

Muslim leader warns of a new assault on US forces

ROBERT FISK

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Eastern Afghanistan - From his guerrilla redoubt high in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan, Ossama Bin Laden - regarded by Washington as the West's most dangerous Muslim fundamentalist enemy - has warned Americans of a renewed onslaught against their forces in Saudi Arabia.

In an interview with The Independent, the 44-year old billionaire Saudi dissident who led an army of Arab fighters against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, claimed that he had now secured the support of thousands of Pakistanis for his jihad - holy war - against US troops in the Gulf. He also acknowledged for the first time that his guerrillas had fought street battles against US forces during the ill-fated UN mission to Somalia.

He had, he said, sent faxes to King Fahd and all main departments of the Saudi government, informing them of his determination to pursue a jihad against the Americans; he even claimed that some members of the Saudi royal family agreed with his demand to expel the Americans from the Gulf - an allegation that will only heighten US suspicions that some leading figures in the kingdom covertly support the dissident movement.

I spent the night in Bin Laden's guerrilla camp 8,000 feet up a frozen mountain in south-east Afghanistan as his Arab mujahedin, wearing camouflage jackets and cowled in kuffiah scarves, patrolled the perimeter ridges armed with rocket-propelled grenades and automatic rifles. The road to the camp had been gouged out of the cliffs and precipices by Mr Bin Laden's followers during their earlier jihad against the Soviet army; a few metres from me, a 20-foot high air raid shelter - cut for hundreds of metres through the rock of the mountainside - provided protection against aerial bombing.

Mr Bin Laden himself, dressed in a white turban and green robes with a Kalashnikov assault rifle beside him, sat on the floor of a tent lit only by a sputtering gas lamp. He heaped praise upon the bombers who slaughtered 24 Americans in the Saudi bombings at Riyadh and Al-Khobar - "a great act in which I missed the honour of participating" - and spoke in a chilling, almost inaudible monotone of his hatred for the American "occupiers" of his country. His claim of Pakistani assistance in his "holy war" will cause deep concern to Americans in Saudi Arabia, where tens of thousands of Pakistanis live as immigrant workers.

Astonishingly - in view of his previous threats against British and French troops in the Gulf - Mr Bin Laden claimed that the armies of both countries now provided only a "symbolic presence" in Saudi Arabia, at one point praising Britain for not occupying the Arabian peninsula during the First World War.

He claimed that European nations were now distancing themselves from US policy towards Israel, singling out the European vote against Israel in the UN Security Council debate on the new Jewish settlement on occupied Arab land outside Jerusalem.

But if British and French troops in the Gulf can now sleep a little easier in their beds - in itself a doubtful premise - the Americans appear to face another spate of bombings. "This is the first time in 14 centuries that the land of the two shrines [Mecca and Medina] has been occupied by non-Islamic forces," he said.

"In the past, the Americans didn't meet with real resistance from Muslims because scholars working for the Saudi government misled the people by saying the Americans were providing them with protection. But now, the Muslim nation understands the truth and Pakistanis have allied themselves with us to expel the Americans; Pakistani religious thinkers are issuing fatwa against them."

If Mr Bin Laden's view of America bordered on the eccentric - at one point, he suggested that individual US states might secede from the Union because of Washington's support for Israel - his historical perspective was deeply disturbing. "We believe that God used our holy war in Afghanistan to destroy the Russian army and the Soviet Union - we did this from the top of this very mountain upon which you are sitting - and now we ask God to use us one more time to do the same to America, to make it a shadow of itself.

But he was confident. "We also believe that our battle against America is much simpler than the war against the Soviet Union, because some of our mujahedin who fought here in Afghanistan also participated in operations against the Americans in Somalia - and they were surprised at the collapse of American morale. This convinced us that the Americans are a paper tiger."

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The man who wants to wage holy war against the Americans

A pilgrimage through a broken and dangerous land of death

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The journey to meet Ossama Bin Laden began, as it did last year, outside the facade of the run-down Spinghar Hotel in Jalalabad. An Afghan holding a Kalashnikov rifle invited me to travel in a car out of town. But this time - instead of a journey across the deserts and Russian-bombed villages of the plains - we headed past the roaring waters of a great river and up into the mountains, overtaking trucks and a string of camels, their heads turning towards our headlights in the gloom. Two hours later we stopped on a stony hillside and, after a few minutes, a pick-up truck came bouncing down the rough shale of the mountainside.

An Arab in Afghan robes came towards the car. I recognised him at once from our last meeting in a ruined village. "I am sorry Mr Robert, but I must give you the first search," he said, prowling through my camera bag and newspapers. And we set off up the track which Ossama Bin Laden built during his jihad against the Russian army in the early 1980s, a terrifying, slithering two-hour odyssey along fearful ravines in rain and sleet, the windscreen misting as we climbed the cold mountain.

"When you believe in jihad, it is easy," he said, fighting with the steering wheel as stones scattered from the tyres, bouncing down ravines into the clouds below. From time to time, lights winked at us from far away in the darkness. "Our brothers are letting us know they see us," he said.

After an hour, two armed Arabs - one with his face covered in a scarf, eyes peering at us through spectacles - came screaming from behind two rocks. "Stop! Stop!" As the brakes were jammed on, I almost hit my head on the windscreen. "Sorry, sorry," the bespectacled man said, putting down his anti-tank rocket launcher and pulling from his pocket an electronic metal detector, the red light flicking over my body in another search. The road grew worse as we continued, the jeep skidding backwards towards sheer cliffs, the headlights illuminating terrifying gorges on either side. Still clutching the wheel, the Arab fighter turned to me and smiled. "Toyota is good for jihad," he said. I could only agree.

In the moonlight, I could see clouds both below us in the ravines and above us, curling round mountain tops, the headlights now shining on frozen waterfalls and icy pools. Ossama Bin Laden knew how to build his wartime roads - many an ammunition truck and tank had ground up here during the titanic struggle against the Red Army. Now the man who led those guerrillas - the first Arab fighter in the battle against Moscow - was back again in the mountains he knew. There were more Arab checkpoints, more screaming orders to halt.

"No one can get to us here," the driver muttered.

Our meeting was almost an anti-climax. Ossama Bin Laden looked fatigued when he entered the tent in which I was waiting cross-legged on a rough blanket, my shoes left at the entrance.

At times during our conversation, he paused for at least a minute to choose his words. He was, however, studiously polite, offering the usual Arab courtesy of food to a stranger: a tray of cheese, olives, bread and jam. But his message was unequivocal, even brutal, while couched with the usual conditional clauses. "I am not against the American people - only their government," he said. How many times have I heard that phrase? I told him I thought the American people regarded their government as their representatives. He listened to this in silence. "We are still at the beginning of our military action against the American forces," he said.

If the United States regarded him as the foremost "terrorist" in the world - as I suggested to him they did - then "if liberating my land is called terrorism, this is a great honour for me". And so we embarked on a three-and-a-half hour interview in which the US was damned for supporting Israel, but in which Europe was faintly praised for its slow departure from American policy in the Middle East.

For him, there was no difference, he said, between the American and Israeli governments, between the American and Israeli armies. But Europe was beginning to distance itself from the Americans, especially France - although he condemned French policies towards north Africa. He did not mention Algeria but the name hovered over us for several minutes like a ghost.

He gave me a Pakistani wall poster in Urdu which proclaimed the support of Pakistani scholars for his holy war against the Americans, even colour photographs of graffiti on the walls of Karachi, demanding the ousting of US troops from "the place of the two Holy Shrines (Mecca and Medina)". He had, he said, received some months ago an emissary from the Saudi royal family who said that Bin Laden would have his Saudi citizenship and passport returned to him and that his family would receive 2 billion Saudi riyals (pounds 339m) if he abandoned his jihad - declared on 23 August - and went back to Saudi Arabia. He had rejected the offer and so had his family, he said.

The US was in Saudi Arabia because of its oil but - more importantly - because it feared ("along with the Zionists") that "they and their local agents would drown in the Islamic uprising". Of the strict Islamist Taliban militia, which now controls three-quarters of Afghanistan and in whose region Bin Laden now lives, he said that he had "struggled alongside them" since 1979. "We believe that Taliban are sincere in their attempts to enforce Islamic religious law. We saw the situation here before [they took over] and after, and have seen an obvious improvement."

Despite these words, Ossama Bin Laden was unwilling to have me taken back to Jalalabad through the Taliban checkpoints at midnight. So I spent the night under the stars at his guerrilla camp, close to the massive rock-hewn air-raid shelter that he built during the Russian war. When the Arabs drove me back before dawn next day, they paused by the roadside to pray, kneeling on rugs with their rifles beside them, crying "Allahu Akbar" over the bleak landscape of rivers and snow-capped mountains. And amid the pageant of stars above us, a great comet trailed down the sky with a fiery tail, unseen since the time of the Pharaohs. It was, I learned later, the Hale-Bopp comet. "They say that after a comet, there will be a great war," one of the Arabs said to me.

We had driven past the police barracks in Jalalabad at first light but, minutes later, a thunderous explosion tore across the road, incinerating every driver within 100 metres, a massive blast at the local munitions store that killed at least 50 men, women and children and left hundreds wounded. The Taliban were on the streets, beating back relatives of the dead with sticks, a mile-high column of brown smoke belching into the sky. It was not difficult to see how this broken, dangerous nation could engender anger and an acceptance of death; even a desire to turn the weapons once used against the Soviets upon the world's only surviving superpower.