

Method to the Madness

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By Jeffrey Bartholet

In this age of celebrity, Osama bin Laden knows the importance of stagecraft. He cultivates an air of mystery, and has a knack for tapping feelings of alienation and anger.

Sometimes he wears flowing white robes, signifying purity, before the cameras. For his latest video, he opted for an American-style camouflage jacket, offset by a finely folded white turban with a scarflike tail draped ever so gracefully over his left shoulder. His diatribe against America-"the modern world's symbol of paganism"-was videotaped against a rugged backdrop of rock outcroppings, with an assault rifle propped by his side. Bin Laden spoke softly, with almost otherworldly composure and confidence, about "the wind of change" blowing against America. The overall effect was outlaw chic.

Americans watching bin Laden see a monster or a madman. But if he were simply that and nothing more, the "twilight war" ahead would be over quickly. Madmen, after all, generally don't attract the kind of popularity that bin Laden enjoys-which he now hopes to use to even greater effect than his human bombs. There's a method to his madness: to lure the United States into a prolonged conflict that could inflame the Islamic world. That's why the administration wants to lower bin Laden's profile, by talking about him less and reducing his media exposure. National-security adviser Condoleezza Rice last week won agreement from American networks to edit inflammatory language from Al Qaeda videos. She said the tapes may contain secret messages to bin Laden "sleepers" to launch new attacks. But the self-censorship was awkward, at best, and few thought it could be effective in this age of easy Internet access and streaming video.

A Muslim Robin Hood

Bin Laden may be a mass murderer on the run in a ruined land, where women are kept in medieval bondage and no television is allowed. But among a significant number of Muslims, he's also a kind of Robin Hood figure. In the bustling bazaars of the Pakistani border town of Peshawar last week, among stalls selling trinkets and robes, guns and ammo, the most popular vendors were peddling T shirts emblazoned with portraits of "the great holy warrior of Islam." In Palestinian refugee camps, young militants took to the streets crying bin Laden's name. And among some middle-class professionals in Muslim countries, bin Laden's face is used as a welcome screen on their cell phones.

The FBI and CIA have full-time teams probing bin Laden's mystique and his methods. The most urgent question concerns his Qaeda network and its ability to find and recruit 19 men to join a mass suicide plot to kill thousands of civilians. "If we had to sit down and do the psychological vetting to find people like that, we'd never get 19 out of 19," says a former senior intelligence officer for the CIA who specialized in Afghan operations. "But I don't think they vetted 5,000 people to find the 19. I think there are hundreds of potential fanatics within bin Laden's grasp, willing to give up their lives at his command."

Bin Laden is handsome in his way, and he knows which chords to strike. He appeals to a pervasive sense of humiliation and powerlessness in Islamic countries. Muslims are victims the world over, he says: in Bosnia, Somalia, Palestine, Chechnya and the "land of the two Holy Places"-Saudi Arabia. Like any fanatic, he makes the world simple for people who are otherwise confused, and gives them a sense of mission.

Although he may live in a cave or some similarly primitive lair, he's a master at manipulating the modern media. In the same way Ayatollah Khomeini used audiotapes to spread his revolution, bin Laden uses television and video. In 1996, when he was on the run and seemingly headed toward oblivion, bin Laden issued a "Declaration of War" against America and its allies, and then gave interviews to prominent American journalists in 1997 and 1998. Correspondents from CNN and ABC trekked to his mountain hideout, and Qatar's emerging Al-Jazeera satellite channel, the most open and controversial source of news in Arabic, later became almost his house organ. Bin Laden never took personal credit for specific terror attacks, yet he heaped praise on the attackers. Eventually he got around to producing his own recruitment video. In it, he joyously celebrated last year's bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen, which killed 17 sailors, and wore a Yemeni dagger as a symbol of his identification with the attack. His arguments for the ongoing jihad are offered in language that sounds both poetic and erudite, even to Muslims who deeply oppose him.

Aspiring Caliph

Bin Laden's aim is not simply to terrorize America. The attacks on civilians are a means to an end, which is to overthrow or "reform" regimes across the Muslim world. In his 1996 declaration, he directed much of his venom against Saudi rule. But to "correct" that "illegitimate" regime, bin Laden argued, Muslims had to attack the "Zionist-Crusader alliance" that was the root of the corruption. According to a 1999 FBI memo obtained by NEWSWEEK, bin Laden's desire to "cleanse" the Persian Gulf region is just a start: "He envisions installing a worldwide Islamic government with himself as the caliph." Bin Laden has been careful to define himself mainly by what he is against, not what he is for. (That way he assures himself the broadest possible support.) But he has held up as a model the Taliban government in Afghanistan, which is the most socially repressive regime in the Muslim world. Women aren't allowed to go to school, men are ordered to grow beards, and neckties, nonreligious music and kite flying are banned. Just about anything that smacks of Western culture is treated like a disease that could infect and cripple the society. Afghanistan has also provided an ideal base for bin Laden to assemble his militant network. The CIA estimates that up to 20,000 volunteers have passed through his training camps since 1995. Even if only a quarter of those people are active now, that's a lot of true believers indoctrinated in bin Laden's extremist interpretations of Islam. Most volunteers appear to be Arab or Pakistani, but they've also included Europeans, Chinese, Chechens, and Muslims from Southeast Asia. Some are peasants; others have advanced degrees. One Egyptian volunteer was described by his parents as a young kid who liked to "go up on the roof and read"; an Algerian describes himself as a wayward Muslim "who got used to doing bad things." Al Qaeda vets the volunteers, assigns them to different camps and eventually gives them marching orders.

Screening Recruits

The vetting sometimes involves psychological screening. A Tajik who signed up to fight communists described, for a friend, how he failed one such test. His handlers put him in a room and told him to wait there until someone came for him. He waited two days and part of a third, at which time the handlers came and told him he had failed. The surprised Tajik asked what he had done wrong. He was told that he had pulled back a window curtain several times to look outside—a sign of psychological weakness. Al Qaeda wanted someone who would sit without stirring, at peace with himself, until he was called to the task at hand.

Some volunteers are placed in bin Laden's 055 brigade in Afghanistan, where they fight alongside the Taliban militia in its battle against Afghan foes. Others have been sent to hot spots like Chechnya and Bosnia. Others still are trained in terror skills and encouraged to settle in the West, Asia or Africa. They might set up an Islamic relief organization, an import-export company or a computer business. Sometimes they get help from Al Qaeda operatives to acquire asylum papers, visas or even false passports. The 1999 FBI memo noted that investigators had "revealed a limited network of bin Laden associates in the United States" but warned that "a larger U.S. presence is anticipated." That future is now: NEWSWEEK learned last week that the FBI is actively investigating evidence from "technical sources" that Al Qaeda officials in Afghanistan placed at least four telephone calls to numbers in the United States after Sept. 11. The FBI believes that bin Laden is trying to activate more terror cells, but the phone calls haven't yet produced new leads. (One target number that was tracked down turned out to be The New York Times.)

Al Qaeda sometimes recruits locals, who are given specific duties but little other information about the operation they're involved in. One of the participants in the 1998 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Dar es Salaam was a Tanzanian grocery clerk named Khalfan Muhamed. The story of his involvement begins at his local mosque, where he was introduced to the idea that he was part of the worldwide Islamic community and had obligations to fellow Muslims who were suffering in war zones like Bosnia. "He found a sense of meaning and community in the mosque," says Jerrold Post, director of the political-psychology program at George Washington University. "In a rather vague and ... romantic, heroic way, he became inspired to join the struggle, the jihad, and help the Muslim victims."

Muhamed later went to camps in Afghanistan for training and hoped to become a warrior for God on a battlefield in the Balkans or Chechnya. But he never joined Al Qaeda. He was disappointed when told that his training was up and he should go back home. More than a year later, however, a Qaeda operative approached Muhamed on a ferry and asked whether he wanted to help with "a jihad job." He jumped at the chance and handled local logistics—including a safe house and rental car—for the Tanzania bombers. Muhamed was not told of the target until a few days before the bombing. And while Al Qaeda operatives (using aliases) left the country when the mission was done, Muhamed was left behind to clean up. "In essence, he was hung out to dry," says Post.

A Course in Sabotage

Al Qaeda's recruits don't have to be devout Muslims. Ahmed Ressay, the Algerian caught with explosives while crossing into the United States from Canada ahead of the millennium celebrations, was a two-bit criminal in Montreal before joining the jihad. He heard about the Khalden training camp in Afghanistan from Algerian friends and flew there in March 1998 via Pakistan. "Nabil," as Ressay was known in the Qaeda camps, got six months of training in light weapons, rocket launchers, explosives and assassination. He took a course in sabotage—how to blow up targets such as military installations, electric plants, airports and corporate offices. He also donned gas masks with other members of his Algerian cell as they learned how to use cyanide gas to poison Americans and other "enemies of Islam," according to testimony he later gave to a New York court. But Ressay's plan to blow up Los Angeles airport fell apart when U.S. Customs officials at the border with Canada became suspicious because he looked nervous and used a Costco membership card as proof of identification. In Afghanistan, bin Laden seems to have worked his charisma on the relatively unschooled leaders of the Taliban militia. He provided Mullah Mohammed Omar, the Taliban "Supreme Commander of the Muslim Faithful," with tens of millions of dollars at a time when most of the world had cut him off (for harboring bin Laden). Although cabinet members rarely had

contact with Mullah Omar except through written orders, bin Laden could enter his office at will. By some accounts, he became a Rasputin-like figure in the Islamic court. That, anyway, is the view of Sayid Massoud, the highest-level defector from the Taliban government to date. Massoud, an economist by training, fled to Pakistan last May after serving as "chief of documentation" for the Taliban's council of ministers in Kabul. According to notes made by Pakistani debriefers, Massoud described a system of government in which decrees were issued by Mullah Omar from his office in Kandahar and implemented by ministers. The decrees were often signed twice with the name "Muhammad Omar"-once in the crude hand of Mullah Omar, and again in a highly calligraphic hand that officials widely believed to be that of bin Laden. That double signature meant the order was authentic and had to be obeyed immediately. "The dynamic was that over the last two or three years the office of the emir became increasingly powerful-not the personality, but the office," says a United Nations official. "As bin Laden and the Arabs controlled the office, they controlled Afghanistan from behind the scenes."

Radicalized in Hamburg

But even such powers of persuasion and control don't help explain the central mysteries of Sept. 11. German investigators still have more questions than answers about key members of the hijack team based in Hamburg, including presumed leader Mohamed Atta. Counterintelligence officials believe the men went to Hamburg five to eight years ago as faithful but not particularly devout Muslims and were radicalized later. They believe the men must have fallen under the tutelage of a particular imam, but they have not been able to identify such a person. Whoever filled that role presumably played on individual vulnerabilities among the recruits. Atta, for instance, was the son of an overbearing father who thought his only boy wasn't tough enough. The son was deeply uncomfortable with girls, unsure of what he was doing with his life, and suddenly found himself alienated in the beer-swilling student society of Hamburg. At some point he became convinced-or someone convinced him-that he was the personal agent of God Almighty. Bin Laden himself knows something of cultural confusion. Last week a Spanish woman who did not want to be identified told a Bilbao newspaper that she spent time with bin Laden and two of his half brothers back in the summer of 1971. She had a photo of herself and a girlfriend with the three bin Laden boys at Oxford, where they were attending a language school. One of the girls appears in hot pants, and Osama looks like any awkward teenager. The boys took the girls rowing on the Thames and insisted on paying; on another occasion they had a picnic together. An annotation in the photo album describes Osama as "a wonderful kid" who seemed to feel a platonic devotion toward the woman's friend. He was not drawn to the fast life and told the girls that the foreigners gallivanting through London were "a bit crazy."

According to what the woman told El Correo, bin Laden was polite and "deep" for his age. "He told us his mother was extremely beautiful and that this attracted the attention of his father," the woman recalled. The girls detected melancholy in the young bin Laden when he explained that he and his brothers had different mothers and that his was "not the wife of the Quran but a concubine."

Psychological profiling, although practiced by the CIA and other intelligence agencies, only gets you so far. Most kids who feel like outcasts or resent their father or feel confused don't grow up to be mass murderers. Most foreign Muslims who settle in the West adapt to their new surroundings just fine. And psychological profiling cannot explain how Al Qaeda got 19 individuals, all with their own life stories, to conspire in the same apocalyptic ending. All that

is known for certain is that the hijackers had holes in their souls that many Americans cannot begin to fathom but that bin Laden and his minions knew how to fill.