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## *Al-Qaeda's Domsday Document and Psychological Manipulation*

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In this paper I present a fresh reading and analysis of the first part of the so-called "Domsday Document," found in the luggage of September 11 hijacker Muhammad Atta. It follows on two other close readings, offered by Hassan Mneimeh and Kanaan Makiya, and by Bruce Lincoln. My question here is slightly different from the ones they asked of the document. I am asking here how the hijackers misused various techniques of Islamic spirituality to achieve a psychological state of mind in which it was possible for them to commit mass murder and their own suicides. On reflection, then, it seems to me that the text was probably authored by Muhammad Atta himself, the only Egyptian on the hijacking team. Another possibility is that the document was pulled together from instructions by more than one person, some of them not native Arabic speakers, and not carefully edited by an Arab with a good style.

It is worth noting that I have been wrestling with this text since the FBI released it, but have found working with it to be extremely difficult on an emotional level. Like most Americans, I was traumatized by September 11 and by the enormity of the crime against humanity then perpetrated. As a friend of Muslims and an admirer of Islam as a religion, I also had great difficulty coming to terms with the way in which such an act could have come out of even a fringe cult within Islam.

On a first reading, I had been struck by what seemed to me Sufi emphases, coming out of Islamic mysticism. I suspected a South Asian or Afghan influence on the Arab jihadis gathered in southern Afghanistan. But I have concluded that the text exhibits not so much Sufism as simple common Islamic spirituality, if put to monstrous uses. Even the Muslim Brotherhood strain of Islamic fundamentalism did not explicitly reject Sufi figures such as al-Ghazali, and there was a Sufi tinge to some Brotherhood texts and practices. This would have carried over to the radical splinter groups, al-Jihad al-Islami and al-Gama`a al-Islamiyyah, and Atta almost certainly was affiliated with one or the other of these. Only four of the five Arabic texts have been released by the FBI, with the first page unavailable. Page 2, the first of the released pages, contains 15 instructions aimed at preparing the hijackers psychologically for their action on the night before they were to carry it out.

The second page begins with a hadith or saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, "One of the companions said, "The messenger of God commanded that it be read before a raid, so we have read it, and have gained booty, and remained safe and sound." The prophetic saying or hadith refers to several elements important to this letter, including the idea that conducting raids against the enemy is Koranically sanctioned (even though the enemy that concerned the Koran was the pagan Meccans, not US Christians and Jews). It ties success and safety in this enterprise to reading or reciting holy verses. Recitation is thus essential to establishing the set of mind and the spiritual conditions conducive to success. Although the saying refers to gaining

booty, the Koranic Surah of the Spoils (al-Anfal) actually insists that booty is not the central reason for raids, saying “The spoils belong to God and the Messenger; so fear you God and set things right between you, and obey you God and His Messenger, if you are believers.” (K. 8:2). That is, the “raid” (ghazwah) is supposed to be a selfless act, even if spoils are taken.

The letter now turns to preparations for the actual operation. This section is entitled, “The Last Night.” The raiders are directed to “vow to accept death.” The word for ‘vowing to accept,’ tabayu`, is related to the term bay`ah, which means “giving fealty to,” used to describe giving allegiance to a caliph or leader of the Muslim community. It is pledge of loyalty, but instead of being given to the leader of Islam, here it is proffered to death itself. Muslim Brotherhood founder Hasan al-Banna had written, “Always intend to go for Jihad and desire martyrdom. Prepare for it as much as you can.” Then, the document advises, the hijacker must “renew admonition” (tajdid at-tanbih). The reference is to an admonition of the base self (an-nafs), which Muslim mystics saw as the primary impediment to undertaking selfless acts of worship. In this document, the carnal self is the enemy of the vow to die, selfishly seeking to hang on to life, and so must be vanquished. Admonishing the self is the way to contain it and remain true to the death vow.

The raider is then directed to shave the extra hair on his body, to perfume himself, and to ritually wash himself. Instruction 2 is merely practical, saying that the raider should know the plan well “from every angle.” Instruction 3 reverts to mindset. The raider must read two chapters of the Koran, “The Spoils” and “Repentance.” He must meditate on their meaning and on the rewards God has promised in them to martyrs. This immersion in key sacred texts is important to attaining the mindset of the martyr, to thinking of oneself as already dead and preparing to receive the delights of divine recompense. The Spoils was revealed after the battle of Uhud between the pagan Meccans and the Muslims of Medina in 625, in which a small Muslim force of 700 defeated a much larger attacking army. The general context is thus the Muslim raids on and wars against the Meccans (there were 70 raids and 3 major wars). Uhud came after the Battle of Badr. The Surah of Spoils thus situates the Twin Towers and Pentagon raids in Islamic history for the al-Qaeda cult. It mapped the United States onto Pagan Mecca. Both had superior military force and both were extremely wealthy commercial centers. The earlier Battle of Badr had aimed at interfering in the Meccan caravan trade as a way of reducing their material superiority over Medina. September 11, which likewise struck a commercial target, was envisaged as the first of a three-part attack, according to John Walker Lindh, the first of which was executed on September 11. The second would “bring the US to its knees,” and the third would “finish it off.”

The Surah of Repentance (K. 9) distinguishes between idolaters who had made a covenant with Muhammad and those who had sought to wipe out Islam. With regard to the second group, 9:5 says “Then, when the sacred months are drawn away, slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them, and confine them, and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush.” The way of thinking that allowed the hijackers to apply this to the US is highly abstract and unnuanced. Did it really not matter that Americans are Christians and Jews, not “idolaters”? That these verses referred to a historical battle with Meccans, not to a twenty-first century cultural struggle? And what of the verse that follows 9:5, “But if they repent, and perform the prayer, and pay the alms, then let them go their way; God is All-forgiving, All-

compassionate. And if any of the idolaters seeks of thee protection, grant him protection . . .” What opportunity would the “troops” in the Twin Towers have had to “seek protection” or “repent” (the whole point of the Surah)? The hijackers convinced themselves that they were seventh-century Muslim raiders defending the “Medina” of the Muslim world against aggressive American Meccans soldiers, who were determined to wipe out true Islam. Their comportment and techniques were therefore those of the successful raider against a superior and deadly enemy.

Instruction 3 returns to the battle with the carnal soul. The night before action, the raider must remind the base self (*tadhkir an-nafs*) to listen and obey. The raider is warned that he will encounter “decisive turning-points” such that for his soul to listen and obey is absolutely crucial. An internal dialogue is suggested between the raider’s determined rational self and his carnal soul: “Train your base self, make it understand, convince it, and goad it on to this end.” The base self is depicted almost as a brute animal that can be trained to do as it is told with sufficient effort, evoking the techniques and terminology of the Islamic tradition of piety. For Sufis, “training” (*riyadah*) of the carnal involved deliberate acts of self-denial. The Muslim Brotherhood tradition in Egypt had not, unlike the Salafis, entirely rejected Sufi ideas. Al-Banna was an admirer of the great medieval Sufi thinker Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. He wrote, “Strive hard against your own soul until it is under your full control. Lower your gaze, control your emotions, overcome your sexual urge, and elevate it via means that are decent and lawful.” An early Brotherhood member told a Sufi organization, “The internal composition of the Muslim Brotherhood was in certain aspects like that of your sufi community. We used to live together for forty days doing *dhikr* [repetition of verses] and learning jurisprudence . . .” The Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots, such as the *al-Jihad al-Islami* of Ayman al-Zawahiri, thus continued to use terminology that would be recognizable in a medieval Sufi “Manual for Adepts.” They extracted this terminology, however, from its original context in Sufi brotherhoods and mystical shaykhs or leaders.

The author of the document now quotes from the Surah of Spoils, 8:46, “And obey God, and His Messenger, and do not quarrel together, and so lose heart, and your power depart; and be patient; surely God is with the patient.” This verse helps show why this chapter of the Koran is so important to the hijackers. They take from it key psychological cues, stressing forbearance, group unity, and infinite patience, a patience that conjures the presence of God Himself. In the small group interactions they had while pursuing flight training and leading up to September 11, there must have been many petty quarrels and short tempers. Some of that pressure was relieved by exercising at the gym or drinking in bars and strip clubs. But constantly turning to verses like 8:46 was another way of maintaining group unity and individual composure.

The fifth instruction concerns staying up late at night and engaging in fervent prayer for victory and God’s help in accomplishing their task, and in keeping them hidden. The custom of *tahajjud* or after-midnight prayers is important to the traditions of Muslim piety and mysticism. A prophetic saying narrated by Muslim goes, “Every night, when the last third of it remains, God, our Sustainer, the Blessed, the Superior, descends to the lowest heaven saying, ‘Is there anyone to ask Me so that I may grant him his request? Is there anyone to invoke Me so that I may respond to his invocation? Is there anyone seeking My forgiveness so that I may forgive him?’ ” Al-Banna wrote, “Always be conscious of God; remind yourself of the Hereafter and prepare for it. Be determined and aspire to seek His pleasure. Bring yourself closer to God by

performing extra night prayers (tahajjud) and fasting at least three days every month.” Of course, staying up to the “last third” of the night is no easy task, and apparently coffee first became popular in concentrated form as a drug used by Yemeni and then Ottoman Sufis trying to stay up late for the especially blessed night prayers. In order to maintain a liminal consciousness committed to suicide and mass murder, the hijackers may well have kept themselves sleep-deprived, praying into the small hours of the morning, and then getting up for flight school or other activities. Certainly, they were advised to do so on their last night. The activity of praying, chanting and reciting through the night would aid in the auto-hypnosis necessary to maintaining their self-image as martyrs vowed to die.

The sixth instruction underlines the importance of constant internal recitation of sacred phrases, something analogous to the mantra in Hindu mysticism. Whereas Sufi orders developed their own phrases for constant repetition, called dhikr, the Salafi influence on author of this document is underlined by the assertion that the best phrases for in constant repetition are those drawn from the Koran itself. Al-Banna himself had compiled a short book called “Selections” (al-Ma’thurat) of Koran verses and prophetic sayings related to the practice of dhikr. In another book, he wrote, “Partake in much remembrance (dhikr) both of the heart and the tongue and recite the renowned supplications of the Prophet.” There is at least a slim relationship in some sources between dhikr and jihad. The “greater jihad” of the Sufis like al-Ghazali, which involved conquest of the carnal soul, was considered by them to be greatly aided by the technique of dhikr. It is possible that a suicide/mass murder operation like this one was considered by al-Qaeda to combine the virtues of both the greater (spiritual) and lesser (military) jihads, and that therefore the techniques appropriate to the former should be applied to the latter. Further, there is a widely cited hadith or prophetic saying that a person who engages in dhikr is better than a mujahid or a holy warrior. A Sunni Encyclopedia tells us that the medieval jurist “Ibn Hajar in Fath al-Bari (1989 ed. 11:251) explained that what is meant by dhikr in Abu al-Darda's narration of the primacy of dhikr over jihad is the complete dhikr and consciousness of Allah's greatness whereby one becomes better, for example, than those who battle the disbelievers without such recollection.”

The seventh instruction employs the language of Muslim asceticism and mysticism to reinforce the urge to suicide or self-martyrdom. The mass murderer is encouraged to see his action as selfless. He is to “purify” his “heart” and cleanse it of “stains.” He is to forget that there is even such a thing as “this world.” He is informed that the time for play has ended, and the rendezvous Eternal Truth is nearing. He is encouraged to regret how much of his life he has “wasted,” i.e., spent on impious pursuits or in search of merely material benefits. He should “take advantage” of these, his last hours, to offer up to God acts that will draw him near to the divine and express his obedience. Whereas traditional Islamic piety urged detachment from the material world as an aid to ethical and spiritual fulfillment, the Domsday Document urges it as a support for suicide and massive killing of civilians.

There may be a hint in this paragraph of a strategy of using guilt to manipulate the hijackers. We know that al-Qaeda operatives were often encouraged to antinomian behavior, including hanging out at strip clubs and with fast women. Khalid Shaikh Muhammad was a notorious playboy and high roller during his years in the Philippines. Several of the hijackers were known to frequent US strip clubs and to drink heavily. Bin Laden admitted that the hijackers were not Muslims in

the ordinary (i.e. Wahhabi) sense of the term, and it was to this strategy of antinomianism that he probably was referring. The sinful lifestyle probably had several advantages. It served as a form of false flag tradecraft, that is, of covert deception, in throwing off any intelligence organizations that might have been tracking the hijackers as suspected Islamist terrorists. Such libertine behavior was in part a cover, insofar as it marked the operatives as irreligious. But it may have had other implications as well. It served as a reward to young men who would end their lives early, allowing them to live out fantasies and feel that had lived full lives. The earthly delights may also have been intended to serve as a reminder for the even more impressive heavenly delights promised after their suicides. Were the American exotic dancers intended to be symbols of the houris or maidens of paradise the document mentions elsewhere? Finally, despite all the good tactical reasons they had for behaving this way, the hijackers must have felt some guilt over it, as committed Muslim fundamentalists. This last feeling is played upon in paragraph 7. The time for play is over. They have wasted much of their lives with unworthy, worldly activities. Now they must feel the full regret and prepare to make amends with a final night of worship, drawing close, and preparation for the rendezvous with God. Their earthly lives have been in any case “ruined” by their antinomian activities, so why not just cast off that old skin and emerge into a new existence in the afterlife?

The fifteenth and final instruction concerns the morning of September 11. The hijackers are to prayer their dawn obligatory prayers in congregation. Only the Friday noon prayers are necessarily prayed in congregation, but committed Muslims often believe that a special award attaches to going to the mosque to pray even some of the five daily prayers in congregation. Al-Banna had written, “try to pray in congregation in the mosque as frequently as possible.” Al-Qaeda also clearly held that group prayer contributes to solidarity. The hijacker is then to proceed to the morning dhikr or recitation, and should continue to reflect on the reward of saying dawn prayers in congregation. After performing their morning routines and before leaving the apartment, the hijackers are instructed to perform their ablutions once again. The reason given for this action is that “angels seek forgiveness for you as long as you have prepared ablutions and they pray on your behalf.” The hijackers are encouraged to live in a magical world of omens and angels, where small ritual acts serve as guarantees of divine succor . . .

The beginning instructions of the Doomsday Document give us vital insight into how a normal, middle class, secular young man like Ziad Jarrah, a Lebanese engineer with at Turkish-German live-in girlfriend, could become a mass murderer and suicide. He and others were convinced that they were reenacting sacred history. The United States was not a Christian country but rather a reincarnation of pagan Mecca. As Mecca was attempting to invade Medina and destroy Islam, so the United States had invaded the Muslim world to undermine Islam. The hardy band of real Muslims who recognized the extreme threat had no choice but to undertake a raid (ghazwah) against this much superior foe. Just as small bands of early Muslims often inflicted defeats on larger Meccan forces, so a handful of young believers could hope to inflict a grievous blow on the 21st century Mecca of the West.

The hijackers thus saw themselves as holy warriors, as Muslim raiders. Their victims were not even human, but rather mere animals for ritual slaughter. Atta and other handlers convinced them to live a double life. Inwardly they were committed to piety and asceticism and self-sacrifice. Outwardly they frequented bars and strip clubs, both to throw the intelligence agencies

off the scent and to get a foretaste of the rewards of martyrdom. If it was Bin Laden who put them up to this double life, he may well have done so with personal knowledge of the kind of guilt it would induce, and the kind of self-hatred and openness to manipulation to which the guilt could lead.

The internal psychology of commitment to murder on a huge scale and to die in the process was underpinned by an almost obsessive-compulsive immersion in the details of repeated rituals. Specific phrases were recited with every activity, constantly. The internal monologue was drowned in a set of sacred mantras, leaving no space for questioning orders. The constant hum of the recitation may have been intended in part to induce a liminal state that was not entirely conscious. The intensity and lack of small talk that those who met them remarked on in the hijackers probably derived from their silent, constant dhikr or repetition of sacred verses. This liminal consciousness may have been reinforced by deliberate sleep deprivation, and by bouts of drunkenness. Employed as they were intended, the techniques of Islamic mysticism have produced saints and sages like Rumi and al-Ghazali. Misused as a form of brainwashing, they appear to have contributed to among the largest mass murders in history.

Appendix:

First section of the Doomsday Document  
Trans. J. Cole

*The Last Night*

- 1) *Vow to accept death, renew admonition [of the base self], shave the extra hair on the body, perfume yourself, and ritually wash yourself.*
- 2) *Know the plan well from every angle. Anticipate the reaction or the resistance of the enemy.*
- 3) *Read the surahs of Repentance and The Spoils. Contemplate their meaning and the bounties God has prepared and established for the martyrs.*
- 4) *Remind your base self to listen and obey this night, for you will be exposed to decisive turning points wherein listening and obeying is one hundred percent necessary. Train your base self, make it understand, convince it, and goad it on to this end. "And obey God, and His Messenger, and do not quarrel together, and so lose heart, and your power depart; and be patient; surely God is with the patient."*
- 5) *Staying up at night and imploring in prayer for victory and strength and perspicuous triumph, and the easing of our task, and concealment.*

6) Much recitation of sacred phrases. Know that the best of dhikr is reciting the noble Qur'an. This is the consensus of the people of knowledge or, indeed, of the most learned. It is enough for us that it is the words of the creator of the heavens and the earth toward Whom you are advancing.

7) Purify your heart and cleanse it of stains. Forget and be oblivious to that thing called the world. For, the time for playing has passed, and the time has arrived for the rendezvous with the eternal Truth. How much of our lives we have wasted! Shall we not take advantage of these hours to offer up acts of nearness [to God] and obedience?

8) Let your breast be filled with gladness, for there is nothing between you and your wedding but mere seconds. Thereby will begin a happy and contented life and immortal blessing with the prophets, the true ones and the righteous martyrs. They are the best of companions. We beseech God for his grace. So seek good omens. For the Prophet, may blessings and peace be upon him, used to love divination about every matter.

9) Then fix your gaze, such that if you fall into tribulations, you will know how to behave, how to stand firm, how to say "We are, verily, from God and to him we shall return." Thus you will know that what has befallen you is not because of any error you committed. That you committed an error was not so that you would face tribulations. That calamity of yours is in fact from God, may he be exalted and glorified—so as to elevate your station and cause your sins to be forgiven. Know that it is only a matter of seconds before it shines forth by the permission of God. Then blessed is he who attains the great recompense from God. God says, "Did you think you would enter paradise when God knows those who strove among you, and knows the patient?" "Am hasabtum an tadhkulu al-jannat . . .

10) Then recite (tadhkharu) the words of God, "You were wishing for death before you encountered it, then you saw it, and are looking for it . . ." And you wanted it. After that, recite the verse "Kam min fi'ah qalilah ghalaba fi'ah kathirah bi idhn Allah . . ." And In yunsirukum Allah fa la ghalib lakum . . . "

11) Bring your base self, as well as your brethren, to remembrance through prayers. And contemplate their meaning (recitations [adhkar] of morning and evening, recitations of city [baldah], recitations of . . .[makan], recitations of meeting [liqa' al-Tur] . . . ).

12) The jet: (with breath [an-nafs], suitcase, clothing, knife, tools, identity papers, passport and all your papers.]

13) Inspect your weapon before setting out and before you even begin to set out and [CBS: "Let every one of you sharpen his knife and kill his animal (dhabiha) and bring about comfort and relief of his slaughter" before the journey. ]

14) Pull your clothes tightly about you, for this is the way of the pious ancestors (as-salaf as-salih), may God be pleased with them. They pulled their clothing tightly about them before a battle. Pull your shoelaces tight and wear tight socks that grip the shoes and do not come out of

*them. All of these are means that we have been commanded to adopt. God has hasabna and he is the best of advocates (na'im al-wakil).*

*15) Pray the morning prayers in congregation and reflect on the reward for doing so while you are performing recitation afterwards. Do not go out of your apartment without having performed ablutions. For the angels seek forgiveness for you as long as you have prepared ablutions and they pray on your behalf.*