Afghanistan has long since fallen off the screen of U.S. officialdom and the media—save for the *Christian Science Monitor*—it remains at the center of bin Laden's concerns and priorities. The West has largely missed the affection with which bin Laden regards Afghanistan, and the debt of personal honor and religious duty he feels toward Mullah Omar and the Taleban for hosting al Qaeda and refusing U.S.

demands to surrender him. How many are willing to give up the reins of the world for the sake of one man and religious fanaticism? cynically on bin Laden's late-1990s appointment of Mullah Omar as the "Commander of the Faithful" that he was showing less-than-enthusiastic return for the Taleban's protection and assistance that bin Laden regards as the Muslim world's primary Muslim leader. "Bin Laden said in late 2001, 'I am a valiant and most content Muslim, but God.'"³⁹

Beyond the personal debt to Mullah Omar, Islamist leaders view Afghanistan as the center of the world, and that the battle going on there will decide the Muslim world's future in the "immortal battles."⁴⁰ "A core tenet of Islam is that Islamists must gain control of a sacred land," M. J. G. Hamid wrote in *The Age of Sacred Space*. "The Islamic nation that applies in most Islamic countries, in my view, is a prelude to knocking over the existing Muslim regimes. . . . The craving for jihad carries out its own terrorist attacks and insurgencies."⁴¹ The other point of contention—to reacquire land once lost in the name of a defensive jihad. So far as bin Laden is concerned, Islamic insurgency that seeks to overthrow the unsupported but media-pleasing regimes of the West, bin Laden "makes very clear . . . [that] the Islamic civilization in its entirety . . . is immune to such hyping. UK foreign secretary described al Qaeda's November 2001 attack on Istanbul "as an attack on our entire

But why, one might ask, is bin Laden so fixated on a one-eyed, battle-scarred, and aging man? Why the Islamists' eyes? The answer lies in Islamic history. Since the British took the Caliphate in 1924, no country has been the world's center. In other words, bin

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off the screen of U.S. official- *Christian Science Monitor*—in concerns and priorities. The West which bin Laden regards Afghani- and religious duty he feels toward ing al Qaeda and refusing U.S.

demands to surrender him. How many men and organizations, after all, are willing to give up the reins of power and control of a country for the sake of one man and religious principle? The West also looked too cynically on bin Laden's late-1990s decision to formally pledge his loyalty to Mullah Omar as the "Commander of the Faithful," concluding that he was showing less-than-sincere respect for the Taliban chief in return for the Taleban's protection. To date, however, there is no evidence that bin Laden regards Mullah Omar as anything other than the world's primary Muslim leader. "My relationship with Mullah Omar," bin Laden said in late 2001, "is one of faith. He is the greatest, most valiant and most content Muslim of this age. He is not afraid of anyone but God."³⁹

Beyond the personal debt to the Taleban, bin Laden and other Islamist leaders view Afghanistan as "the only Islamic country" in the world, and that the battle going on there against the United States will decide the Muslim world's future and therefore "is one of Islam's immortal battles."⁴⁰ "A core tenet of al Qaeda's strategy is that radical Islamists must gain control of a nation," Steven Simon and Daniel Benjamin wrote in *The Age of Sacred Terror* in a generally accurate explanation that applies in most Islamist circles. "Holding a state, in their view, is a prelude to knocking over the dominoes of the world's secular Muslim regimes. . . . The craving for territory is one reason al Qaeda carries out its own terrorist attacks and supports so many national insurgencies."⁴¹ The other point to be made here, of course, is that the Islamic insurgencies al Qaeda supports are fighting—without exception—to reacquire land once ruled by Muslims and so fit the definition of a defensive jihad. So far as I have found, al Qaeda supports no Islamic insurgency that seeks to conquer new lands, notwithstanding the unsupported but media-pleasing claim of many in the West that bin Laden "makes very clear . . . [his] ultimate goal is to undermine Western civilization in its entirety. . . ."⁴² Even Western political leaders are not immune to such hyping. UK foreign secretary Jack Straw, for example, described al Qaeda's November 2002 attack on two British facilities in Istanbul "as an attack on our entire civilization."⁴³

But why, one might ask, is one of the poorest countries on earth and a one-eyed, battle-scarred, and not superbly educated mullah pivotal in the Islamists' eyes? The answer, once again, is found in the annals of Islamic history. Since the British completed destruction of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924, no country has replaced Turkey as the Muslim world's center. In other words, Islam has needed a site from which to

launch a new Caliphate, a state that would be governed by the shariah, God's law. "The beauty of the new Islamic system," wrote the Sunni scholar Sayyid Qurb, an Egyptian executed by Nasser and whom bin Laden and most Islamists view as both hero and mentor, "cannot be appreciated until it takes concrete form. To bring it about, there must first be a revival in one Muslim country, enabling it to attain the status of world leadership." Writing in 1997, Professor Samuel P. Huntington, like Qurb, noted that Islam has lacked what he called a "core state" since the Ottomans' demise. "A core state," Huntington contends, "can perform its ordering function because member states perceive it as cultural kin. A civilization is an extended family and, like older members of a family, core states provide their relatives with both support and discipline."⁴⁴ While several states have tried to play this role—Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey—none became the "dominant center," which meant "no one of them is in a strong position to mediate conflicts within Islam; no one of them is able to act authoritatively on behalf of Islam in dealing with conflicts between Muslim and non-Muslim groups."⁴⁵ Suddenly, when the Taleban captured Kabul in 1996, Afghanistan became an official Islamic state—or emirate—ruled by shariah principles, and so the Islamists found themselves having the long-sought basics: a state ruled by an Islamic scholar from which to revive the Caliphate. On this latter point, much has been written about Mullah Omar's less-than-stellar academic credentials, that they prevent him from being accepted as an international leader of Islam. Clearly, Omar is less well educated than many scholars in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and elsewhere, but the reality is that Afghanistan is an Islamic state, it was ruled by the shariah, and its leader was a Muslim cleric who fought in a victorious jihad. Given these factors, Mullah Omar may not be the best-educated cleric, but—since only God is perfect—he will do in a pinch. This reality was marked in a January 2002 communiqué sent to the Taleban by several senior Saudi Islamic scholars. Sent via the Internet to "the Commander of the Believers . . . Muhammad Omar and those Mujahedin with him," they congratulated Omar for the Taleban's victory of having "separated the world into two trenches. . . ."

We—the collective scholars—are honored to have the likes of you attributed to our ummah, because you have affirmed, in reality, the supremacy and honor of the believers.

And we will bear witness that you were alone the ones who raised

your heads to America; the Muslims were not honored and again, "No!" to what Only you did so. So congrats

Finally, Afghanistan is wide simply because it is a territory over the West in almost had, and still has, enormous world; it remains a potent and other Islamist insurgent anti-Soviet Afghan jihad 1989—the year of the Soviet the interethnic civil war, themselves radical feminism, missed the war's importance now called the Islamic shock of the Afghans' victory, lms that, if God is willing.

Not surprisingly, bin the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan U.S. soldiers, but because a try that has been successful and defended against odds behind military victories titles of Badr and The Trench, the Prophet's victories—lar reference and comment Muslim world. "The early Muslims, because it represents Schwartz wrote in his *Sa'ud from Tradition to* never been drained of its participate collectively and in a way largely absent (ism)."⁴⁷ Welcoming the lined his confidence that one who prolonged us to defeat the Soviet Empire us again to defeat America