What the Fatwa? Understanding bin Laden's Manifesto against the United States

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Osama bin Laden might be the most vilified figure in American history. The Saudi-born jihadist was the founder and mastermind of the Islamist terror group al Qaeda. Over more than three decades, the organization has been responsible for a variety of terrorist attacks around the world, including those of September 11, 2001, the deadliest on U.S. soil. When bin Laden was killed by Navy Seals in May 2011, spontaneous celebrations erupted across the United States.

Many of those revelers were college students – not unlike the audience for a class I teach about the War on Terror. The course is intended to provide historical grounding for this contemporary conflict. The audience is overwhelming non-majors for whom this may be their only college history course. My aim is to teach students the merits of historical thinking, which they will find useful to their discipline, to their future career field, and to become better informed global citizens.

To that end, one of my course objectives is for students to think critically about the arguments of historical actors. Part of such analyses requires students to engage challenging perspectives with open minds. It's not an easy exercise with a figure as notorious as bin Laden, of whom students already have a strong opinion. "I thought he was a crazy terrorist who hated America," one student told me. "He is one of the worst men in history," another said.[94] While certainly not trying to justify al Qaeda's attacks, my aim in engaging bin Laden's ideology is to offer insight into the man himself beyond the popular, simplistic view of him as evil.

During a lesson about bin Laden's background and the events leading to 9/11, I have students read the English translation of his self-styled "fatwa" from February 1998. Co-signed by four other men, including his deputy and successor Ayman al-Zawahiri, this manifesto calls for Muslims around the world "to kill the Americans and their allies – civilians and military" in retaliation for purported crimes and sins committed against Muslims. According to the group, these transgressions included the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia (Islam's holiest land), American-led sanctions and military actions against Iraq during the 1990s, and the continuing U.S. support of Israel.[95]

The "fatwa" – technically a misnomer because none of the signatories was a Muslim scholar or cleric – is important because it signaled a shift in al Qaeda's emphasis. To that point, the organization had played more of a supportive role in helping other jihadi groups commit terrorist acts around the world. After the fatwa, though, it began taking more of an operational approach, directly overseeing its own attacks. The rotten fruits of this strategy would be seen in the August 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the October 2000 bombing of the *USS Cole*, and attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on 9/11.

With that background in mind, I have students read the fatwa and consider three pre-circulated questions for discussion:

1. According to the authors, how does the U.S. threaten Muslims around the world?
2. What do the authors call on Muslims to do?
3. How does bin Laden frame support for his argument?

[94] Student surveys of March 7, 2018, in possession of author.

[95] World Islamic Front Statement, "Jihad against Jews and Crusaders," 23 February 1998 https://fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm.

These questions are intended to help guide students through the reading and get them to focus on the heart of the authors' arguments, including the extent to which the writers support it.

The ensuing class meeting often leads to a robust discussion. Most students concede that the fatwa sheds important light on bin Laden's perspective and they are compelled to question labels and motivations commonly attributed to the War on Terror. "It is strange that bin Laden refers to us as terrorists yet we are referring to him as a terrorist," one student said after the lesson. Said another, "[President] Bush stated that [al Qaeda] were jealous of our freedom but in reality bin Laden did not want non-Muslims in the holy land." For some, reading bin Laden's words merely reinforced their previous sentiments. "It has just made me dislike [al Qaeda] even more than I already had," one student said. Added another, "bin Laden and al Qaeda were and are some of the worst people on this planet and we need to get rid of them."

The vast majority of students, though, noted that reading the fatwa significantly affected their understanding of bin Laden – not necessarily in a sympathetic way but in a more complex, nuanced, and multi-dimensional manner. "I can see why he's so frustrated and is willing to do such [hateful] acts against the U.S.," one student said. Another student concluded, "My view hasn't really changed but at least now I know the justification he used for doing what he did." Ultimately, those who read the fatwa are challenged to consider a very foreign perspective, both literally and figuratively. Sam Wineburg has famously described historical thinking as an unnatural act.[96] Sometimes, it can be uncomfortable, too. But that's where most of the learning takes place.

[96] Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).