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DECLARATION OF JIHAD

August 23 1996

The longest of bin Laden's early statements, reproduced here in an abbreviated version, this text has subsequently been dubbed the "Ladenese Epistle". It comes in the form of a juridical edict authorizing defensive war (jihad) against the Americans for their continued presence in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The full document sums up the long and very detailed findings of the May 1991 letter of protest and July 1992 "Memorandum of Advice" sent by the sahwa to King Fahd. It was issued after the Sudanese government, under intense American and Egyptian pressure, had requested bin Laden—following various Saudi attempts to assassinate him—to leave Khartoum, and he had arrived in Afghanistan in May 1996, before the Taliban came to power in the autumn of that year. Its composition and transmission have been dated by various commentators to between August and October 1996.¹ In form, the Epistle is an adaptation of "Communiqué 17," an indictment of the Saudi regime and a call for the abdication of King Fahd, issued on March 8 1995 by the London office of the Advice and Reform Committee (ARC). The Epistle broadens the framework of bin Laden's appeals, addressed now not only to Muslims in the Arabian peninsula, but across the world, whose sufferings he invokes in the Middle East, Central Asia, the Horn of Africa, the Caucasus, the Balkans and Southeast Asia, under "the blatant imperial arrogance of the United States" and its cover in the United Nations. But in this panorama of desolation, "the greatest disaster to befall Muslims since the death of the Prophet" is "the occupation of Saudi Arabia, the cornerstone of the Islamic world", and most of

1 The full title of this statement is "A Declaration of Jihad against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Sanctuaries." Rosalind Gwynne notes that the full text was published in three parts, on October 12, 13 and 14 1996, by the Muslim Student Association (Ohio State University). An English translation of the complete version of the Statement can be found at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A4342-2001Sep21>; Gwynne's exhaustive analysis of bin Laden's use of Qur'an and *hadith* references in the Ladenese epistle, "Al-Qa'ida and al-Qur'an: The 'Tafsir' of Usamah bin Ladin", September 18 2001, is published at http://web.utk.edu/~warda/bin_ladin_and_quran.htm.

the Epistle concentrates on the fate that has overtaken it, as American troops camp in the land and the regime collaborates with Israel. Amid the stench of corruption, mass unemployment, inflation and poverty are spreading. Petitions are ignored and jails are filled. The country has become a volcano, in which resistance has already started, with attacks on American forces in Riyadh and Khobar. Calling for a boycott of American goods, and jihad against the 'Judeo-Crusader alliance', bin Laden exhorts the warriors who fought in Afghanistan and Bosnia not to lay down their swords. "Cavalry of Islam, be mounted!"

"Expel the Polytheists from the Arabian peninsula."²

A Letter from Sheikh Osama bin Muhammad bin Laden to his Muslim Brothers across the world, and particularly those in the Arabian peninsula.

Praise be to God. We beseech Him for help and forgiveness. We seek refuge in God from the evil of our souls and our bad deeds. He whom God guides will not go astray, and he whom He leads astray can have no guide. I testify that there is no god but God alone, who has no partners. And I testify that Muhammad is His Servant and Prophet.

"You who believe, be mindful of God, as is His due, and make sure you devote yourselves to Him, to your dying moment."³

"People, be mindful of your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them spread countless men and women far and wide; be mindful of God, in whose name you make requests of one another. Beware of the severing ties of kinship: God is always watching over you."⁴

"Believers, be mindful of God, speak in a direct fashion and to good purpose, and He will put your deeds right for you and forgive you your sins. Whoever obeys God and His Messenger will truly achieve a great triumph."⁵

Shu'ayb said: "I cannot succeed without God's help: I trust in Him, and always turn to Him."⁶

Thanks be to God, who said: "[Believers], you are the best community singled

2 From the *hadith* collection of al-Bukhari, no. 2,932; also found in the collection of Murdin, no. 3,089.

3 Qur'an, 3:102.

4 Qur'an, 4:1.

5 Qur'an, 33:70-71.

6 Qur'an, 11:88.

out for people: you order what is right, forbid what is wrong, and you believe in God.”⁷

And blessings and peace upon His Servant and Prophet, who said: “The people are close to an all-encompassing punishment from God if they see the oppressor and fail to restrain him.”⁸

It is no secret to you, my brothers, that the people of Islam have been afflicted with oppression, hostility, and injustice by the Judeo-Christian alliance and its supporters. This shows our enemies’ belief that Muslims’ blood is the cheapest and that their property and wealth is merely loot. Your blood has been spilt in Palestine and Iraq, and the horrific image of the massacre in Qana⁹ in Lebanon are still fresh in people’s minds. The massacres that have taken place in Tajikistan, Burma, Kashmir, Assam, the Philippines, Fatani, Ogaden, Somalia, Eritrea, Chechnya, and Bosnia-Herzegovina send shivers down our spines and stir up our passions. All this has happened before the eyes and ears of the world, but the blatant imperial arrogance of America, under the cover of the immoral United Nations, has prevented the dispossessed from arming themselves.

So the people of Islam realized that they were the fundamental target of the hostility of the Judeo-Crusader alliance. All the false propaganda about the supposed rights of Islam was abandoned in the face of the attacks and massacres committed against Muslims everywhere, the latest and most serious of which—the greatest disaster to befall the Muslims since the death of the Prophet Muhammad—is the occupation of Saudi Arabia, which is the cornerstone of the Islamic world, place of revelation,¹⁰ source of the Prophetic mission, and home of the Noble Ka’ba where Muslims direct their prayers. Despite this, it was occupied by the armies of the Christians, the Americans, and their allies.

I meet you today in the midst of this gloomy scenario, but also in light of the tremendous, blessed awakening that has swept across the world, and particularly the Islamic world. After the scholars of Islam underwent an enforced absence—enforced due to the oppressive Crusader campaign led by America in the fear

⁷ Qur’an, 3:110.

⁸ From the *hadith* collection of Abu Dawud, book 37, no. 4,325.

⁹ On April 18 1996, Israeli forces launched a rocket and mortar attack on a UN compound near the village of Qana, Lebanon. 102 civilian refugees died and over 300 were wounded.

¹⁰ The place of revelation is the cave of Hira, where the Qur’an was revealed to Muhammad in 610. Hira is located on Jabal al-Nour (“Mountain of Light”) in the Hijaz region of Saudi Arabia.

that these scholars will incite our Islamic *umma* against its enemies, in the same way as did the pious scholars of old (God bless their souls) such as ibn Taymiyya and al-Izz ibn Abd al-Salam¹¹—this Judeo-Crusader alliance undertook to kill and arrest the righteous scholars and hardworking preachers. May God sanctify who He wishes. They killed the *mujahid* Sheikh Abdallah Azzam,¹² they arrested Sheikh Ahmed Yassin in Jerusalem,¹³ and they killed the *mujahid* Sheikh Omar Abd al-Rahman¹⁴ in America, as well as arresting—on the advice of America—a large number of scholars, preachers and youth in Saudi Arabia. The most prominent of these were Sheikh Salman al-Auda and Sheikh Safar al-Hawali¹⁵ and their brothers.

This injustice was inflicted on us, too, as we were prevented from talking to Muslims and were hounded out of Saudi Arabia to Pakistan, Sudan, and then Afghanistan. That is what led to this long absence of mine, but by the grace of God there became available a safe base in Khurasan, high in the peaks of the Hindu Kush, the very same peaks upon which were smashed, by the grace of

11 For ibn Taymiyya, see above, p. 5, n. 7.

12 Abdallah Azzam (1941–89) was a radical Islamic scholar and preacher of Palestinian origin. He taught that *jihad* was a moral obligation of Muslims and the ‘sixth pillar’ of faith (conventionally, there are five such pillars of faith in Islam). Azzam taught in Saudi Arabia from 1978 to 1984, when he moved to Peshawar, where he worked in conjunction with bin Laden, setting up a recruitment centre, the Maktab al-Khidamat (MAK), to organize resistance against the Russians in Afghanistan; branches of which were subsequently opened throughout the Middle East, and in locations as far-flung as Brooklyn, New York. Azzam became revered as a father of the *jihad* against the USSR in Afghanistan. He was killed by a car bomb in Peshawar in November 1989.

13 Sheikh Ahmed Yassin (c.1937–2004) was founder of the Palestinian organization Hamas (“Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah” or “Islamic Resistance Movement”) in 1987. In 1989 he was convicted of ordering the kidnapping and killing of two Israeli Defense Force (IDF) soldiers, and sentenced to life imprisonment. Released in 1997, the quadriplegic Yassin resumed his leadership of Hamas; he was assassinated by an Israeli helicopter gunship on March 22 2004.

14 Contrary to bin Laden’s assertion, the blind Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman (1938–) is still alive. An Egyptian cleric, after graduating in Qur’anic studies from al-Azhar university, Cairo, he became the leader of al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya (“the Islamic group”), which was responsible for the attacks at Deir el-Bahri, Luxor, on November 17 1997, that left 62 dead. During the 1970s, he developed links with another militant organization, Egyptian Islamic Jihad, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, and spent three years in Egyptian jails, where he was tortured. In the mid-1980s, he rejoined his former university professor, Abdallah Azzam, in Afghanistan. In 1990, he was issued a US tourist visa by the CIA in acknowledgment of his role in opposing the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan. Arrested in 1993, he was convicted in October 1995, of conspiring to bomb locations in New York. He is currently serving a life sentence in Colorado.

15 See above, p. 8, n. 19.

God, the largest infidel military force in the world,¹⁶ and on which the myth of the great powers perished before the cries of the holy warriors: God is greatest!

And today, in the same peaks of Afghanistan, we work to do away with the injustice that has befallen our *umma* at the hands of the Judeo-Crusader alliance, especially after its occupation of Jerusalem and its appropriation of Saudi Arabia. We pray to God that He might bless us with victory—He is our protector and is well capable of doing so.

And so here we are today, working and discussing with each other to find ways of rectifying what has happened to the Islamic world generally and Saudi Arabia in particular. We need to study the appropriate paths to take in order to restore things to good order, and to restore to the people their rights after the considerable damage and harm inflicted on their life and religion. This has afflicted every section of society, whether civilian or military or security personnel, whether employees or merchants, young or old, university students, graduates or the unemployed, who now represent a broad section of society numbering hundreds of thousands. The situation in Saudi Arabia has begun to resemble a huge volcano that is about to explode and destroy unbelief and corruption, wherever it comes from. The two explosions in Riyadh and Khobar¹⁷ are merely warning signs pointing to this destructive torrent which is produced by bitter repression, terrible injustice, and the humiliating poverty that we see today.

People are struggling even with the basics of everyday life, and everyone talks frankly about economic recession, price inflation, mounting debts, and

16 Khurasan ("where the sun appears") was a Persian province commensurate with parts of modern-day Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Bin Laden is referring to the defeat of the Soviet army in Afghanistan by the *mujahidin*. Backed by Pakistan and the USA, the *mujahidin* succeeded in forcing the Soviet forces to withdraw, after ten years of occupation, with the loss of around 15,000 soldiers.

17 On November 13 1995, a car bomb was detonated outside the National Guard building in Riyadh. The first such attack of its kind in Saudi Arabia, it killed five Americans and two Indians. Subsequently, one of the four accused said that he had been influenced by the writings of bin Laden and by Egyptian Islamist groups. Three of the four had fought in Afghanistan, one of them, Maslah al-Shamrani, was appointed to the Egyptian-run "al-Farooq" training camp, near Khost, with which bin Laden had connections. Bin Laden denied direct responsibility for the attack, but drew a connection between the bombing and his role as an inciter to *jihad*. The four bombers were subsequently sentenced to death by a Saudi court and beheaded. On June 25 1996, an attack on the Khobar Towers military complex killed nineteen US servicemen and injured hundreds of others. Five years later, thirteen members of Saudi Hezbollah, a Shia group with Iranian links, were indicted in the USA for the bombing.

prison overcrowding. Low-income government employees talk to you about their debts in the tens or hundreds of thousands of riyals,¹⁸ whilst complaining that the riyal's value is declining dramatically. Domestic debts owed by the government to its citizens have reached 340 billion riyals, and are rising daily due to usurious interest, let alone all the foreign debt. People are wondering: are we really the biggest source of oil in the world? They feel that God is bringing this torture upon them because they have not spoken out against the regime's injustice and illegitimate behaviour, the most prominent aspects of which are its failure to rule in accordance with God's law, its depriving of legal rights to its servants, its permitting the American occupiers into Saudi Arabia, and its arresting of righteous scholars—inheritors of the Prophets' legacy—and unjustly throwing them in prison. The regime has desecrated its legitimacy through many of its own actions, the most important being:

1. Its suspension of the rulings of the Islamic law¹⁹ and replacement thereof with man-made laws, and its entering into a bloody confrontation with the righteous scholars and pious youth. May God sanctify whom He pleases.
2. Its inability to protect the land and its allowing the enemies of God to occupy it for years in the form of the American Crusaders, who have become the principal reason for all aspects of our land's disastrous predicament.

The voices of the shadows have spoken up, their eyes uncovering the veil of injustice and their noses smelling the stench of corruption. The voices of reform have spoken up, calling for the situation to be put right: they have sent petitions, testimonies, and requests for reform. In the year 1411 AH, at the time of the Gulf War, a petition was sent to the king with around 400 signatures calling for reform in the country, but he made a mockery of them by completely ignoring their advice, and the situation went from bad to worse.²⁰

18 The currency of Saudi Arabia.

19 "Islamic law" throughout this volume represents the Arabic word *sharia*. Islam has no distinction between religious and secular life; *sharia* therefore covers not only religious rituals but many aspects of everyday life, including politics, economics, and banking.

20 It should be noted that the 1990–91 Gulf War is generally termed the Second Gulf War; the first was the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88). The petition bin Laden is referring to here is probably not the Memorandum of Advice sent after the Gulf War in July 1992, but a first petition sent in May 1991, which similarly called for the imposition of Islamic law, and for the Saudi regime to be accountable. See Headnote to Statement 1, p. 3.

Brother Muslims in Saudi Arabia, does it make any sense at all that our country is the biggest purchaser of weapons from America in the world and America's biggest trading partner in the region, while at the very same time the Americans are occupying Saudi Arabia and supporting—with money, arms, and manpower—their Jewish brothers in the occupation of Palestine and their murder and expulsion of Muslims there? Depriving these occupiers of the huge returns they receive from their trade with us is a very important way of supporting the *jihād* against them, and we expect you to boycott all American goods.

Men of the radiant future of our *umma* of Muhammad, raise the banner of *jihād* up high against the Judeo-American alliance that has occupied the holy places of Islam. God told his Prophet: "He will not let the deeds of those who are killed for His cause come to nothing; He will guide them and put them in a good state; He will admit them into the Garden He has already made known to them."²¹ And the Prophet said: "There are one hundred levels in Heaven that God has prepared for the holy warriors who have died for Him, between two levels as between the earth and the sky."²² And the *al-Jami al-Sahih* notes that the Prophet said: "The best martyrs are those who stay in the battle line and do not turn their faces away until they are killed. They will achieve the highest level of Heaven, and their Lord will look kindly upon them. When your Lord looks kindly upon a slave in the world, He will not hold him to account."²³ And he said: "The martyr has a guarantee from God: He forgives him at the first drop of his blood and shows him his seat in Heaven. He decorates him with the jewels of faith, protects him from the torment of the grave, keeps him safe on the day of judgment, places a crown of dignity on his head with the finest rubies in the world, marries him to seventy-two of the pure virgins of paradise and intercedes on behalf of seventy of his relatives," as related by Ahmad al-Tirmidhi in an authoritative *hadith*.²⁴

I say to the youth of Islam who have waged *jihād* in Afghanistan and Bosnia-Herzegovina, with their financial, spiritual, linguistic, and scholarly resources,

21 Qur'an, 47: 4–6.

22 From the *hadith* collection of Muslim, book 20, no. 4,645.

23 The *al-Jami al-Sahih* is the title of al-Bukhari's collection of *hadith*. See above, p. 13, n. 34. Quoted in ibn Hajar al-Haitimi, *Majma al-Zawa'id wa Manba al-Fawa'id*, p. 909.

24 From the *hadith* collection of al-Tirmidhi, vol. 4, book 23, ch. 1, no. 1,620. Abu al-Tirmidhi (824–92), from Termez in modern-day Uzbekistan, was a collector of *hadith*. He wrote the *Jami al-Tirmidhi*, one of the six canonical collections of Prophetic traditions used in Sunni Islam.

that the battle is not yet over. I remind them of what Gabriel said to the Prophet, after the battle of Ahzab: "When the Messenger of God, prayers and peace be upon him, departed to Medina and laid down his sword, Gabriel came to him and said: 'You have laid down your sword? By God, the angels have not yet laid down their swords. Get up and go with whoever is with you to the Bani Qurayza, and I will go ahead of you to shake their fortresses and strike fear into them.' So Gabriel went off, accompanied by his pageant of angels, the Prophet, and his holy warriors and helpers."²⁵ This is as it was told by al-Bukhari.

I say to our Muslim brothers across the world: your brothers in Saudi Arabia and Palestine are calling for your help and asking you to share with them in the *jihad* against the enemies of God, your enemies the Israelis and Americans. They are asking you to defy them in whatever way you possibly can, so as to expel them in defeat and humiliation from the holy places of Islam. God Almighty has said: "If they seek help from you against persecution, it is your duty to assist them."²⁶

Cavalry of Islam, be mounted! This is a difficult time, so you yourselves must be tough. You should know that your coming-together and cooperation in order to liberate the holy places of Islam is the right step towards unification of the word of our *umma* under the banner of God's unity. At this point we can only raise our palms humbly to ask God Almighty to provide good fortune and success in this matter.

Lord, bless your slave and messenger Muhammad, and his family and companions. Our final prayer is praise to God, Lord of the worlds.

Your brother in Islam,
Osama bin Muhammad bin Laden

25 From the *hadith* of al-Bukhari, vol. 5, book 59, no. 448. The Battle of the Trench (627) was fought between the forces of Muhammad and the coalition ("joint forces," or *al-Ahzab*) army of Mecca. Muhammad was victorious; in the aftermath of the battle, the Jewish tribe the Bani Qurayza, who had broken a peace treaty with Muhammad to side with the "joint forces" against him, were found guilty, the judge ruling that all the adult males in the tribe should be killed.

26 Qur'an 8:72. Bin Laden leaves out both the first part of the verse, which establishes the antecedent (the emigrants), and is also the conditional to the quoted clause, which reads, "except against people with whom you have a treaty: God sees all that you do."