

Al Qaeda in Its Own Words

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After September 11, 2001, Al Qaeda and one of its leaders, Osama bin Laden, became household words. News organizations monitored the organization's every move, and the media broadcast almost daily the messages that various political groups had reportedly received from Al Qaeda. With the same brush, the media often painted Al Qaeda as a terrorist group intent on fomenting death and destruction. Through all of these events, Al Qaeda rarely had a chance to speak for itself or to let its own words be heard.

Thanks to the monumental efforts of Keppel, a professor at the Institute for Political Studies in Paris, and Milelli, his colleague at the Institute, anyone interested in Islam and in the history of Al Qaeda now has an opportunity to hear its leaders speak plainly and in detail. Drawing on numerous online sources, the editors have collected excerpts from the writings of four leaders of Al Qaeda: Osama Bin Laden, the "iconic orator"; Abdallah Azzam, the "Imam of Jihad"; Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the "veteran of Jihad"; and Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, "Jihad in Mesopotamia." Each section is devoted to one of the leaders and contains a short introduction to the leader's life and work.

Although much of the background information about these leaders may be widely known, their writings reveal in-depth their interpretations of Islam and its political and religious role in the world. The chapter on Bin Laden, likely the most familiar face here, for example, includes the well-known information about his wealthy family and his use of financial resources to fund his operations in Sudan and Afghanistan. In his "Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans," Bin Laden points out that his followers "love death as much as you [Americans] love life. They have inherited honor, pride, bravery, generosity, sincerity, courage, and a spirit of sacrifice. These things are handed down from father to son, and their steadfastness in combat will show when the confrontation comes."

Azzam's "Join the Caravan" encourages its readers to fight, among other reasons, "so that unbelief does not win out; for fear of hellfire; to fulfill the obligation and respond to God's call; to follow the pious ancestors' example."

This important collection offers a brilliant portrait of an elusive political movement that continues to change the shape of politics and religion around the world.

HENRY L. CARRIGAN (April 11, 2008)

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