Interview with Saudi oppositionist Usama Bin Ladin by chief editor 'Abd-al-Bari 'Atwan

"in Afghanistan's mountains"; date not given; the front page carries a summary of the interview accompanied by a photograph of Bin Ladin sitting in front of a row of bookshelves with a machine gun visible in the background, captioned "Shaykh Usama Bin Ladin in front of his library in one of the caves; his machine gun, which he said he seized in one of the battles against the Soviets, could be seen hanging in front of a shelf of heritage books"; page 5 carries the text of the interview with a photograph of Bin Ladin and 'Atwan walking among trees among snow, captioned "The most prominent Saudi oppositionist Usama Bin Ladin accompanies colleague 'Abd-al-Bari 'Atwan on a tour in the Khorasan mountains"

'Atwan: Based on sources close to the investigation, some US newspapers reported recently that those who carried out the al-Khubar operation are from the Shiite Hizballah of Saudi Arabia. What is your opinion?

Bin Ladin: Regimes throughout the world and in the Arab world tend to lay the blame on other quarters or accuse any opposition of working for foreign quarters. Over the past three decades we have noticed that any reformist endeavor tends to be accused of working for the United States and Israel. But now that it has become clear that the region's states are in one way or another agents for the United States and Israel, these states have invented other means such as accusing other quarters of such actions in a bid to divert attention from the truth about the legitimate opposition and also to prevent people from interacting with those who carried out the operations. There are political objectives behind these rumors, aimed at diverting attention. As for the size of the opposition, it includes all sectors, including the security and the military. A whole people has been humiliated and persecuted. And the group that has been humiliated most is the Army, on which thousands of millions of dollars have been spent only to discover later that it needs those foreign forces. This is in addition to the economic harm inflicted on the people as a result of the money spent on US forces. Cab drivers now say that their sons are unemployed because the budget is spent on US forces and weapons.

'Atwan: Some people consider operations against US forces terrorism and describe you as a leader of Islamic "terrorism."

Bin Ladin: Terrorism—if it is against criminals, thieves, and bandits—is a legitimate thing adopted by all states in all ages. The blameworthy terrorism is the kind committed by thieves against nations. What happened in the Riyadh and al-Khubar blasts was praiseworthy terrorism, because it was against thieves, not individuals but major states which went there to plunder the riches of this nation and to encroach on its greatest holy sites. It is a great honor for every Muslim to defend his qiblah [direction to which Muslims turn in praying] and liberate it from these aggressors who are plundering its riches.
With regard to their descriBing the mujahidin as terrorists, the following proverb applies to them: "She found comfort in accusing me of her own illnesses." It is these aggressors who are committing the objectionable terrorism. Suffice it to point to the suffering of the Muslim people in Palestine and the disgraceful US stances and its use of the veto, which in itself is terrorism. This is addition to the Qana massacre and the blockade imposed on Iraq, which has caused the death of over 600,000 innocent children.

The highest degree of injustice is what happened at the Sharm al-Shaykh meeting. The United States is using the veto against the Muslim people in Palestine, who have been persecuted for over a century. But when [only a few] scores of Jews were killed, world Leaders—some of whose hands are stained with blood, such as Yeltsin, whose hands are stained with the Chechens' blood—got together.

Such propaganda will not dissuade Muslims from defending their religion by themselves.

'Atwan: In your recent message you declared jihad against US forces and demanded that Washington goods be boycotted, and many people expected operations along the lines of the al-Khubar operation, but nothing has happened. What is your opinion?

Bin Ladin: The military are aware that preparations for major operations require time, in contrast with small operations. It took several months when the United States wanted to hit Iraq in its brutal attack on the nation and [start] the occupation of the [land of the] two holy mosques [Saudi Arabia]. If we wanted to carry out small operations, it would have been easy to do so immediately after the statements. Even the nature of the battle requires qualitative operations that affect the adversary, which obviously requires good preparation. We had thought that the Riyadh and al-Khubar blasts were a sufficient signal to sensible US decisionmakers to avert a real battle between the Islamic nation and US forces, but it seems that they did not understand the signal.

'Atwan: What is that signal?

Bin Ladin: Understanding the signal means withdrawing all forces from the region, because we believe that the US Government committed the biggest mistake when it entered a peninsula which no non-Muslim nation has ever entered for 14 centuries despite the presence of imperialist forces in the region. They all feared to enter the two holy mosques area and remained in the fringes, such as Yemen and Oman. The British and others respected the feelings of more than 1 billion Muslims, which is why they did not occupy the land of the two holy mosques. US interests had not been harmed by the US nonentry [into the peninsula], since oil was being sold to the United States—we are not going to drink it. Nevertheless, they managed to impose a policy which reduced prices to an unrealistic level. Their entry was arbitrary and a reckless action. They have entered into a confrontation with a nation whose population is 1 billion Muslims.

They made another mistake when they relied on reports which do not reflect the real anger of the masses in the Islamic world. The coming days [al-ayam al-qaribah], God willing, will prove that that decision was the biggest strategic mistake the United States has ever committed. It can only be redressed by withdrawing and suspending all material support for the Jews in our first qiblah in Palestine.

'Atwan: You are launching these threats from 2,500 meters up in the Afghan mountains,
2,000 miles or more from the Arab region. Do you believe that there is something which is difficult to understand here?

Bin Ladin: That could be correct if I was talking about the country of the two holy mosques, on the grounds that I am one of that country's sons, or dissociating myself from a nation whose territory begins from the east of the earth to the west [min mashriq al-ard ila al-maghrib] and whose lands are linked together. I am talking about their [all Muslims'] qiblah, which I want to liberate from the infidels. This nation is linked together like electricity. I am talking about the nation as a whole. I am not addressing the sons of the peninsula only; US interests exist throughout the Islamic world, the world has become a small village, and with God's help, the contacts exists and the interaction is there. The nation has been prevented from hearing a word of truth from its sons, which is why our elite ulema have been put in the jails of the Islamic world, especially the Kingdom's jails.

The influence is there, and we are satisfied that the interaction is continuing. And we hope to reach the ignition point not in a long time.

'Atwan: You remained silent for a long time and suddenly decided to surface after a comfortable stay in Sudan. How did you move from Afghanistan to Sudan, and what was the turning point that prompted you to shoulder this big opposition responsibility?

Bin Ladin: After the Saudi Government harassed the ulema, dismissed them from their jobs in universities and mosques, and prevented the distribution of their tapes, I decided that, if it was going to prevent them from speaking, I would begin to promote virtue and repudiate vice, something which had been suspended. Then the state prevented the clerics from speaking, so we set up the advice committee and began to reveal the truth and clarify matters, seeking reform and guidance for the nation and reminding people of the long time our ulema had spent working to reform [society] through good preaching. Statements were issued from Sudan, and when the Saudi Government discovered the great impact and effect of these statements, it transcended all its disagreements with the Sudanese regime, which had exerted great efforts to rectify its relations with the Riyadh Government and to end the boycott but encountered a lack of response and arrogance. After Statement No. 17 was issued—it was an open letter to the king on the occasion of the cABinet reshuffle—the Saudi Government contacted the Sudanese Government at the highest level, requesting reconciliation on the condition that Usama Bin Ladin and the sons of the two holy mosques accompanying him in Sudan were expelled and that they stopped issuing statements.

'Atwan: How did you receive the decision, and did you understand their position?

Bin Ladin: The Sudanese Government at the highest level informed me of its difficult position and the scale of the Saudi pressure. They asked me to stop issuing statements. On the day I was told to stop issuing statements I sought to find an alternative land capable of bearing the word of truth, so God helped me and we came to the land of Khorasgan once again. We are in an invincible [hasinah] land which enjoys security, pride, and immunity against the humiliation and subjugation to which our brothers are subjected in our country.
'Atwan: Did you go to Sudan at an invitation from the government or from another quarter?

Bin Ladin: I went to Sudan by myself and without an invitation.

'Atwan: Did you expect the Saudi Government to request your departure?

Bin Ladin: The possibility existed, and we had arranged some alternatives such as Afghanistan. This is why we had retained our camps there. So we returned to our home. The Islamic world as a whole is a home for [every] Muslim.

'Atwan: What did the Sudanese Government gain from the decision to expel you?

Bin Ladin: Nothing significant. As you have heard, UN and US pressures on Sudan have continued and increased since I left. A US official said that Bin Ladin's expulsion is a good step, but it [the Sudanese Government] still has to do a great deal to prove its good intentions.

'Atwan: In your recent message you referred ambiguously to a lesson you had taught the Americans in Yemen, but you gave no details. Can you clarify that?

Bin Ladin: With regard to Yemen, I do not want to add anything significant. However, the press said that the Americans left Yemen in less than 24 hours and that those who hit the airport and tried to blow up a US bus at Aden airport did so because US forces had entered Yemen by force and were heading for Aden. Butrus-Ghali contacted the Yemeni president and told him that there was a US plan to send forces to restore security in Somalia, and we hope that you will give it [the United States] a base, because we want to use Aden airport as a rear base. The Yemeni Government was surprised by the aircraft, and some young men carried out an action against them, so the US forces had to leave in less than 24 hours.

'Atwan: Did you fight the Americans in Somalia?

Bin Ladin: The only non-Somali group which fought the Americans was the Arab mujahidin brothers who had come from Afghanistan. The US Government knew for certain that we were fighting it. And it had announced that there were extremist non- Somali forces fighting [against it], and they meant us. These were successful battles in which we inflicted big losses on the Americans. We used to hunt them down in Mogadishu. Aidid denied any responsibility, and he was telling the truth. The war in which we are currently engaged with the United States is not tee first, and we pray to God to grant us victory over them just as He did before.

'Atwan: But the US forces in Saudi Arabia are well-fortified compared with those which were in Somalia, and they have recently been moved to the al-Kharj base.
Bin Ladin: Things are possible with God's help. Their fortifications will not impede the faithful mujahidin's resolve, God willing. We were surprised by the US soldier's psychological level in the Somali war. There was nothing for him to fight for. It was just a media show. There is no comparison between him and the Russian fighters, against whom we fought in Afghanistan. The Russian soldier is more courageous and patient than the US soldier. I took up arms against the Soviets in Afghanistan for 10 years, and we believe that our battle with the United States is easy compared with the battles in which we engaged in Afghanistan. And we are now more determined to continue until we meet God [meaning until death].

'Atwan: After the Taleban movement seized power in Kabul, it was reported that your presence as Afghan Arabs was no longer considered desirable. Is this true?

Bin Ladin: Our relations with the Taleban are good. According to them, they consider us similar to the emigrants [who left Mecca for Medina] who were received in Medina by the al-ansar [followers of the Prophet Mohammad]. It is a relationship based on piety and righteousness. We feel completely comfortable with cooperating with the Taleban. Great achievements have been scored since the Taleban elements came to the areas in which we are based, especially with regard to applying the Shari'ah, spreading security, and eliminating fear in their areas. And the extent of the people's acceptance of the application of Islam and God's law is now clear. It is also clear how the people have welcomed this Shari'ah, and bad aspects such as the actions committed by thieves and others have disappeared.

Interviewer: If your relations with Taleban deteriorate for one reason or another, will you return to Sudan?

Bin Ladin: I can never return to Sudan. Not because I am not interested in Sudan, but because the mountains are our natural place.

'Atwan: What about Iraq?

Bin Ladin: Iraq is not on the cards. The choice is between Afghanistan and Yemen. Yemen's topography is mountainous, and its people are tribal, armed, and allow one to breathe clear air unblemished with humiliation.

'Atwan: With or without the Yemeni Government's knowledge?

Bin Ladin: It is the same.

'Atwan: Do you believe that that will happen soon?

Bin Ladin: I am not thinking [of doing that] in the foreseeable future.

'Atwan: Some people accuse you of financing extremist jihad movements in Libya, Egypt, Algeria, and elsewhere. What truth is there is this?
Bin Ladin: Naming numerous countries of the Islamic world will change nothing in the reality. We deal with the Islamic world as one state. We cooperate with people on the basis of piety and righteousness and according to our capacity and capabilities, because we are one nation with one religion and one qiblah. A lot of what is said by the media contains clear exaggerations.

'Atwan: What is the size of your wealth? Is it in billions as the Western media say?

Bin Ladin: I praise God for granting us belief, rescuing us from the darkness, and moving us to the light. It is our duty to spread this light in the world through the means sanctioned by Almighty God.

He has granted us health, and we praise Him. He has granted us money sufficient, God willing, to repulse the unjust attacks committed against our nation. It is the duty of the nation as a whole to use its money in the jihad so that God's religion will prevail.

'Atwan: Did you think, like others, of turning to a European state? And did you visit London secretly or openly?

Bin Ladin: I would rather die than live in any European state. Some Arab governments are circulating such rumors in a bid to distort [my] reputation. Muslims are not supposed to be adjacent to non-Muslim societies. It is not true that I thought about going to London or applying for a visa. Such rumors are designed to defame. They are circulated by hired newspapers which are too lowly to be responded to.

'Atwan: How did you feel when US forces began to arrive in the Arabian Peninsula and then launch raids on Iraq?

Bin Ladin: It was clear that it was an occupation of the Islamic countries and Muslim holy sites. My people or most of the people's sons were shocked by the fatwas [religious rulings] issued by people in whom they had had full confidence, so we had to wait until this shock disappeared. Right should be followed. Men are judged on the basis of their adherence to right. Praise be to God, we succeeded in revealing the truth to the people, and the nation in the country of two holy places now knows that their holy sites are under dual US-Israeli occupation.

'Atwan: It is noted that you are focusing on or giving priority to Islamic issues other than Palestine. Many people criticize you for this. What is your opinion?

Bin Ladin: Interest in issues is determined by their closeness to the people's life and their sequence. Without doubt the Afghan issue was the most recent responsibility compared with the al-Aqsa Mosque and then came the country of the two holy mosques. The event was a hot issue and prompted the nation's interest, so God helped us to stage the jihad in Afghanistan. The same applied to the two holy mosques, they were occupied recently compared with the occupation of the al-Aqsa mosque, which made them more important because they are the qiblah of all Muslims.
'Atwan: Did you fight against the secession in Yemen?

Bin Ladin: It is documented in South Yemeni security departments that we fought the communist Socialist Party before the union and the union plan, because they are atheist, communist, and oppressive socialists. They oppressed the people, destroyed everything, attacked God's religion, and sanctified their party, saying nothing is louder than the party's voice. I delivered a number of lectures in mosques inciting Muslims to fight them (the Socialists), which prompted the Saudi Government to prevent me from delivering any speeches. But with God's grace, the youths continued the jihad, and we continued to cooperate with them against the heads of atheism in the Socialist Party.

'Atwan: We noted that in your recent message you excluded British and French forces from any threat to hit them, focusing, instead, on the US forces in the peninsula only. Can you explain this?

Bin Ladin: The message to the Europeans is clear: hasten to leave [the peninsula]. True, the main forces in terms of numbers are the US forces. The logical thing for the wise people in Europe is to withdraw their forces before the battle blazes, especially as they have nothing at all there, now that the United States has seized everything. We hope that they will make that decision and not delay it.

'Atwan: But Europe does not intend to withdraw and is forming a rapid deployment force.

Bin Ladin: We believe that they will withdraw. The earlier the better for them. Their intervention is arbitrary and unjustifiable. They are mobilizing their energies in the interests of the United States, and it is in control of the oil "tap" or the largest oil complex in the world, an action which will have negative effects on them as well.

'Atwan: It is clear that the Islamic moderation tide is expanding while extremism is declining. Are you not thinking of reconsidering your calculations and admitting the failure of extremism in Algeria, Egypt, and elsewhere?

Bin Ladin: Islam is a moderate religion. It is the religion of Muhammad (peace be upon him). Everything in it is just and right. Words and explanations are used to clarify the matters which can be explained. And Almighty God has sanctioned al-da'wah [preaching]. This is justice and moderation. With regard to the matters in which spearheads [meaning weapons] need to be used, it is a just right. If some people confuse the two, Islam is not responsible, since the error is in the application. If anyone means by violence and renunciation of violence to prevent us from staging the jihad, he has deviated from the right path. The jihad is part of our Shari'ah and the nation cannot dispense with it [in its fight] against its enemies.

Since it abandoned the jihad the nation has been suffering the calamities of murder, dispossession, and plunder at the hands of the crusaders and their allies, led by the United States and Israel.
'Atwan: Has your family been harmed?

Bin Ladin: Obviously the family has been harmed without doubt, but relatively. Great pressures have been exerted on them for the sake of my return.

'Atwan: Is there any mediation by the government for the sake of reconciliation, and when was the most recent one?

Bin Ladin: The most recent of these mediations was eight months ago. They promised to return my identity card, passport, and money. They said I can return to the Kingdom dignified and respected if I say through the media that the king is Muslim. My reply was that we firmly believe that the regime has passed numerous laws without referring to God and appointed itself as a lawmaker and a co-lawmaker with God. This is unbelief as endorsed by the ulema and the Book of Almighty God. "He does not share His command with anyone." [Koranic verse] I refer anyone who criticizes me for this attack on the regime to the glorious verse: "God loveth not that evil should be noised abroad in public speech, except where injustice hath been done." God verily says the truth.

'Atwan: It has been reported that you were exposed to an assassination attempt in Sudan during the attack on a mosque in Omdurman in 1993, and another in your house late in Sha'ban 1993?

Bin Ladin: We used to meet with the brother guests at 1700 hours every evening. On that day, and for a reason known to God, I was late, then I heard a barrage of bullets fired on the guest room, which is detached from the house. Some bullets were [fired] at me. So I took my weapon and went to a position overlooking the house to investigate the matter. I gave my eldest son ('Abdallah) a weapon and told him to take a position inside the house. I thought that an armed group had attacked the guards, and we prepared ourselves for a clash. But it was discovered that the attack was aimed directly at the guest room, which was stormed by three young men who opened fire at the guests, three of whom were seriously wounded. They opened fire on the place where I used to sit. One [guest] was hit in the abdomen, another in the thigh, and the third in the leg. The brothers clashed with them. There were Sudanese security forces near the house, so they clashed with them, killing two and wounding the third. Some of the brothers sustained minor injuries.

'Atwan: In your opinion, who was behind that attempt?

Bin Ladin: We believe that the regimes in our Arab region are now pursuing a bad policy and carrying the arrests to excess, not to extract information through torture, but to create a wing of young men who believe in declaring all society infidel, so as to use this wing indirectly to kill any of society's groups.

'Atwan: What about the second attempt?
Bin Ladin: The second attempt was in the al-Thawrah Mosque in Omdurman when a group tried to kill me while I was performing my prayers.

Compilation of Usama Bin Ladin Statements 1994-January 2004
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