
Al-Jazeera Correspondent Reveals Details From Bin Laden Interviews

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER YOUSSEF ABOUL-ENEIN, USN

Mohammad Muwafiq Zaydan, a journalist with Al-Jazeera and the Arabic daily *Al-Hayat*, had the rare opportunity of spending hours with Usama Bin Laden in October 2000 and in the early part of 2001. Zaydan has conducted multiple interviews with the Al-Qaeda leader, and he was the only journalist summoned to Afghanistan to cover the wedding of Usama Bin Laden's eldest son Mohammad to Karima Muhammad Atef, daughter of the late Al-Qaeda operations chief Muhammad Atef (aka Abu Hafis Al-Masri), who was killed in a UAV strike during Operation Enduring Freedom. In 2003, Zaydan published a book entitled, "*Usama Bin Laden bila Qanaa, Liaqaat Hazaarat Nashruha al-Taliban (Usama Bin Laden Revealed: Interviews the Taliban Warns Against Publication)*," although the lead title would probably be best translated as "Usama Bin Laden Unvarnished." It was published by the World Book Corporation of Beirut, Lebanon, a legitimate publishing house with its own Web site — www.arabook.com. The 215-page book offers readers a strategic, operational, and tactical glimpse of America's number one adversary. It reveals Bin Laden's thoughts on disseminating his message, the Taliban, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the U.S. military and much more. The following will highlight major strategic portions of Zaydan's book and his interviews with Bin Laden.

This essay is an attempt to know our adversary. It is also an attempt to make Bin Laden's perversion and destructive interpretation of Islam intelligible. For this to be accomplished, it is vital that Arabic books that highlight Bin Laden and his top lieutenants be translated, studied, reviewed and discussed among U.S. military leaders and planners. Bin Laden will eventually be neutralized or die of natural causes. However, his legacy will plague the region for a generation, and such books help the United States deconstruct Bin Laden's ideology and begin the process of tactically undermining the movement. More importantly, an assault on Bin Laden's ideological roots can be undertaken through exposing historical perversions, half-truths, pseudo-intellectualism, and Islamic imagery, soundbites and politicized religious doctrine that possess no historical context. These illegitimate tools are used to attract and indoctrinate segments of Muslim youth into a culture of suicide. This is the fourth review essay in an ongoing series by *Infantry Magazine*, which highlights Arabic books on Usama Bin Laden. The first was published in the May-June 2006 edition.

Bin Laden and his Emphasis on Mass Media

The October 2000 meeting with Bin Laden began with a discussion regarding the position of the *Ulama* (Religious Jurists) who boycotted American products, services and trade as punishment for American support of Israel. He cites the Qatari-

based cleric Yusuf Al-Qaradawy who has his own regular Islamic show on Al-Jazeera in which he answers questions from callers on points of Islamic law. The late Muhammad Atef, Bin Laden's operations chief and military planner, attended this meeting. Bin Laden described to Zaydan how both the communist and western democracies have capitalized on the use of the media for decades, and that Islamists today have a rare opportunity to influence Muslim opinion against the Arab regimes that govern them. The objective is to attain government and then institute Islamic law. Bin Laden confirmed the strategic importance of satellite TV to incite the masses saying it transmits the language of the body before the language of speech. What Bin Laden is saying through this metaphor is that the media offers an opportunity to instill raw emotion through imagery before rational thought can be undertaken through dialogue.

The Legacy Bin Laden Wishes to Leave Behind

Zaydan's book mentions that Bin Laden's objectives are long-term and that he considers a small accomplishment, such as an Islamic unified boycott against the United States, a major accomplishment for Al-Qaeda. Bin Laden mentioned that a book he was working on would address the methodology of wielding a united Muslim front at the street level through pressuring Arab regimes, boycotts, protests and Islamist revolutionary activities. He told Zaydan the title of this book would be *Al-Ahmal Al-Islamee bain Al-Ijtima wa Duah al-Nizaa*, (*Islamic Works Between Society and a Call to Protest*). The book was to be published in Pakistan, but may have been thwarted by Operation Enduring Freedom. Zaydan looked into the publishing house mentioned and found that the publisher did not exist. However, Zaydan was shown about 145 pages of the draft, and what it revealed was Bin Laden's desire to be the ultimate peacemaker and unifier of Islamist groups around the globe and to attain a unity of effort. Bin Laden emphasized to Zaydan the three most important legacies he wished to leave:

- (1) Unity under *usul* (traditions),
- (2) Superseding (Islamic) divisions and becoming a whole community under God, and
- (3) Affixing all Islamic protest and disputes under the *manhaj* (methodology) of the *Salaf* (founders of the 7th century).

To the uneducated, words like *usul*, *manhaj* and *salaf* basically connote Bin Laden's mission of reuniting the Muslims under pure Islamic precepts and using this power to defend the rights of Muslims globally. This message resonates with the poor and emotionally charged on the street. What is missing is the reality that:

■ It is Bin Laden and his *shura* (council) that will interpret what is an appropriate recreation of 7th century Islamic Arabia.

■ Even within Islam there are different types of Islamic beliefs (*manhaj* according to Bin Laden) and practices. Only a small group would appreciate living under his militant *salafi* system. To impose an Islamic government is to then address the impossible task of determining which kind of Islam will be imposed upon the rest.

Bin Laden's militancy even within the Islamist movement has split the Muslim fundamentalists between those who wish to cooperate and work to attain power through elections, and those like him who desire to be in a perpetual state of war. Even within those Islamist militants who act out violently, there is disagreement between those who wish to attack the "near" enemy (Arab regimes) and those who wish to attack the "far" enemy (The United States and western democracies).

Zaydan learns later that the book Bin Laden claims to have written was actually published by Al-Qaeda ideologue Abu Hafs Al-Mauritani (The Mauritanian). This revelation is important for several reasons. It shows Bin Laden's obsession with leaving a legacy. It also reveals his willingness to plagiarize ideas and pass them off as his own. Finally, it demonstrates that Al-Qaeda has more than just Ayman Al-Zawahiri as an ideologue. Bin Laden grew up Hanbali, and was radicalized by a mixture of Saudi Wahabism and Egyptian militant Qutbism (a reference to Sayyid Qutb, a militant ideologue and a key founder of 20th century jihadism). Bin Laden intimates to Zaydan that Islamist politics represent one of two wings. One is charged with restoring Muslim self-confidence, and the other is his remedy of (violent) jihadist action.

Bin Laden betrayed his view of Islamists working within the political system to attain power in the latter part of the book by stating that there are global efforts to undermine the jihadist spirit, and this global effort must be confronted. Therefore, Islamist movements must unite to counter this vicious attack against the Islamic jihadist spirit. His reference to a unity of Islamist movements belies the question of whose Islamist doctrine or jihadist agenda to follow. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Algerian Islamic Salvation Front have strategically decided to work within the confines of their

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respective nation's polity, which has earned them the wrath of jihadists like Bin Laden who want to continue pursuing the violent option of establishing an Islamist state. Bin Laden sees the unification of violent Islamist movements worldwide as an important objective and a legacy that he wishes to leave behind.

Bin Laden's Comments on the USS Cole

It is best to frame this section with what Bin Laden told Zaydan in the winter of 2000 when the USS Cole incident was fresh: "*We thank God for this brave operation that brought down America's pride, and has made Americans to feel that the time has come for their withdrawal from the Arabian Peninsula...*" Zaydan assesses that Bin Laden struck the USS Cole because he did not feel that the United States was taking him and his message seriously when he undertook the coordinated attacks on the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Dar-es-Salam. Bin Laden told Zaydan that he expected an American response over the USS Cole (which occurred on October 2000) by January 2001. The strategy was to lure American conventional forces into tight mountainous terrain in Yemen or Afghanistan and recreate the tactics Bin Laden was familiar with in fighting Soviet Forces over a decade earlier. Bin Laden expressed disappointment, according to Zaydan's book, that the United States did not respond as he expected a superpower would. The strategy of striking American targets like the USS Cole and the American Embassies in East Africa was to restore Muslim self-confidence in the realization that the United States can be struck. One assessment of these statements is that Bin

Laden changed strategy and always seemed to fall back when the United States responded in an unexpected way. Initially he told Zaydan it was to get America to commit forces. When that did not work, he relied on bolstering the self-confidence of the Muslim community as a reason for the strikes.

Not being a cleric, Bin Laden cited fatwas (religious rulings) issued by clerics. He cited the fatwa of the late Saudi Sheikh Hammud al-Shuaibee and his 165-page book entitled, "*al-Qawl al-Mukhtar fee Hukm Istanaa al-Kufar, (Edicts on Consulting Apostates)*." Published in 1997 by *Sahwa* (Islamist Reawakening) Press in Lebanon, the book was among a chorus of calls from radicalist preachers calling for the forcible removal of the United States from Arabia. Bin Laden also discussed a sermon given by Saudi Sheikh Ali bin Abdulrahman Al-Huzaify at the Prophet's Mosque in Medina. The sermon's location is important, for within the walls of this mosque in Medina, the first Islamic society was born. Even though content of sermons in government mosques like Medina is regulated by the government, it is virtually impossible to prevent a selected cleric from deviating from his submitted script. Bin Laden cited Huzaify as saying that Jews and Crusaders have invaded this land militarily and economically, and although not as direct as Bin Laden or Sheikh al-Shuaibee, intimates that a radical step must be taken to remedy this situation. Bin Laden then shifted from discussing Richard Nixon to Sheikh Safar Hawali in a geo-strategic amalgamation of modern history and militant Salafi interpretations to justify the importance of the Arabian Peninsula to the United States.

Saudi Intelligence Requests Mullah Omar Surrender Bin Laden

After the U.S. Embassy bombings in East Africa, Zaydan's book discusses the efforts of former Saudi Intelligence Chief Prince Turki Al-Faisal in getting Taliban leader Mullah Omar to surrender Usama Bin Laden. Mullah Omar rationalized his refusal of Prince Turki's request by saying that no Saudis died in this event, nor did the attack occur on Saudi soil. By 1998 Mullah Omar was in a precarious position. His legitimacy and a main source of his

political power were built on harboring Usama Bin Laden. In addition, Bin Laden provided access to funds, fanatic fighters and had developed family ties through intermarriage between his entourage and Mullah Omar's. Had Mullah Omar surrendered Bin Laden, it would have caused deep splits within the *madrassas* (religious schools in Pakistan and Afghanistan) and within its students that were inculcated to view Mullah Omar as a mythological figure. These students represented the new foot soldiers needed to sustain Mullah Omar's war against the Northern Alliance.



Bin Laden's Concern of Foreign Government Infiltration

Zaydan, while awaiting the Bin Laden interview, conducted a discussion with leaders charged with Al-Qaeda's operational security. The book mentions two instances of penetration of the group. The first was a Syrian fighter with extensive military training who was an agent of Syrian intelligence. The second instance was a member of the *Bidoon* (literally "without," and representative of a class of people in the United Arab Emirates who are without any citizenship status but permanently reside there). The Bidoon agent was a basic recruit, and according to Zaydan's book, was commissioned by the Emirati, Pakistani and U.S. intelligence agencies for an assassination attempt. Whether true or not, the few pages devoted to these stories show the constant concern that Bin Laden has for foreign infiltration and for his own security by Arab and non-Arab governments alike.

The Bin Laden Wedding

Zaydan was among the few journalists to cover the wedding of Usama Bin Laden's son Mohammad to Muhammad Atef's (the late Abu Hafs Al-Masri, Al-Qaeda's military commander) daughter Karima. Among the items of note during this occasion that occurred in the fall of 2000 were:

□ Usama Bin Laden wore Saudi dress to include headdress emphasizing his childhood roots and the curved dagger of Yemen known as *Jambiyah* as an open expression of his Yemeni ancestry.

□ Usama Bin Laden's mother and brothers attended, and came to the wedding from Saudi Arabia through a chartered Ariana (Afghan) flight under the cover of Afghans making pilgrimage. This cover made interfering with the flight religiously sensitive and provided the perfect cover, as Afghans make these flights frequently to Jeddah as the arrival point for their pilgrimage to Mecca.

Bin Laden's Economic Discussions with Zaydan

Zaydan notes that when Bin Laden withdrew from the wedding to conduct further discussions with the journalist he had constant satellite TV, internet and media connections. Aides brought him the latest internet downloads that he would peruse, but during the interview, Bin Laden gave Zaydan his full attention. Bin Laden then discussed an economic and globalization argument that

avored the Islamist militant call for a caliphate. All Arab and Muslim nation-states cannot be self-sufficient on their own. There is a subtle hint to the artificial borders drawn by the Sykes-Picot Treaty of World War I that carved former Ottoman possessions into the nations of the Arab world we know today. The only solution, according to Bin Laden, is to create a self-sufficient Islamic unity that will enable Muslims to be an independent block that is distant from the corruption of the west. This unity would then control its own destiny. Bin Laden told Zaydan that this was how Muslims existed for centuries before the abolishment of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924, and that the imposed artificial borders of the Middle East

were designed to keep Muslims weak, divided and enslaved. The only path to this objective is (violent) jihad against the western powers that have imposed this division of the Muslim *Umma* (community).

The Arab Street: Should it be Ignored? Bin Laden Does Not Think So

Bin Laden then discussed the 2000 *Intifadah* (Palestinian uprising). His view is that the "Children of the Stone," as he called the rock-throwing Palestinians, are embarrassing Arab regimes. He cited this as an example of the power of mass mobilization, and the fanning of the flames of a public media campaign designed to bring attention to and reveal the danger America poses to the Islamic world. Bin Laden was specific on the utility of the Arab street in forming a popular movement that is anti-western and anti-American. He said that the 2000 *Intifadah* in essence showed how policy is made by the street mob. In his mind, it prevented the United States Envoy (Anthony Zinni) from succeeding in his mission.

Bin Laden expressed frustration at the Taliban-imposed media ban, and Zaydan highlighted that Bin Laden lamented the many questions sent to him by foreign journalists via the Taliban Embassy in Pakistan. However, the Taliban refused to let him answer these questions despite his desire to do so. It is important to realize that some of the vital components of the Islamist militants' strategy in this "long" war are public perception, media and information. This sentiment, reflected by Bin Laden, is echoed by his deputy Ayman Al-Zawahiri.

WMD and Unconventional Weapons

The most interesting part of Zaydan's book is a discussion he had with the late Muhammed Atef on weapons of mass destruction. Here is a translated excerpt of what Atef told Zaydan:

"Is it really difficult to get such weapons? We are in a region saturated with all manner of weapons of mass destruction; a quick glance at the map can show this clearly. Central Asian nations are filled with them, and possess all types of unconventional weapons that can be found in the black market for U.S. dollars. India, Pakistan, Iran and China have those weapons and within some quarters of their governments animosity towards the United

States. American policy aids in our cooperation with these groups and we benefit from the animosity towards the United States and disunity among nation-states. Even if we discount nation-states and whether they are U.S. adversaries, there are non-governmental entities within those nation-states that share our views of American imperialism.”

The book continues with a discussion of how Al-Qaeda has absorbed many Uzbek, Tajik, Chechen and other Central Asians in their movement, giving them access to organized crime connections in these nations. There is no telling what would have happened had Bin Laden maintained his base of operations in Afghanistan post-9/11, increasing his ties to Central Asian gangs or sympathetic nuclear scientists.

Bin Laden’s Silence on Iran

When Zaydan asked Usama Bin Laden about Iran, its policies and their efforts to export their Islamic revolution, Bin Laden was extremely guarded in answering those specific questions. It is common knowledge that Bin Laden’s brand of militant Salafi Sunni Islam is incompatible with Shiite Islam. Zaydan’s analysis is that there is a form of convenient accommodation between him and Iran, that could be as subtle as guarding his answers to protect Al-Qaeda members detained by the Iranians. The only comment he would make about Iran at any great length was acknowledging his role and assistance with the Taliban in diffusing a 1997 crisis between Iran and Afghanistan over the Taliban’s massacre of nine Iranian diplomats. In 2005, two years after the publication of Zaydan’s book, a Zawahiri letter to the late Zarqawi in Iraq revealed criticism of Zarqawi’s boasting of the beheading of Shiites, and a reminder of the 100 senior leaders under house-arrest in Iran.

Conclusion

Zaydan’s 2003 book offers the most comprehensive and recent look at Usama Bin Laden’s strategic thinking. Arabic books on Bin Laden typically mythologize him. This, on the other hand, is an instance of a journalist conducting a serious dialogue with a prime adversary of the United States. To begin to attack Bin Laden’s ideology, it is important to deconstruct his arguments using Arabic sources and, more importantly, make an Islamic counter-argument to his methods, ideas and vision. This cannot be done without exploring Arabic books like Zaydan’s. Bin Laden’s legacy of destabilizing Arab nations and ushering in a just Islamic society may sound good as a slogan, but its impracticality must be exposed. Bin Laden argued that only God has sovereignty and that democratic institutions, like legislatures, place God’s sovereignty in the hands of mankind, which is heresy. This message can be countered by arguing that *Shariah* (Islamic law) that Bin Laden advocates must in the end be interpreted by mankind. There is no getting around developing institutions that will undertake this task. Another counter-argument is that if one ushers in an Islamic state, whose Islam will dominate Sunni or Shiite? Within Sunnis, will it be Maliki, Hanafi, Wahabi, or Salafi? Within Shiite Islam, will it be Usuli, Ashari, Twelvers, Fivers, Ahemdis, or Zaydis? The list for both Shiite and Sunni schools and theosophies goes on. If you

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alienate one, the others will be prone to resort to violence. Only a democratic model of representative government can balance the variety inherent within Islamic thought and practice.

Another strategic aspect of Zaydan’s book is Bin Laden’s emphasis on the media and his public perception campaign. Making the United States feel more and more uncomfortable in the Arab street is a strategy he has openly articulated in this book. The United States, with the help of its Muslim allies, should consider ways in which to counter this important element in Bin Laden’s war. This could mean taking the drastic step of featuring a constructive discussion on Islamic law, such as the importance of early Christians in Islam, the historical context of the 70-plus war verses in the *Quran* (Islamic book of divine revelation), or the origins of the Caliphate that is a pre-Islamic form of tribal governance. The United States could also exploit constructive interpretations of Islamic history, law, and commentary on such American-owned channels as *Al-Hurra* TV to challenge the destructive Islamic interpretations of militants. Yes, there are risks. But for now, the jihadists have stayed on point, saturating the airwaves and internet with messages of hate derived from selective as well as misquoted elements of the *Quran* and *Hadith* (Prophet’s sayings). We have much work to do. But exposing American military planners and policymakers to Arabic books of strategic significance is the first step in the ideological war against Islamist militancy, which threatens and murders Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

Lieutenant Commander Youssef Aboul-Enein is a Defense Department Middle East Analyst and served four years as Advisor and Middle East Country Director at the Office of the Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. His understanding of Zaydan’s work represents LCDR Aboul-Enein’s personal views. All opinions are his own. He wishes to thank his colleague Mr. James Janis, Staff Assistant to the Director of the Joint Intelligence Task Force-Combating Terrorism, for his edits and insightful comments that enhanced this piece. Thanks also goes to the John T. Hughes Library in Washington, D.C., and the R. W. Woodruff Library at Emory University in Georgia for making a copy of Zaydan’s book available for this review essay.
