

# Al Qaeda

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When commercial airplanes loaded with passengers were flown into the World Trade Center towers and into the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the nation was shocked and angered. It took only a few weeks before the organization behind these attacks was identified by the US and its allies as al Qaeda, a group that almost no Americans had ever heard of. Al Qaeda had been operating training camps for militant Muslims intent on *jihad* against the West and against anything else they considered anti-Islamic, including governments of Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia. Ultimately, because al Qaeda's camps were located in Afghanistan, and the fundamentalist leadership in Afghanistan known as the Taliban refused to shut down those camps and refused to hand over the leadership of al Qaeda to the US, the US arranged a military action to overthrow the Taliban and destroy al Qaeda leaders and camps.

But how does such an organization as al Qaeda get started? How does it obtain funds to operate? What is its connection with Islam?

It has taken some time for those details to emerge. However, now that more is known, the connection between Islam and al Qaeda has become clear enough to be discussed carefully. The purpose of this brief essay is to begin to explore that connection.

It is important to understand the religious dimensions of al Qaeda. This is not a criminal mob like the Mafia, or a governmental organization like a group of spies or saboteurs directed from some national capital. It is a private, religiously motivated group. Or at least that is the way the group represents itself to recruit followers. One might question whether the motives that truly push al Qaeda leaders to attack others "for Islam" are genuinely religious, or whether the motives have more to do with trying to grab power and control others. Probably everyone has mixed motives for their actions. Nevertheless, the campaign to recruit volunteers for al Qaeda rests openly and explicitly on Islam; young men are being asked to put their lives on the line for Islam, in *jihad* against the infidels who are attacking Islam, and they find the message appealing. I find no particular reason to believe that the leadership itself is cynically insincere or hypocritical about their religious motivations, even if they do have mixed motives.

To understand the origins of al Qaeda, one must start with understanding a bit about modern Saudi Arabia. Mecca and Medina, the birthplace of Islam, are today located in western Saudi Arabia.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For convenience, I here excerpt "The Saudi Connection" by David E. Kaplan, which appeared in the December 15, 2003, issue of *US News and World Report*, 18 - 32. All the materials quoted in what follows are drawn from that source, although the footnotes are my own.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was born of a kind of marriage of convenience between the House of Saud and the strict Wahhab sect of Islam. In the 18th century, Mohammed ibn Saud, a local chieftain and the forebear of today's ruling family, allied himself with ...the Wahhab sect.<sup>2</sup> Over the next 200 years, backed by the Wahhabis, Saud and his descendants conquered much of the Arabian peninsula, including Islam's holiest sites, in Mecca and Medina. Puritanical and ascetic, the Wahhabis were given wide sway over Saudi society, enforcing a strict interpretation of certain Koranic beliefs. Their religious police ensured that subjects prayed five times a day and that women were covered head to toe. Rival religions were banned, criminals subjected to stoning, lashing, and beheading.

The Wahhabist view of Islam, with its strict and harsh interpretations of Islamic life, should probably be viewed as a kind of puritanical revivalist approach to Islam, an Islamic fundamentalism in the bud, so-to-speak. The Saud family leaders presumably are not convinced that Islam has to take that form, but by taking on the mantle of religious purists, they can claim to be uniting the region (the birthplace of Islam!) under the banner of pure Islam. This strategy proved effective.

The Wahhabist approach to Islam became a full-fledged fundamentalism when it had to deal with modern developments: Western oil money accompanied by Westerners flowing into the Middle East, conflict between Muslim Afghans and the Communist, atheistic Soviet Union, perpetual war between Jews and Palestinians, and, most of all a violent 1979 takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Islamic militants demanding an even purer Saudi Arabia. (Recall that Islam is theologically unfriendly to monarchy as a form of government. Saudi Arabia, under the Saud family, is an absolute monarchy.)

Probably with these challenges in mind, the Saudi royal family decided to fight back, to improve its image by pushing Wahhabism outside of Saudi Arabia. It seems to me they were suggesting that they were especially suited to be Islamic leaders because they adhered to an especially strict form of Islam, that could be therefore represented as especially pure.

Threatened within the kingdom, and fearful that the radicals in Tehran<sup>3</sup> would assert their own leadership of the Muslim world, the Saudis went on a spending spree. From 1975 through last year, the kingdom spent over \$70 billion on

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<sup>2</sup>Most observers claim that the marriage between the current Saudi royal family and this strict version of Islam is still a "marriage of convenience". Saudi Arabia is governed as an absolute monarchy, with the royal family calling the shots. The royal family is not necessarily committed to the correctness of the Wahhab views, but those views are nevertheless enshrined in the legal system of the country. It is not structured as an Islamic state, with the *Quran* as constitution, but more like a traditional Muslim country from the long-distant past. The laws created by the monarch include many of the strictest versions of sharia law, requiring women to be covered in public, outlawing the practice of religions other than Islam, setting up a large force of religious police, and so forth.

<sup>3</sup>Tehran is the capital of Iran.

overseas aid, according to a study of official sources by the Center for Security Policy, a Washington think tank. More than two thirds of that amount went to "Islamic activities" – building mosques, religious schools, and Wahhabi religious centers, says the CSP's Alex Alexiev, a former CIA consultant on ethnic and religious conflict. The Saudi funding program, Alexiev says, is "the largest worldwide propaganda campaign ever mounted" – dwarfing the Soviets' propaganda efforts at the height of the Cold War. The Saudi weekly *Ain al-Yaqeen* last year reported the cost as "astronomical" and boasted of the results: some 1,500 mosques, 210 Islamic centers, 202 colleges, and nearly 2,000 schools in non-Islamic countries.

This campaign was not directly run by the government of Saudi Arabia. Instead, the flow of money and religious literature associated with this campaign of Wahhabist missionary work was controlled by “charitable organizations” based in Saudi Arabia. Some of these “charitable organizations” are similar to the “foundations” established by wealthy Americans to promote various causes such as education, environmental protection, conservative politics, or other causes. But in Islam there is a religious obligation for reasonably well-off Muslims to pay a tax to support charitable work. This provided large sums of money to the missionary effort, which was directed by clerics close to Saudi’s ruling elite.

With names like the Muslim World League and its affiliate, the International Islamic Relief Organization, the funds spent billions more to spread Wahhabism. The IIRO, for example, took credit for funding 575 mosques in Indonesia alone. Accompanying the money, invariably, was a blizzard of Wahhabist literature. Wahhabist clerics led the charge, causing moderate imams to worry about growing radicalism among the faithful. Critics argue that Wahhabism's more extreme preachings – mistrust of infidels, branding of rival sects as apostates, and emphasis on violent jihad – laid the groundwork for terrorist groups around the world.

In other words, Saudi money (much of which came from selling oil to the West) was funneled through these charities to support the worldwide image of Saudi Arabia as a leader in the Muslim world, through the promotion of Wahhabist Islamic fundamentalism.

Many of those spreading the Wahhabist doctrine abroad, it turned out, were among the most radical believers in holy war, and they poured vast sums into the emerging al Qaeda network.<sup>4</sup> Over the past decade, ac

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<sup>4</sup>The al Qaeda network was headed by Osama bin Laden, himself a Saudi who began his career in Islamic fundamentalism with a call for reform in his home country. When he was unsuccessful in Saudi Arabia, he joined the Islamic fighters in Afghanistan, fighting to oust the Soviets and their puppet government, as part of a larger fundamentalist enterprise to Islamicize the governments of Muslim countries through campaigns of violence. These

According to a 2002 report to the United Nations Security Council, al Qaeda and its fellow jihadists collected between \$300 million and \$500 million – most of it from Saudi charities and private donors.

But al Qaeda did not receive all its funds from Muslim sources. The US helped out quite a bit with taxpayer funding of the Muslim efforts in Afghanistan to oust the Russian puppet government in that country. This was all part of the Cold War with the former Soviet Union. The Soviet Union, seen by the US as enemy number one, wanted to ensure a friendly Afghanistan on its southern border, and so they forced a puppet government onto the country, using Soviet military might to prop up that government.

In Afghanistan, Riyadh<sup>5</sup> and Washington together ponied up some \$3.5 billion to fund the mujahideen--the Afghan fighters who took on the Soviets. At the same time, men like bin Laden served as fundraisers for the thousands of foreign jihadists streaming into Afghanistan. By persuading clerics across the Muslim world to hand over money from zakat, the charitable donations that are a cornerstone of Islam, they collected huge sums. They raised millions more from wealthy princes and merchants across the Middle East. Most important, they joined forces with the Saudi charities, many already moving aid to the fighters. Afghanistan forged not only financial networks but important bonds among those who believe in violent jihad. ...

It might seem odd to you that money used to support the Muslim fighters in Afghanistan, supplying them with food and weapons, would be seen as a legitimate expenditure for a charity. However, those fighters were volunteer jihadists, not part of the army of any country. So, US tax money mingled with Saudi and Middle Eastern zakat and other donations to keep those Muslim fighters going, and promoting the ultimate Islamic fundamentalist takeover of Afghanistan that ultimately led to its becoming a base used to launch attacks against us.

Of course, the US government had no idea that it was helping to finance a movement that would eventually get around to attacking the US. We did not “get” the fundamentalist message that *all* non-Muslim interference and domination in Muslim regions must cease; we were not aware of what a powerful social and religious force was beginning to take hold.

After the Soviets left Afghanistan in disgrace, bin Laden moved his fledgling al Qaeda to Sudan, in 1992. By then a perfect storm of Islamic radicalism was

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were the origins of al Qaeda, ultimately leading to various terrorist attacks by that organization on US interests, including embassies, a naval vessel, as well as the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

<sup>5</sup>Riyadh is the capital city of Saudi Arabia. In political writing such as the present article, the name is often used as a substitute for the government or the country of Saudi Arabia.

gathering across the Muslim world. Some "Afghan Arab" veterans of Afghanistan now eyed radical change in their homelands, where secular and corrupt regimes held sway. Others set out for lands where they saw fellow Muslims oppressed, such as Kashmir and Bosnia. Saudis rich and poor responded with donations at thousands of zakat boxes in mosques, supermarkets, and schools, doling out support for besieged Muslims in Algeria, Bosnia, Kashmir, the West Bank, and Gaza. Millions poured in.

The Saudi charities opened offices in hot spots around the globe, with virtually no controls on how the money was spent, U.S. officials say. The donors funded many worthy projects, supporting orphanages and hospitals, and providing food, clothing, and medicine to refugees. But by 1994, Riyadh was starting to get complaints – from the French interior minister – about Saudi funds reaching Algerian terrorists and from President Clinton about their funding of Hamas, whose suicide bombers were wreaking havoc on the Middle East peace process.

Of course, now that the fruits of this support of fundamentalism have become apparent, there are recriminations aplenty coming from those who do not agree that violent attacks on the West or on “lax” Muslims are a legitimate part of Islam. There certainly are those who are suspicious that the Saudi “charities” are nothing more than fronts for terrorist organizations. But the Saudi charities themselves have always said that they are innocent, that they had no idea that terrorist attacks would come from their support. And they can point to the fact that some of the same people and organizations were being supported by the US government. They claim they were caught off-guard, just as the US government was. In fact, there is some evidence that is all true. If the Saudis had realized what would eventually come of their support of the most radical form of Islam, they might not have been so willing to go ahead. After all, the monarchy in Saudi Arabia itself is now a prime target of Wahhabist criticism, and may well find itself under direct terrorist attack from the very movement it indirectly helped to foster.

"The Saudis are not diligent donors," says Chas. Freeman, a former ambassador to Riyadh whose Middle East Policy Council receives Saudi funds. "They've never asked us what we're doing with their money." The Saudis' record, Freeman says, is not one of complicity but of "negligence and incompetence."

It sounds as though there is plenty of negligence and incompetence to go around.

In Pakistan, meanwhile, President Pervez Musharraf has twice asked Riyadh to curtail the millions of Saudi dollars that pour into local Islamic political parties, jihad groups, and religious schools. Again, the Saudis have promised change, but Pakistani officials are skeptical.

The bigger test for the Saudis will be reform of their society. The hijacking of their charities by the jihad movement occurred because of support by the Saudi fundamentalist religious establishment. That won't be easy to change. Since May

12 [2003], officials in Riyadh say, they have purged some 2,000 radical clerics from their mosques and ordered the jihadist rhetoric turned way down. But bringing Wahhabism into the 21st century won't be easy. "We need time," says Abdullah Alotaibi, a political scientist at King Saud University in Riyadh. "You can't change 70 years of history overnight."

The May 12, 2003, date in the above quote is a significant one for the Saudi government – on that day, al Qaeda bombed a wealthy Muslim neighborhood in Riyadh, not far from the royal family's neighborhood. The message to the royal family and to “lax” “corrupt” Muslims was clear. Wahhabism had come home with a vengeance.