

# Gandhi and bin Laden: Religious Conflict at the Polar Extremes

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Résumé de l'article

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## **Gandhi and bin Laden: Religious Conflict at the Polar Extremes**

by  
*James L. Rowell*

### **Abstract**

*The current conflict of political terror advocated by religious Islamists, such as Osama bin Laden, threaten to eclipse the relevance of non-violent strategies advocated by Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. An examination of the relative strengths and weakness of the tactics of non-violence (ahimsa) and violence (jihad) will show some short-term advantages for violence, that are seriously mitigated by other long-term and tactical weaknesses. This investigation also suggests new ways (a chemical model) for understanding the moral polar extremes of religious belief represented by Gandhi and bin Laden.*

### **INTRODUCTION: HAS JIHAD TRUMPED AHIMSA?**

Mohandas K. Gandhi and Osama bin Laden would seem to be polar opposites on the spectrum of religion and political activism. One advocated selflessness and non-violence by steadfastly adhering to the principle of *ahimsa*, and the other advocates violent and murderous *jihad* in a perverse call to religious duty. Gandhi brought down the hegemony of the British Empire in India, while bin Laden's directives crumbled the World Trade Center in New York City. Gandhi sought to advance an inner calm, a truth-force that could not be conquered, which was intrinsically just, and commanded the respect and compliance of the adversary. Bin Laden, conversely, promotes terror and chaos, attempting to instill fear and obedience in the hearts of those he loathes the most. Unquestionably, a student of religion and politics would prefer to choose Gandhi as the just and better representative of good ethics and good character. The troubling question is, however, can the principles and tactics of non-violence, as Gandhi espoused them, respond to the current era of religious and political conflict? Is it a disturbing fact that the tactics of bin Laden have a distinctive and superior edge, such that they have trumped and made irrelevant the hopes and prospects of religious non-

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violence? Has, in short, bin Laden trumped Gandhi? If so, then we say goodbye to an era of religion and non-violence, but if not we must ask ourselves what are the comparative strengths and weaknesses of the tactics and ideology of men like Gandhi and bin Laden?

Surprisingly, Gandhi and bin Laden have some things in common. Both men have had, in their own era, a cult appeal and widespread following for their contests with Western empire. "Gandhiji" was a term of endearment used by countless thousands of Indians before their moment of independence, as Gandhi challenged the might and influence of British colonialism in the country of his birth. Gandhi attempted to unite Hindus and Muslims alike in an effort to reject, not only British rule, but all characteristics of Western culture and empire that he considered to be corrupt and unjust. India could not be truly free, in Gandhi's view, if it threw off the British yoke and mimicked the principles of its imperial rule. That would be like exchanging British masters for Hindu ones. Gandhi was, of course, successful in his bid to throw off British rule, but failed in attaining the unity of nationalism among Hindus and Muslims that would have prevented India's partition. Gandhi displayed a highly critical attitude toward Western empire and civilization, seeing it in immoral terms, thoroughly bound up with violence and materialism in its very bones.<sup>1</sup>

Bin Laden's cause, and the cause of many Islamists who he has been able to stir to his allegiance, is in some ways similar, but in others radically different in scope and intent. Bin Laden is not attempting to free any one country *per se*, though he would very much like to begin by a regime change in Saudi Arabia. Bin Laden wants to emancipate the Arab Muslim world from the perceived imperialism and injustice of the West, but also from Arab governments he perceives to be corrupt puppets of their interest. His war is not only a war against the West; it is also a war against other Muslims (or, in his view, those whose claims to be Muslim are false). Bin Laden's goals are, therefore, far less defined, diffuse, and of course completely corrupted by his willingness to use indiscriminate murder in the pursuit of his cause. Because his goals are so broad and his enemies many, one can only foresee that his project will result in inevitable failure. Bin Laden's struggle is not one that the West, or anyone of good conscience, could consider just. Gandhi's was. For these reasons, there is very good reason to believe that the principles and causes for which Gandhi stood will outlast the impact of bin Laden in the long run.

Troubling questions remain, however. How can Gandhi's non-violent tactics be effectively employed to respond to violence in the short-term? Granted the principles of peace, toleration, and benevolence have longer staying power, but up to this point our war on terror has relied almost exclusively on the tools of warfare. King and Gandhi would have warned us against this, as they both successfully employed the tactics of non-violence.

There were good reasons why their campaigns worked. Their targets were

vulnerable, publicly visible institutions that could be forced to listen and comply with the will of public conscience. Given the open, public nature of those institutions, reasonable negotiations could be forced by the tactics of civil disobedience. It is nearly impossible to employ these non-violent tactics against terrorist groups, such as bin Laden's, because they are subterranean and closed to all reasonable negotiation. Hence, non-violence responses have been wanting, and to date our war on terror has pitted an organized military against covert terrorist forces.

The tragic irony, however, is that reliance upon a military response is what the prophets of non-violence warned us against. Both King and Gandhi understood that violence is cyclical, that to retaliate with violence only invited more violence. King said that the weakness of violence is that "it is always a descending spiral leading nowhere. This is the ultimate weakness of violence; it multiplies evil and violence in the universe. It doesn't solve any problems."<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, "To retaliate with hate and bitterness would do nothing but intensify the hate and bitterness in the world."<sup>3</sup>

King even warned against the use of defensive violence in his own black community, saying "It is dangerous to organize a movement around self-defense. The line of demarcation between defensive violence and aggressive violence is very thin."<sup>4</sup> Gandhi at times aided the British Empire when it was under the duress of war, but never in any direct military role. Whenever violence did break out, he wanted nothing to do with it. When his non-violence campaigns faltered and broke into violence, he said: "If I can have nothing to do with the organized violence of the government, I can have less to do with the unorganized violence of the people."<sup>5</sup>

King and Gandhi, if they were alive today, would be very critical of the war on terror, but the apparent handicap of their own methods against terrorism would seem to offer them a difficult choice. Not wanting to engage in the very cycle of violence they considered destructive, the strategies of their own non-violence are, at least in the short-term, very challenged to respond to covert organizations who are willing to dispense violence in any shape or means. The tactics of terror that bin Laden and other Islamists advocate gives them a definite strategic edge. This is not to suggest that non-violence or its legacy is ultimately helpless against bin Laden's terrorist tactics, only that it finds significant challenges to surmount.

#### **WHEN AND WHERE DO VIOLENCE AND NON-VIOLENCE WORK?**

A short, imaginative exercise shows us how non-violence is certainly at a severe disadvantage in Iraq. Try to imagine, if you can, a line of non-violent, peaceful Iraqis, demonstrating against either the injustices in their own country or the continued occupation of the United States. Picture them vividly, marching down the streets of Iraq and you only see them as an easy and sickeningly

vulnerable target for a suicide bomber. A long line of non-violent protestors can be reduced to bloodied scraps simply by the embittered and final act of spiteful, murderous violence, perpetrated by a lone suicide bomber. In this context, the tactical power of non-violence is eclipsed by that terrorism. In Iraq, the strength of will, the nationalist bond, and the power of charismatic leadership are absent to unify such a non-violent cause. Gandhi was able to vitalize such nationalist glue in India for a short time. Non-violent tactics may still be applicable to conflict resolution, but under special circumstances.

Non-violent tactics worked for both Martin Luther King Jr. and Mohandas K. Gandhi, but the circumstances in which they prevailed were special. Arguably, both the United States and Great Britain had at least a residue of moral conscience, a spirit of moral good that non-violent protestors could elicit by their peaceful demands for justice. Gandhi and King protested in democracies, not functioning at their best, but democracies nonetheless, which had a self-professed interest in justice and law. King appealed to the public conscience of Americans by making a striking example of injustice. Gandhi did the same in India calling forth the conscience of the British. Both operated in climates of relative political stability with an ideology powerfully wielded by a skillful leader.

We must ask: could non-violence be applied in other contexts in the Middle East where terrorism has gripped many nations? The answer depends in large part upon the context of the nation in question. Where a politics of civility is possible and a government is capable of conscientiously responding to non-violent protest certainly non-violent strategies cannot be ruled out. Furthermore, it is clear that the indiscriminate practice of terrorist tactics often brings with it certain disadvantages. For example, in Egypt a series of escalating violent acts by radical Islamist culminated in the killing of some 68 civilians and foreigners at Luxor in 1997. This act appalled the public conscience and gave support to the Mubarak administration's crackdown on the terrorist agitators. This public outrage seriously undermined any support the Islamists might have hoped to gain in their struggle against Mubarak.<sup>6</sup> In Algeria division in Islamist radical organizations, such as the GIA and AIS, may have thwarted their efforts and intentions to either bring the *shari'a* directly into politics or restore the legitimacy of the Islamic FIS.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, when *al-Qaeda's* Zarqawi claimed responsibility for a suicide attack on a wedding ceremony at the Radisson hotel in Jordan a host of angry Jordanians gathered shouting "Burn in hell Abu Musab al-Zarqawi!" If Zarqawi was no friend of the Jordanian government, his tactics risked alienating Jordanian Muslims just as the Luxor massacres backfired in Egypt.

The targets that *al-Qaeda* has chosen are not just the US and its allies, such as Great Britain. They have included targets in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Africa. Because their number of enemies seems so many and diffuse, while the opponents of Gandhi and King were comparatively fewer and clearer, the tactics of terrorist violence *al-Qaeda* has chosen operate at a serious disadvantage. With

so many potential enemies in so many different countries, *al-Qaeda* has no other option but to be a subterranean force with its leader making periodic publicly taped messages and declarations. By contrast, both Gandhi and King were able to operate in sustained open-air conditions under wide public visibility and media coverage. King's campaign especially benefited from televised images of the persecution of blacks with water hoses, clubs, and police dogs. And after non-violent protest, both King and Gandhi could seek to negotiate face to face with their oppressors, or plea for justice from the confines of jail. Their principles and character gave them the political weight to have real impact and change, which bin Laden completely lacks. Consequently, King was able to achieve some civil rights reform for African Americans and Gandhi to attain independence for India (and Pakistan, though the latter was not his intention). Bin Laden can call for more violence, but it seems doubtful he can control or orchestrate it toward a concrete political end in the way that Gandhi and King were able to.

Clearly, bin Laden's tactics have some strengths as well as serious shortcomings. However, it may be fairly asked, to what extent is bin Laden really a mover or prime instigator in the Islamist revolt that we see in the world. Surely he played a leading role in 11 September, but the Islamist rebellion we face today is best described as an amalgam of insurgency movements with a loose coalition of causes and some overlap of aims. Most Islamists share a common hatred of Israel, the West, and its hegemony, and a desire to make some appeal to Islam as remedy from the problems of modernization. Fawaz A. Gerges has said ". . . Islamism represents less of a coherent ideology and more of a historic reaction and a protest movement against the inadequacies of the two powerful doctrines that shaped the world in the last several decades, market capitalism and Soviet communism."<sup>8</sup>

Comparatively then, what is the scope and impact of bin Laden on the Islamist movement *vis-à-vis* that of Gandhi with non-violent *satyagraha*? Both King and Gandhi were direct, legitimate leaders of movements in a way bin Laden is not. Bin Laden has taken advantage of Islamist unrest, but he is only one member of an ongoing movement for violent *jihad*. Peter Bergen, a journalist who has met with bin Laden and published two books on him, suggests that bin Laden still "continues to give substantial ideological direction to jihadist movements around the globe," and that it would therefore be a mistake to dismiss him and the importance of catching him.<sup>9</sup> His charisma lends weight to the practice of *jihad* as Gandhi's did to *satyagraha*.

Bergen also notes that bin Laden, out of self-preservation, has discontinued all use of traceable communications, such as cell phones, radio, or satellite phones. Most direct communication he will relay by personal courier, which seriously hampers his ability to operate *al-Qaeda* in a quick, directed, and coordinated fashion. As we are embroiled in the controversy over whether President Bush's communication eavesdropping is legal or not, *al-Qaeda* operatives must

be finding alternative sources, perhaps cumbersome, of communicating. While some have said that bin Laden is now significantly marginalized and unimportant, a figure on the run, and hopelessly outnumbered, it would be premature to make such a judgment.

In the Fall of 2000, shortly before the events of 11 September, an otherwise astute observer made this tragic miscalculation about bin Laden and *al-Qaeda*:

Al-Qaeda is by now a shadow of its former self. Shunned by the vast majority of Middle Eastern governments, with a \$5 million US bounty on his head, Bin Laden, has in practice been confined to Afghanistan, constantly on the run from the US, Egyptian, and Saudi Arabian intelligence services. Furthermore, consumed by internecine rivalry on the one hand, and hemmed in by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt on the other, Bin Laden's resources are depleting rapidly. Washington plays into his hands by inflating his importance. Bin Laden is exceptionally isolated, and is preoccupied mainly with survival, not attacking American targets.<sup>10</sup>

Sadly 11 September proved that this evaluation was in serious error. It is suggested here that in the midst of this crisis we cannot currently know what bin Laden's impact in the future will be. Should he be captured tomorrow or killed, his impact on stirring up the coals of global *jihad* could be neutralized. Or, as Peter Bergen has suggested, this martyrdom might have an opposite effect, as the execution of Sayyid Qutb in Egypt magnified the legacy of his writings.<sup>11</sup> If *al-Qaeda* or a group loyal to their cause were to actually acquire WMD from Pakistan, Iran, or some other nation in the near future, we could see a grave escalation of conflict. What seems clear so far is that bin Laden's tactics, when compared to Gandhi's, have some advantages in the short-term, but many long-term and strategic disadvantages.

The election of *Hamas* to power over the Palestinians will force a new chapter in this dialogue. *Hamas* will be under great pressure to abandon its agenda for the ultimate destruction of Israel and its support of terrorist acts. Whether it can sustain a governmental function and a covert wing of operations has yet to be seen, though it seems a hard task.

## ORIGINS AND ORIENTATION OF GANDHI

How did Gandhi come to prominence in the realm of religious and political conflict? Gandhi was not originally a saint. Indeed, in his early years he admits he was for a brief time inclined towards atheism and that he knew little about his own Hindu traditions until his visit with Christians in England inspired him to learn more. Soon Gandhi's favorite text became the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a text he interpreted as an allegory of moral duty. "The book struck me as one of priceless worth. The impression has ever since been growing on me with the result that I regard it today as the book *par excellence* for the knowledge of

Truth.”<sup>12</sup> Yet Gandhi did not look exclusively to the *Gita*. He was also deeply inspired by the Sermon on the Mount and attempted to integrate the two into a common, non-violent expression of love and justice.<sup>13</sup> His preference for the *Gita* over the Sermon on the Mount he reiterated, however.<sup>14</sup>

Many, if not most believers, however, espouse a faith without engaging in political activism. A moment of transformation occurred for Gandhi when, as a young English barrister in South Africa, he was kicked off a train for refusing to give up his seat to a white man who did not want to share the compartment with a person of color. Incensed at such treatment, which had been alien to him in India or England, Gandhi was convinced that he needed to battle the system of racial apartheid in South Africa. Michael Nojeim has rightly identified this as a turning point for Gandhi, critical in his transformation to a life of religious and political activism.<sup>15</sup> It was in South Africa that Gandhi’s devotion to *ahimsa* or non-violence can be traced, and a combination of factors, including Hinduism, Jainism, and contact with the Christian pacifist Leo Tolstoy, that heavily influenced him to embrace non-violence. *Ahimsa* became a centerpiece of Gandhi’s religion, as he showed in the concluding words of his autobiography:

My uniform experience has convinced me that there is no other God than Truth. And if every page of these chapters does not proclaim to the reader that the only means for the realization of Truth is Ahimsa, I shall deem all my labor in writing these chapters to have been in vain.<sup>16</sup>

Gandhi adopted the principle of *ahimsa* to the practice of his resistance campaigns. He did not favor the term passive resistance, but instead labeled it *satyagraha*, which has often been translated as “truth force” or “soul force.” *Satyagraha* attempts to appeal to the conscience of an oppressor, by putting oneself bodily in harms way, peaceably resisting the injustice at hand.<sup>17</sup>

Gandhi spelled out three criteria for the success of *satyagraha*. First, the *Satyagrahi* should not have any hatred in his heart against the opponent. Second, the issue must be true and substantial. And, third, the *Satyagrahi* must be prepared to suffer till the end of his cause.<sup>18</sup>

It is interesting to contrast these criteria with the motivations of a suicide bomber. Looking at the first criterion, hatred of the opponent, bitterness that is complete and total, must be a prerequisite. Without it, one could scarcely imagine trading one’s life for that of any other. The suicide bomber must also be equally convinced of the truth and justice of his or her cause, and be willing to suffer to the end. If most perceive that belief to lie in some kind of false or radicalized consciousness, the suicide bomber himself must think it to “be true and substantial.” Profilers of many individuals involved in religious violence in general do not indicate a constant set of socio-economic traits, but do at least indicate that they are convinced of the truth and justice of their cause.



Comparatively, the suffering that a non-violent resistor invites upon his or herself is of indefinite scope and duration, while that of the suicide bomber is certain, final, and brief. The criteria for non-violent resistance, as laid out by Gandhi, have some points in common, yet some fundamental differences with the suicide bomber. Martyrdom is a claim laid by both of them, yet Gandhi's *satyagraha* is much more genuine. Suffering for a just cause, without seeking harm to one's oppressors is a very difficult choice, but one worthy of moral respect. Islamists, such as bin Laden, attempt to win this respect cheaply by couching suicide bombing in terms of martyrdom, but the Islamic-theological validity of this is seriously in doubt.

Because Gandhi weds *satyagraha* to *ahimsa*, he would categorically reject the justice of suicide bombing and declare the truth of such causes to be insubstantial, or illusory. Yet would Gandhi have a way to stop or curtail the violence? Even in his own life he had substantial difficulty keeping non-violent practices from becoming violent in India and once declared in India that it was his "Himalayan miscalculation" that non-violence in India could have been practiced without requisite training and discipline.<sup>19</sup>

Here a criticism by Reinhold Niebuhr is well noted. Niebuhr faulted Gandhi for not understanding thoroughly enough the potential of non-violent resistance to contain possibilities for violent outbreaks.<sup>20</sup> Niebuhr was correct that protest movements could possibly result in unintended injury due to the host of uncontrollable factors involved in such movements and the sheer difficulty of not responding violently to outward attacks. Gandhi always denounced acts of violence when they occurred and often fasted in repentance for them.

Gandhi occasionally overestimated the capacity of non-violence to achieve its ends: "*Satyagraha* can rid society of all evils, political, economic, and moral."<sup>21</sup> Once he suggested that the Jews could have used it against the Nazis. This might have been possible before Hitler had secured power, but once the state was in his grips there was little or no effect to appealing to public political conscience in Germany. In his theoretical outlook Gandhi was sometimes pragmatic and not absolutist about violence. He supported Britain in at least three war efforts.<sup>22</sup> The fact that Gandhi used non-violence in the era of the Second World War, a period marked by the most awful extermination conceivable, suggests that his methods might not be irrelevant today, even though we perceive ourselves to be embroiled with the basest forces of malevolent terrorism. Gandhi had an understanding of *himsa* or violence, and *ahimsa* that was rooted in a very discerning and realistic political calculus. Gandhi's realism showed understanding about how the non-violence was intertwined with a climate of violence:

*Ahimsa* is a comprehensive principle. We are helpless mortals caught in the conflagration of *himsa*. The saying that life lives on life has a deep meaning in it. Man cannot for a moment live without consciously committing outward *himsa*. The very act of living — eat-

ing, drinking, and moving about — necessarily involves some himsa, destruction of life, be it ever so minute.<sup>23</sup>

He knew violence was not inevitable and that non-violence was certainly preferable: “I do believe that, where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence . . . . But I believe that non-violence is infinitely superior to violence, forgiveness, is more manly than punishment.”<sup>24</sup> One might put a very opposite emphasis on bin Laden, that given a choice amongst violence, forgiveness, or cowardice, bin Laden would advise violence.

Gandhi was indeed very adept at using non-violence, but also pragmatic about its limitations. He opposed the British with firm backbone, yet also showed capacity for negotiation and compromise. Bin Laden has also been calculating about his use of violence. For example, he has issued blanket decrees for the death of all Americans, but also agreed to interviews with American journalists to get his message to a Western audience. Gandhi suspended his program of *satyagraha* discriminately when he saw outbursts of violence, and bin Laden also has been crafty in using the war of propaganda as effectively as his violent campaign of *jihad*. Gandhi non-violently exposed the vulnerabilities of Western empire as bin Laden violently assaulted them. Gandhi never sought to vanquish or conquer his opponents, only to expose their injustice and convert them. Bin Laden seeks a victory as decisive as the one he experienced in Afghanistan.

### **THE COMPARATIVE STRENGTH OF AHIMSA AND JIHAD**

Gandhi’s tactics of non-violence are ineffective against *al-Qaeda* because they were designed to oppose a similar target as *al-Qaeda*: a civilian populace or their government and its institutions. Against clandestine organizations, such as *al-Qaeda*, they are helpless, because those organizations have neither the visibility nor the public conscience to be targeted by them. Yet the noble power of non-violence rings with a perennial truth and vitality that the tactics of terror can never have, and thus one is left hoping that in the long-term the principles of non-violence will prevail, even if in the short-term their tactics may be at a strategic disadvantage. It would take a mark of great genius, charisma, and ingenuity to move a climate as violent as Iraq is today to a climate of non-violence. Perhaps such a transition is in fact impossible without a necessary cooling off of violent tempers and lethal outbursts. For even if the imagination could be furnished by non-violent strategists to respond to terrorist strikes, it is likely that the political climates in which the two can survive are simply antithetical.

The truth about the tactics of violence and non-violence is that they work most effectively in contrasting political climates. In cultures with some nominal political stability, where public conscience and democratic reform are at least possible, non-violence may well be a preferable and stronger tactic for realizing social justice. But in badly divided cultures, with unstable governments that have weak or uncertain commitments to democratic forms of justice, the tactics

of fear and terror are all too easily successful. The results of the tactics of terror are far from predictable, but Gandhi also learned in India that the goals he achieved were not equivalent to the aims he set. In India Gandhi wanted independence with unity, but he achieved only the independent states of India and Pakistan. His call for unity was not sufficient to counter Muhammad Ali Jinnah's plea for a separate Muslim sanctuary. Today Iraq faces similar issues about its cohesiveness as a national unit, as it decides if the Shi'a can live with Sunnis or Kurds.

The tactics of terror have also not panned out exactly as planned. Bin Laden probably anticipated that the United States would be drawn into a quagmire in Afghanistan, just as the Soviet Union was bogged down there. What transpired instead was the routing of his bases and allies in the Taliban, and his flight to the borderlands. Now we face an alternative scenario of wide-scale conflict in Iraq. Whether the US becomes embroiled in Iraq as disastrously as the Soviets were in Afghanistan is a future yet unknown, and hopefully avoided. Wishfully, if men of stature, such as Gandhi, were to step forward there, it might obviate the need for a dramatically escalated military presence. Sadly, as observed, the likelihood of a Gandhi emerging in a climate like Iraq seems highly unlikely. The preceding years of Saddam's iron-fisted rule taught them obedience by fear, not by unity through trust and democracy. It is an experience for which Iraqis were not well prepared by historical events.

The US can, for an indefinite period, prolong or quell the conflict there by its military presence, but at great cost in human life. Without additional troops from the US or UN, both of which seem highly unlikely, there will have to be a gelling of Iraqi nationalism or a partitioning into independent states. The kind of spirit of unity that crosses religions and ethnicities that Gandhi had seems absent, so this puts additional pressure on the US for an imaginative diplomatic solution. Bin Laden and *al-Qaeda* were not a presence in Iraq before the war, but their zeal and tactics were taken up there by Zarqawi and other Islamists.

## **ORIGINS AND ORIENTATION OF OSAMA BIN LADEN**

So has bin Laden won in his gambit? Hardly, but the damage his ideological influence is yet doing should not be underestimated. Bin Laden is not the first of Islamic radicals, he is only the latest in a series of insurgents dating back to the *mujahidin* in Afghanistan and Sayyid Qutb in Egypt. Islamism<sup>25</sup> is a phenomena that has been emerging for years as a response to the hegemony of British, US, and former Soviet empires and the impact they have had in the Middle East.

As the latest manifestation of Islamist agitators, bin Laden was able to summon the allegiance of Zarqawi in Iraq as yet another threatening opponent to the United States. Islamists fight against the strength of the US military, economic, and ideological strength in the Arabic world. This conflict is not simply

about religion, just as Gandhi's conflict was not simply about Hinduism. It is clearly a political and religious contest for all forms of cultural impact in the pan-Arabic region. Samuel Huntington has defined it as a "clash of civilizations," but the conflict of nations, civilizations, and ethnicities is nothing new. We are simply in a new permutation of a long and contentious struggle for global influence and change.

Bin Laden, just like Gandhi, was not born into the role of religious and political agitator overnight. It must also be clearly noted that many in the Muslim world categorically reject his claims to Islamic authenticity. The killing of innocents and the practice of *jihad*, as he has emphasized it, is not in compliance with most mainstream interpreters of Islam.<sup>26</sup> Yet, it is troubling that bin Laden has commanded significant authority and respect in the Muslim world. The "magnificent nineteen" who perpetrated the 11 September attacks are as heroic to many oppressed Arabs as they are repulsed by US citizens.

Osama bin Laden came to Islamist radicalism gradually, until his sudden and dramatic immersion in Afghanistan. Bin Laden was born a full lifetime after Gandhi (1869 vs. 1957) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, though his family soon after moved to Medina. His father had been born in the Hadramawt region of Yemen, migrated to Saudi Arabia, where — after a brief career as a porter — he began a construction company that had fabulous success — the company has been estimated to be worth some \$5 billion — due in large part to the ties the father developed with the Saudi royal family. By all accounts bin Laden himself was a fairly quiet youth, not one that would be expected to launch a global terrorist network in the future. Later bin Laden interpreted his actions as obedience to his father's wishes: "My father was very keen that one of his sons should fight against the enemies of Islam. So I am the one son who is acting according to the wishes of his father."<sup>27</sup> Bergen's portrayal of bin Laden is of a man who thinks of himself as a pious Muslim.

When bin Laden went to school at King Abdul Azziz University he was exposed to the kind of radical Islam that would later become a religion for him. There he met Abdullah Azzam, a Jordanian and once member of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, who agitated for the control and autonomy of Muslim lands. Seeking to roll back the influence of the West and reclaim a former sense of glory that Islam had during its empire, Azzam once militantly declared his agenda to be "*Jihad* and the rifle alone: no negotiations, no conferences, and no dialogues."<sup>28</sup> Bin Laden also met Muhammad Qutb, brother of Sayyid Qutb, who was one of the founding fathers of radical Islamic agitation in Egypt. Sayyid Qutb's publications and membership in the Muslim Brotherhood are widely recognized as one root of radical Islamic ideology.<sup>29</sup> Like many young university students bin Laden encountered radical ideas, but unlike most he would take them several steps further than they could imagine.

There are mixed reports as to whether bin Laden actually finished his

degree in economics and public administration.<sup>30</sup> It matters little, since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan called bin Laden into action to help recruit members and fight the incursion of the atheist-empire upon Muslim lands. For bin Laden and his then-comrade Azzam, this was very much a first call to *jihad*.

The terms “martyrdom” and *jihad*, have of course been very much misappropriated by radical Islamists who also try to justify suicide bombings as acts of “martyrdom” to be rewarded by 72 pure companions in paradise.<sup>31</sup> Suicide is strictly forbidden in Islam and attacks upon civilians (non-combatants is not an exact parallel) generally not permitted. John Kelsay has written that these latter prohibitions may have mixed interpretations and are not absolute.<sup>32</sup> The term *jihad* has a long history. It has been used to justify ascetic and warrior practices alike, while during the Umayyad dynasty *jihad* was called upon as a duty to protect the empire. The *dar al-islam* was the “territory of Islam,” and beyond the span of its empire was the *dar al-harb*. *Jihad* in ancient Umayyad times upheld the call to keep, preserve, and expand the empire.<sup>33</sup>

Now Muslims call upon *jihad* to defend the perceived neglect of the tradition as well as the threat of the West. This is not inherently something new. When the Muslim empire fell under the onslaught of the Mongol invaders writers, such as Ibn Taymiyya, called upon *jihad* as a means to preserve the ritual purity and identity of Islam.<sup>34</sup> Today there is also a very real threat to the Muslim sense of identity as Western values, beliefs, and powers threaten to transform those who confront them. *Jihad* has had a long history, giving a depth and dimension of meanings that will not fully be explored here.

The term *jihad* itself is not intrinsically belligerent. Traditionally, *jihad* means “exertion,” and “Greater *Jihad*” was the struggle and effort to be a better Muslim, and “Lesser *Jihad*” was the military defense of Islamic territory.<sup>35</sup> Unquestionably, however, the radical Islamists, such as bin Laden, have imparted a new and sinister dimension to the term, which calls for unmitigated and indiscriminate violence against their enemies. The exertion for Islamists is a radical and violent upheaval against all who dissent from their particular view of Islam. As indicated above with the violence in Luxor or Jordan, depending upon the severity, target, and scope of the attack, it is a tactic that could possibly backfire against them.

Even the radical Abdullah Azzam appeared reluctant to espouse the tactics of terror as bin Laden later did. Azzam was co-founder with bin Laden of the apparatus in Afghanistan that was used to recruit Muslims for the war effort. That same apparatus would later evolve into *al-Qaeda*. Azzam was interested in protecting Islam, but perhaps unwilling to harm non-combatants. Bin Laden had met the Egyptian (and once-physician) Ayman al-Zawahiri who reportedly radicalized bin Laden. The murder of Azzam on 24 November 1989 settled the matter of the future leadership of the organization the West would come to know as *al-Qaeda*.<sup>36</sup> Some see bin Laden as clearly implicated in that murder while oth-

ers have said it remained unresolved.<sup>37</sup>

Bin Laden left for Afghanistan as a friend to Saudi Arabia and its royal family, but returned to become a bitter enemy. One of the key defining moments for him was the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990, and the subsequent US occupation. Prior to this event, the alliance between bin Laden and the Saudi royal family could be characterized as strong. The Saudis contributed very substantial funds to the effort to oust the Soviets from Afghanistan, so the partnership with bin Laden remained fast.<sup>38</sup> Since that effort was crowned with success by the withdrawal of the Soviet Union, bin Laden probably considered himself a hero for his country, fellow Arabs, and religion. Upon Saddam Hussein's forceful annexation of Kuwait, bin Laden proposed to the Saudi royalty that he could oust Saddam Hussein as well with the disciplined help of some 5,000 *mujahidin* who had been battle hardened in Afghanistan. He was shocked and took great umbrage when the Saudis declined his offer, and decided instead to invite the United States and a coalition of European and other nations onto Saudi soil to combat Hussein. No doubt bin Laden felt a combination of outrage and humiliation as well as betrayal.<sup>39</sup>

This, of course, in no way excuses the terrorist career he later embraced, but it begins to grasp its genesis. Exposure to the radicalism of the Afghan war, the Islamist influences of Azzam, Qutb, and Zawahiri amongst others, as well as the spurned offer of help to the Saudis, propelled bin Laden on a very unholy trajectory. He took it as a religious affront for non-Muslim coalition forces to be occupying the lands of Saudi Arabia. His interpretation of Muslim traditions or *hadith* led him to believe that there should be only one religion on the Arabian peninsula and that it must be Islam.<sup>40</sup> Bergen well summarizes the thrust of bin Laden's discontent:

What he condemns the United States for is simple: its policies in the Middle East. Those are, to recap briefly: the continued US military presence in Arabia; US support for Israel; its continued bombing of Iraq; and its support for regimes such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia that bin Laden regards as apostates from Islam.<sup>41</sup>

This corresponds with *al-Qaeda* statements that have been reported elsewhere:

Because the Americans and the Jews occupy the surroundings of the Al Asqa mosque, because of what the Jews do in Palestine such as destroy their homes, because one million Iraqis died and religious leaders in America and other countries are subservient to America, because of the fortunes gained by oil revenues that belong to Muslims, we are forced to wage *jihad* anywhere in the world at any given moment. The fight against the US and its allies, the Jews of Israel, is a fight between life and death.<sup>42</sup>

Bin Laden was very easily convinced to take up the implements and causes of war. Gandhi, by contrast, while he participated in an ambulance corps in wars supporting Great Britain, adamantly opposed *himsa* (violence), always discriminating and evaluating the justice of his own causes. The two men are as polarized by their interpretations and applications of religion as they are by their conduct in conflict. As this article has shown there are varying advantages and disadvantages to the tactics of violence and non-violence. Violence as a tactic can never be condoned, of course, only understood.

The first Gulf War marked the beginning of bin Laden's break with the Saudi regime, and the expansion of his militant programs beyond Afghanistan. Taking safe haven in Sudan for a period of four or five years — as his Saudi citizenship was soon revoked and an assassination attempt made upon him — bin Laden was eventually forced to flee even that sanctuary and return to Afghanistan. His options and allies running thin, bin Laden took his war to a global scale, not merely against the Saudis, but ultimately against those who he perceived to be their puppet masters: the United States. In 1998, bin Laden declared the World Islamic Front and the consequent duty to kill Americans. An excerpt of that text reads:

Since Allah spread out the Arabian Peninsula, created its desert, and drew its seas, no such disaster has ever struck as when those Christian legions spread like pest, crowded its land, at its resources, eradicated its nature, and humiliated its leaders . . . No one argues today over three facts repeated by witnesses and agreed upon by those who are fair . . . They are: Since about seven years ago, America has been occupying the most sacred lands of Islam: the Arabian Peninsula. It has been stealing its resources, dictating to its leaders, humiliating its people, and frightening its neighbors. It is using its rule in the Peninsula as a weapon to fight the neighboring peoples of Islam . . . The most evident proof is when the Americans went too far in their aggression against the people of Iraq . . .

He continued:

Despite major destruction to the Iraqi people at the hand of the Christian alliance and the great number of victims exceeding one million, Americans are trying once again to repeat those horrifying massacres as if they are not satisfied with the long blockade or the destruction. Here they come today to eradicate the rest of the people and to humiliate its Muslim neighbors. Although the Americans' objectives of these wars are religious and economic, they are also to serve the Jewish state and distract from its occupation of the Holy Land, and its killing of Muslims therein. The most evident proof thereof is their persistence to destroy Iraq, the most powerful neighboring Arab state . . . All those crimes and calamities are in explicit

declaration by the Americans of war on Allah, His Prophet, and Muslims . . .

He concluded:

Based upon this and in order to obey the Almighty, we hereby give all Muslims the following judgment: The judgment to kill and fight Americans and their allies, whether civilian or military, is an obligation for every Muslim who is able to do so in any country . . . In the name of Allah, we call upon every Muslim who believes in Allah and asks for forgiveness, to abide by Allah's order by killing Americans and stealing their money anywhere, anytime, and wherever possible. We also call upon Muslim scholars, their faithful leaders, young believers, and soldiers to launch a raid on the American soldiers of Satan and their allies of the Devil.<sup>43</sup>

There are notable equivocations in this passage. It begins by tracing the problem to legions of "Christian pests," and then shifts in the end to a decree to kill Americans, blurring and confusing political with religious agendas. This extreme call to *jihad* emphatically rejects the tolerant inclusive view that Gandhi held, offering an alternative of belligerent self-righteousness.

## **RELIGION AT THE POLAR EXTREMES**

The contrast to Gandhi's inclusive view could not be more complete and if there is a larger abuse of religion it is scarcely imaginable. Gandhi and bin Laden both opposed Western empire, Britain and the United States respectively being their focal concern. Yet Gandhi adhered to principles of non-violence, firmly rejecting the *himsa* that is central to bin Laden's creed. Can one, in all honesty, refer to these men as equally religious? What single moral characteristic of thought and mind, which we might call religious, can these two men have in common? Hardly any it seems, unless one were to consider religion itself as a catalyst for other behaviors. Reinhold Niebuhr once said that "Bad religion can be worse than no religion," and further that ". . . we must not claim too much for our knowledge of God and His judgments. When we do, we merely make God the ally of our interested position in the scheme of things."<sup>44</sup> Bin Laden would have done well to take this advice, for the arrogance to claim a religious duty to kill any given nationality is one of the worst conceivable. It reinterprets divine obedience in strict terms of self-interest, conflating religion and nationalism until they become "religionism," a prejudice against any of alternative spiritual view or persuasion.

Bin Laden's views are steeped in a harsh and exclusive brand of Wahhabi Islam that flourishes in the Saudi peninsula.<sup>45</sup> Charles Kimball's investigation, *When Religion Becomes Evil* argues that the hallmarks of bad religion include intolerance, belligerence, absolutism, and pursuit of "holy war," all of which well characterize bin Laden.<sup>46</sup> It is difficult to comprehend why absolutist, intolerant, and malevolent claims to religion attract so many people, but it is important to



understand that they are not unique to a particular religion, place, or culture. Unfortunately, the appeal to exclude others and show intolerance appeals to the belligerence, angst, and unrest that swallow many people with no grounding in a more nurturing ideological outlook. If human ears, minds, and hearts are on average better tuned to understand the beauty and truth of the tolerant, inclusive view, there is yet hope in the long-term that Gandhi's legacy is yet intact. The battle over the exclusive and inclusive view, however, is ongoing in just about every culture at every moment in time.

It is not easy to define away the problem of "religionism," though definitions assist us in understanding it. Gandhi is certainly anchored and defined by an opposite set of ideals and character from bin Laden. Many would dispute bin Laden's religious claims. He seems to be under the impression that he can speak for the Muslim world. Defining objective criteria of a religious nature for both Gandhi and bin Laden would be difficult. It appears at least that they have a conception that there is a sacred character to the world, and that it gives them some guidance and instruction toward action. Would that the inclusive, tolerant wisdom that we see in Gandhi be currently prevailing. Gandhi observed "The time has now passed when the followers of one religion can stand and say, ours is the only true religion and all others are false. The growing spirit of toleration towards all religions is a happy augury of the future."<sup>47</sup> Sadly, Gandhi could not have foreseen bin Laden, or the error of his own hopeful prophecy. Religious tolerance and equality is not a concept given wide enough currency in any culture. The wisdom of Gandhi's statements live on, yet are not grasped by a sufficient number of people today. Gandhi readily accepted that no religion was best or perfect, though he preferred Hinduism and advocated an essential equality of all religions:

Do people become enemies because they change their religion? Is the God of the Mohammedan different from the God of the Hindu? Religions are different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal? Wherein is the cause for quarreling?<sup>48</sup>

For me all the principle religions are equal in the sense that they are true. They are supplying a felt want in the spiritual progress of humanity.<sup>49</sup>

Gandhi always questioned why one religion, why one text, should be preferred to another.<sup>50</sup> There may be practical and philosophical problems with making an all-inclusive metaphysical conception of religion workable. It may be contended that Gandhi's eclectic view glossed over inconsistencies between religions while emphasizing their unity. Certainly he tried to lend himself to openness, humility, and tolerance. In this sense Gandhi's principles show strength far superior to bin Laden, even if his tactics have been in the short-term been eclipsed by religious violence.

## **A CHEMICAL MODEL OF RELIGION**

If one accepts both bin Laden and Gandhi as religious, the problem of how to understand religion persists. To reconcile the possibilities of religion, as a phenomenon of human conscience, being reconciled to both violence and non-violence, one might take a dynamic view of it. Religion in this view is not a static element, fixed and invariable. As John Esposito has noted, religion and its texts are open to change and interpretation.<sup>51</sup> Religion acts and interacts with culture in a chemical way, much as oxygen forms different combinations with carbon or hydrogen. Take two oxygen molecules alone, or add a hydrogen to them, and you get building blocks elemental to life, air and water, O<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>2</sub>O. Combine one or two oxygens with carbon, or indeed sulfur and hydrogen, and you get carbon monoxide (CO), dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), or sulfuric acid (H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>); all of which can be very harmful to human life. The religious inclinations of Gandhi and bin Laden interacted with their inner personalities and socio-political contexts, yielding radically different results. This is why definitions of religion are always only partially helpful, for religion itself as a disposition can be as variable and pliant as the human nature in which it takes its roots. An examination of Gandhi and bin Laden should elucidate that much.

## **WHOSE RELIGIOUS LEGACY WILL WIN?**

A troubling question remains, however. Readers cannot help but be sympathetic to the ideals and principles advocated by Gandhi, but in the immediate present fail to see how they can be applied in the most violent contexts. As previously evaluated, the tactics of non-violence do not thrive in a climate dominated by fear, division, and hostility, nor do advocates of non-violence have much chance of arising from them. And these words — fear, division, and hostility — unfortunately characterize Iraq, and mar political relations in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. This is not a struggle about religion alone, or culture, but a struggle of religion, politics, and culture all at once. It is a struggle for cultural and religious influence in political contexts.

Bin Laden's influence in this climate is significant in the short-term. The chaos that he and other Islamists use may help effect political change, but they will find it is change that is difficult to guide or control to pre-determined ends. By remaining in legitimate standing with established governments, Gandhi and King could openly and directly participate in change. This afforded them greater, though certainly far from complete, potential to direct the ends of their political conflicts. King spoke before the Lincoln Monument and Gandhi was invited to the London round table conference to negotiate. Islamists cannot directly participate or influence politics in this way, and tactically this is a significant weakness in terms of conflict resolution.

The tactical usage of media and propaganda by bin Laden and Islamists has been as important as the tactics of suicide bombing. Without one, recruits for the

latter are less certain. One might imagine that suicide bombing is such an extreme act that it would appeal to a very small percentage of the population that has a psyche to match; hence you might predict that one would run out of suicide bombers. This assumption is grossly in error, for suicide bombers seem to be in abundance. If bin Laden's rhetoric — and that of Islamist like him — is bereft of any good moral or religious qualities, it is at least effective in convincing numerous persons in the Muslim world to the contrary. Wars and conflicts are not won by arms or non-violent resistance alone, but also by the competing influence and persuasion of the ideologies that back them. Gandhi and King motivated armies of non-violence; we have set in motion armies of violence, having no alternative to substitute. It is hoped the imaginative resources of King and Gandhi might be revived to help stem the tide of violence that threatens human life in the early twenty-first century.

## ENDNOTES

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22. Nojeim, *Gandhi and King*, pp. 75-78.
23. Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, p. 427.
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