

Arab rebel leader warns the British: 'Get out of the Gulf'

Robert Fisk tracks Saudi Arabia's most wanted man to his lair in Afghanistan

Robert Fisk

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Osama Bin Laden, the fiercest opponent of the Saudi regime and of America's presence in the Gulf, has warned Britain that it must withdraw its servicemen from Saudi Arabia if it wishes to avoid the fate of the 19 Americans killed by a truck bomb in the Kingdom last month. In an interview with the Independent in a remote mountainous area of Afghanistan's Nangarhar province - to which he has returned from Sudan with hundreds of his Arab mujahedin guerrillas - the 40-year-old Saudi dissident declared that killing the Americans marked "the beginning of war between Muslims and the United States".

Although taking no personal responsibility for the bombings, which have sent tremors through the vulnerable, oil-rich states of the Arabian peninsula, Bin Laden insisted that the killing of the Americans in Khobar (Dhahran) just over two weeks ago demonstrated the depth of hatred for Americans in Saudi Arabia. "Not long ago, I gave advice to the Americans to withdraw their troops from Saudi Arabia," he said. "Now let us give some advice to the governments of Britain and France to take their troops out - because what happened in Riyadh and Khobar showed that the people who did this have a deep understanding in choosing their targets. They hit their main enemy, which is the Americans. They killed no secondary enemies, nor their brothers in the army or the police of Saudi Arabia ... I give this advice to the government of Britain."

Bin Laden, most of whose immensely wealthy family have remained loyal to King Fahd, has been accused by Western and Arab governments of being "the financier of an Islamic international army", training fighters to oppose the governments of Algeria and Egypt as well as Saudi Arabia. And in his long and sombre interview, he expressed his contempt for the Saudi monarchy and its failure to abide by Islamic sharia law, adding that the "evils" of the Middle East stemmed from America's attempt to take over the region and from its support for Israel. My journey to him took me across miles of devastated villages and fields in the rocky mountainsides of the country where he once fought Soviet invaders, and it culminated in a remote village where dozens of his mujahedin, dressed in Afghan clothes, stood guard as he spoke.

In Saudi robes - and sitting next to his two teenage sons, Omar and Saad - Bin Laden revealed that he had arrived here from Sudan on 18 May with his fighters, after the Saudis and Americans had put pressure on the Khartoum military government to expel him. He claimed that he would carry on a campaign from Afghanistan to set up a "true" Islamic state under sharia law in Saudi Arabia which, he said, had been turned into "an American colony".

When I asked if he was declaring war on the West, he replied: "It is not a declaration of war - it's a real description of the situation. This doesn't mean declaring war against the West and Western people - but against the American regime which is against every Muslim."

As he spoke, armed Egyptians, Saudis, Algerians and Afghans patrolled the night-time fields

around us, their presence revealed by a single hissing gas lamp. At one point, Bin Laden broke off our conversation to pray, alongside his Arabs, on straw matting laid out in the field. Every few minutes, gunfire could be heard from the mountains to the east. "The explosion in Khobar," he said, "did not come as a direct reaction to the American occupation but as a result of American behaviour against Muslims, its support of Jews in Palestine [sic] and the massacre of Muslims in Palestine and Lebanon - of Sabra and Chatila and Qana - and of the Sharm el-Sheikh [anti-terrorist] conference."

Bin Laden's arrival back in Afghanistan after five-and-a-half years in Sudan marks a new stage in the campaign of the Organisation of Advice and Reform.

He accused the Saudi royal family of promising sharia laws while allowing the United States "to westernise Saudi Arabia and drain the economy". He blamed the Saudi regime for spending \$25bn in support of Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq war and a further \$60bn in support of the Western armies in the war against Iraq in 1991, "buying military equipment which is not needed or useful for the country, buying airplanes by credit" - while at the same time creating unemployment, high taxes and a bankrupt economy.

"The safest place in the world for me is Afghanistan," he said.

When I suggested to Bin Laden that Afghanistan was the only place - rather than the safest - in which he could campaign against the Saudi government, he and some of the Arab fighters around him burst into laughter. "There are other places," he replied.

Did he mean Tadjikistan, I asked? Or Uzbekistan? Or Kazakhstan? "There are several places where we have friends and close brothers - we can find refuge and safety in them." When I said that he was already a hunted man, he dismissed my comment with contempt. "Danger is a part of our life - do you not realise that we spent 10 years fighting against the Russians and the KGB? ... When we were fighting the Russians here in Afghanistan, 10,000 Saudis came here to fight over a period of 10 years."

Osama Bin Laden clearly believes he now represents the most formidable enemy of the Saudi regime and of the American presence in the Gulf. Both are probably right to regard him as such.

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Why we reject the West - By the Saudis' fiercest Arab critic; At home in his Afghanistan fastness, Osama Bin Laden tells Robert Fisk why he wants to drive the Americans and British out of the Gulf

BYLINE: Robert Fisk

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Osama Bin Laden is a tall, slim man and when he walks towards me surrounded by his Arab "mujahedin" guerrillas in the mountains of Afghanistan, he towers over his companions. Huge insects fly through the night air, settling like burrs on his Saudi robes and on the clothes of his men. Bin Laden's narrow eyes and long beard were familiar amid the battlefields of Afghanistan where he and his guerrillas fought the Soviet invasion army of the Eighties. His appearance is little changed, the beard a trifle greyer, perhaps, but the fierceness unquenched. Then he fought the Russians. Now, determined to overthrow the monarchy in Saudi Arabia and oust the Americans from the Kingdom, he is describing the bombings that slaughtered 24 Americans in Riyadh and Khobar-Dhahran as a symbol of Saudi anger, the presence of US forces as an "insult" to the Saudi people.

For Bin Laden, the betrayal of the Saudi people began 24 years before his birth, when Abdul Aziz al-Saud proclaimed his kingdom in 1932.

"The regime started under the flag of applying Islamic law and under this banner all the people of Saudi Arabia came to help the Saudi family take power," he says as the night wind moves through the darkened trees, ruffling the robes of the Arab Afghan fighters around us. "Abdul Aziz did not apply Islamic law; the country was set up for his family. Then after the discovery of petroleum, the Saudi regime found another support - the money to make people rich and give them the services and life they wanted and to make them satisfied."

Bin Laden is picking his teeth with a piece of "miswak" wood, a habit that accompanies many of his conversations. History - or his version of it - is the basis of almost all his remarks. And the pivotal date is 1990, the year Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait.

"When the American troops entered Saudi Arabia, the land of the two Holy places Mecca and Medina, there was a strong protest from the ulema religious authorities and from students of the Sharia law all over the country against the interference of American troops. This big mistake by the Saudi regime of inviting the American troops revealed their deception. They had given their support to nations that were fighting against Muslims. They helped the Yemen Communists against the southern Yemeni Muslims and helping Yassir Arafat's regime fight Hamas who opposed the peace process in the Middle East. After it insulted and jailed the ulema 18 months ago, the Saudi regime lost its legitimacy."

Bin Laden spreads his right hand and uses his fingers to list the "mistakes" of the Saudi monarchy. "At the same time, the financial crisis happened inside the Kingdom, and now all the people there suffer from this. Saudi merchants found

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that their contracts were broken. The government owes them 340 billion Saudi Riyals, which is a very big amount; it represents 90 per cent of the national income inside the Kingdom. Prices are going up and people have to pay more for electricity, water and fuel. Saudi farmers have not received money since 1992, and those who get grants now receive them on government loans from banks. Education is deteriorating and people have to take their children from government schools and put them in private education which is very expensive."

Bin Laden pauses to see if I have listened to his careful, if frighteningly exclusive history lesson. "The Saudi people have remembered now what the ulema told them and they realise America is the main reason for their problems.

"The ordinary man knows that his country is the largest oil producer in the world, yet at the same time he is suffering from taxes and bad services. Now the people understand the speeches of the ulemas in the mosques - that our country has become an American colony. They act decisively with every action to kick the Americans out of Saudi Arabia. What happened in Riyadh and Khobar when 24 Americans were killed in two bombings is clear evidence of the huge anger of Saudi people against America. The Saudis now know their real enemy is America."

There is a dark quality to Bin Laden's calculations. "If one kilogram of TNT exploded in a country in which nobody had heard an explosion in a hundred years, surely the exploding of 2,500 kilos of TNT at Khobar is evidence of the people's resistance to American occupation . . ."

Did not the Europeans resist German occupation in the Second World War, Mr Bin Laden asks? I tell him no European would accept this argument because the Nazis killed millions of Europeans, yet the Americans have never murdered a single Saudi. Surely, I say, such a parallel is historically and morally wrong.

Bin Laden does not agree. "We as Muslims have a strong feeling that binds us together . . . We feel for our brothers in Palestine and Lebanon. The explosion at Khobar did not come as a direct result of American occupation but as a result of American behaviour against Muslims . . . When 60 Jews are killed inside Palestine in suicide bombings earlier this year, all the world gathers within seven days to criticise this action, while the deaths of 600,000 Iraqi children after UN sanctions were placed on Iraq did not receive the same reaction. Killing those Iraqi children is a crusade against Islam. We, as Muslims, do not like the Iraqi regime but we think that the Iraqi people and their children are our brothers and we care about their future."

Saudi Arabia's angriest dissident reserves some of his fury for the British. "I am astonished at the British Government," he says. "They sent a letter to me through their embassy in Khartoum before I left Sudan, saying that I would not be welcome in the UK. But I did not ask to go to Britain. So why did they send me this letter? The letter said, 'If you come to Britain, you will not be admitted.' The letter gave the Saudi press the opportunity of claiming that I had asked for political asylum in Britain - which is not true."

But it was America that captured Bin Laden's anger. "I believe that sooner or later the Americans will leave Saudi Arabia and that the war declared by America against the Saudi people means war against all Muslims everywhere. Resistance against America will spread in many, many places in Muslim countries. Our trusted leaders, the ulema, have given us a fatwa that we must drive out the Americans. The solution to this crisis is the withdrawal of American troops . . . their military presence is an insult for the Saudi people."

Yet did not the Americans support the mujahedin's war against the Soviets? "We were never at any time friends of the Americans," Bin Laden says. "We knew that the Americans support the Jews in Palestine and that they are our enemies. Most of the weapons that came to Afghanistan were paid for by the Saudis on the orders of the Americans because Turki al-Faisal the head of Saudi external intelligence and the CIA were working together."

So what kind of Arabian Islamic state does Mr Bin Laden wish to see? Would thieves and murderers still have their heads cut off, for example, in a Sharia-governed state? Mr Bin Laden's answer is unsatisfactory. All Muslims would love to live under true Sharia, he says. A guilty man would only be happy if he was justly punished. Dissident Mr Bin Laden may be. But moderate, never.

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