

# Osama bin Laden's Man Trouble

## *Those scary groups of young men*

by Lionel Tiger

An outstanding characteristic of the miserable band of insane worshipers responsible for the savage events of September 11 is that they are all male. Virtually all the fist-shakers we see in news clips of anti-American demonstrations in Pakistan and elsewhere are men, too, usually relatively young ones.

What does this have to do with September 11, Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, and the future?

One of the most difficult tasks for any social system is figuring out what to do with its young males. These are invariably the most lurchy, impressionable, energetic, socially exigent, and politically inept members of any group. They cause trouble for their elders and ruthlessly hassle each other. (See the Sharks and Jets of *West Side Story* and the Bloods and the Crips of "west coast story.") They pose chronic danger to public order when they drive, drink, and drug.

Various communities cause their young men to endure a startling and often gory array of harassing rituals and trials in order to become acceptable adults. In his autobiography, Nelson Mandela says that only after his circumcision at the age of 15 did he feel ready to assume the chieftancy he inherited. I have been a so-called "expert" witness in lawsuits on behalf of young men physically abused by fraternity brothers during hazing and initiations: One was turned into a quadriplegic. Often, only when they have made their bones in some grim initiatory expedition are young men able to contemplate the next steps of courtship and marriage.

The terrorism of bin Laden harnesses the chaos of young men, uniting the energies of political ardor and sex in a turbulent fuel. The structure of al Qaeda –

an all-male enterprise, of course – appears to involve small groups of relatively young men who maintain strong bonds with each other – bonds whose intensity is dramatized and heightened by the secrecy demanded by their missions and the danger of their projects. Like such highly trained and prestigious warriors as the Army's Rangers or the Navy's SEALs, they are screened before they are allowed to earn their stripes in a program of militaristic training in isolated and demanding environments. Selection to the group is prestigious. It confers unquestionable, if radical, Islamic credentials and

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associates them with the tides of history sketched for them in their training. For many, nothing in the rest of their often sorry existence can compare with the authoritative drama of what they hope to do and with the sense of purpose flowing from their commitment to the leaders they accept.

Their comfort in an all-male world begins with the high sex segregation of many of the Muslim communities from which the terrorists draw. While there are great variations among Islamic communities, the sharp tendency is toward sexually segregated societies. Contact between the sexes is tightly restricted by draconian moral codes. Not only are women's faces veiled, so is their behavior. This means that men and women have relatively little to do with people of the

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opposite sex. Therefore, they develop a great deal of reliance on their own.

Most men in most societies marry, or try to. This is more difficult than usual in polygamous societies in which the powerful men have as many as four wives, leaving three potential husbands without a date for Saturday night – or any night. For example, Osama bin Laden is thought to have several cave mates, as many as four, including his most recent bride, a teeny-bopper who is presumably an earnest theological theorist. There are also substantially more men than women in Afghanistan, which augments the deprivations of polygamy. So some of his troops have no choice but to accustom themselves to relatively monastic lives.

The sexuality and reproductive potential of such young men is not an unimportant matter politically. The United Arab Emirates, not normally considered forerunners of the progressive movement, have taken an inventive action that reflects how difficult it is for men and women to mate in a traditional manner. To marry a local girl, men in that nation must provide gifts, feasts, and ritual performances that may cost as much as \$40,000 – an impossible accumulation for all but a few. Many could choose a foreign wife instead, which is unattractive to the government. So now when a man marries a local woman, the government supplies a grant sufficient for his ceremonial obligations. Bin Laden and his ilk provide no such marriage benefit. (In a grim reversal, they offer bonuses to the kin of those who commit suicide.) So his young men have to rely for emotional and social succor on their fellow marchers toward the triumph of grandly effective death.

It is in the crucible of all-male intensity that the bonds of terrorist commitment and self-denial are formed. As they move from Hamburg to Cleveland to Lima to Havana to Jersey City, they are enveloped in tacit camaraderie with their associates who have endured the same training, the same deprivation, the same expectation of enjoying death and heaven in the same shiver. They share the sweet-sour prospect of striking a fiery suicidal blow for the self-evident purity of a religion of love. They are not lonely psychopaths but demented special forces wearing anonymity like a uniform. They share and catalyze swirling energies and religious absolutism, forces immensely useful to those operators such as bin Laden who are able to turn young men's need for a cool place in the hot sun outward, to other

societies, to attack infidels at large.

It is something grand to do. So much better than the few jobs available, the threadbare economies, the ramshackle societies run either by altogether corrupt cynics, autocratic monarchies feeding princes *foie gras*, or theocracies that mistake reading ancient books for action.

Will the situation change? There are countless young men in poor “states of concern” whose only plausible luxury may lie in the symbolic realm of moral and theological triumph. They are likely, at best, to have to scrape out a minimally tolerable existence that pales beside the images of sensual and material peril – America! America! – their leaders seek to hide from them but cannot. “The Great Satan” strictly translated is “the great tempter.” A select few, perhaps the most angry or lonely, perhaps the most pious or theoretical, will decide not to try to become part of America or its way of life but to destroy it.

To do this, they can enroll in stirring academies such as bin Laden's. The danger of belonging to them enhances their excitement and feeds their sense of worthwhile enterprise. Their comrades provide them an emotional haven and a clear focus for the turbulent energies at the intersection of youth and despair. Their basic weapons are intensity and insane commitment, not the usual visible armament of warriors. American and other forces will have to find, confront, and destroy something new. They may well succeed in rooting out at least the more overt groups. But the much larger and longer-term problem for us and the world-at-large is that there are millions upon millions of these young men, not just bin Laden's thousands, who will finally have to be faced by the currently feckless leaders of the grim societies that have produced and nurtured such wild theological pathologies. •

[Editor's note: On this same topic, see Don Collins's article, “Overabundance of Rogue Males” with its accompanying statistics and charts, in the Fall 2001 issue of *The Social Contract*, Volume XII, Number 1, p.72.]