



## What does Bin Laden want?

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We've been arguing over al Qaeda's aims since before 9/11. Some take Osama bin Laden's specific complaints seriously. But we shouldn't, as we learned this month from his latest rambling communiqué, which faulted America for seemingly everything — global warming, high interest rates, shaky home mortgages, and free-market democratic capitalism itself.

Remember that back in the 1990s, he declared war on America for three other reasons: We had troops in Saudi Arabia. The United Nations had imposed sanctions on Iraq. And America supported Israel. Now it apparently matters little that there are neither embargoes of Iraq nor American soldiers in Saudi Arabia.

In 2004, bin Laden objected to our logical conclusion that he instead

hated the West simply for its freedom. He posed this rhetorical question: "Contrary to what Bush says and claims — that we hate freedom — let him tell us then, 'Why did we not attack Sweden?'"

I think we can now answer that by pointing out that al Qaeda has just put out a \$100,000 murder bounty on a Swedish cartoonist who was a little too free in his caricatures of Islam. Note that Sweden has no troops in Iraq or Afghanistan, lets in plenty of Middle Eastern Muslims and wants no part of George Bush's "war on terror."

But then radical Islamists have also threatened Danish cartoonists, Dutch filmmakers, German opera producers, and the pope. All have nothing to do with Iraq or Afghanistan or Israel — but simply do

things that radical Islam finds blasphemous.

So aren't these constantly changing gripes of al Qaeda's just pretexts for bin Laden's larger hatred of Western-inspired freedom?

The truth is that bin Laden and al Qaeda want power for themselves, and use religious grievances and shifting political demands to try to achieve it.

In their worldview, Islam's chance for a renewed united Muslim caliphate was shattered into impotent warring nations by sneaky 19th-century European colonists. They now want to reunite modern Arab nations into an Islamic empire run by the likes of bin Laden and his sidekick, Ayman al Zawahiri.

And they think they can pull it off for a variety of reasons.

First, al Qaeda claims its jihadists drove the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan, leading to the unraveling of the Soviet empire. It doesn't matter that al Qaeda's terrorists numbered only a few thousand and played a minor role in the Afghan warlords' victory. Instead, according to al Qaeda's propaganda, this tiny Arab legion would become the vanguard of a world-conquering army that would move next against the United States.

Second, bin Laden believes we will ultimately prove weak and suffer the Soviets' fate. That's why he keeps talking about breaking up our

own states on the model of the now-defunct Soviet Union.

Past American hesitation in the face of attacks on our embassies, military assets and diplomats convinced bin Laden as he plotted 9/11 that we would leave the Middle East to his jihadists. He sees us now squabbling over the costs of Iraq, our counter-terrorism measures and Guantanamo Bay. So he still holds out hope that Americans will soon be leaving the region in defeat, and letting down their guard at home.

Third, oil is now sky-high at \$80 a barrel. In bin Laden's view, the longer he is at war, the higher the price of petroleum climbs. That impoverishes Western infidels and ensures that plenty of Middle East petrodollars can be siphoned off to madrassas, radical mosques and terrorists.

Bin Laden also sees how the rival Muslim theocracy in Iran has turned its oil profits into a nuclear-weapons program. He'd like to replace the present Gulf monarchies with self-professed imams and jihadists. Such a single, united Wahhabi theocracy could dole out its oil to subservient importers, and use the profits to acquire enough weapons to unite the Arab world and prepare for the final war against us.

Bin Laden's problem then is not really tiny Israel or global warming or mortgage interest rates, but an all-powerful and free West led by the United States. It alone has the military and economic power to stop radical Islamists. Plus, we bring

the more powerful message of political freedom. And American popular culture, with its informality and egalitarianism, is sweeping the globe, seducing far more adherents than does rote memorization of the Koran.

So, despite bin Laden's bragging, America remains the big stumbling block, the stronger horse. The

United States alone ensures that bin Laden stays a sick man babbling in a cave — and not a Muslim caliph in flowing robes, with billions of dollars in oil under his feet and weapons merchants lined up at his palace door.

Sound absurd? So once did the notion of a crater in Manhattan and \$80 a barrel oil.

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