

# A FURY FOR GOD

THE ISLAMIST ATTACK ON AMERICA

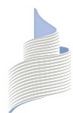
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MALISE RUTHVEN



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# A FURY FOR GOD

*The Islamist Attack on America*

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In memory of my father,  
Patrick Hore-Ruthven (1913–1942),  
who died in the jihad against fascism



And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night

MATTHEW ARNOLD



# CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	XI
<i>Glossary</i>	XV
1 September 11th	I
2 Jihad	44
3 The Aesthetics of Martyrdom	72
4 A Fury for God	99
5 Cultural Schizophrenia	134
6 The Seeds of Terror	169
7 Jihad in America	201
8 A Clash of Civilizations?	240
<i>Notes</i>	292
<i>Index</i>	313





## PREFACE

This book makes no great claims to originality. Much of the material has already been published elsewhere – in scholarly articles, in newspapers and on the Internet, as well as in other books. Some of this material will already be familiar to readers saturated by media and newspaper coverage of September 11th and its aftermath. Part of it, however, will be known only to specialists. In putting together these two different kinds of material I am hoping that new insights will be forthcoming. For example, most newspaper commentary takes the “Islamic” religious motivations of the terrorists at face value, unaware perhaps that for several decades scholars and specialists have analysed or “deconstructed” the religious and political outlook that informs the Islamist movements. Leading scholars in the field, however, have pointed out that Islamist movements owe much more than they care to admit to ideas imported from the “West” they profess to despise. Other commentators, including leading politicians, have gone to considerable lengths to exculpate the “moderate majority” of Muslims from sympathy with the attacks. While fully endorsing the motives behind such statements – which is to argue that a whole religious tradition cannot be held responsible for abuses or distortions invoked in its name – I cannot accept that the tradition as a whole is somehow blameless. All

three Abrahamic monotheisms contain within them justifications for violence that can be exploited for causes that may be denounced as “evil” or “terrorist”, as well as for causes often considered admirable, such as patriotism, national resistance or the promotion of human rights.

This book was written in the “heat of the moment”, between October 2001 and February 2002. A constant flow of new material became available as I was working on it. In a story in which the factual bases kept shifting, consistency was well nigh impossible. There are bound to be contradictions, while some repetitions are also inevitable. Conceived and executed in haste, the book cannot hope to provide a definitive analysis. At best it is an “interim report”, a provisional exploration of some of the forces at work, intellectual and psychological, as well as religious and political, behind the September 11th attacks.

Nearly eight months after the attacks, our knowledge of the details is still very sketchy. On 30 April 2002, following months of investigations involving thousands of agents, as well as the arrest and interrogations of hundreds of Arab and Muslim immigrants, the director of the FBI, Robert Mueller, said there was still no hard evidence revealing how the attacks had been planned and executed. The hijackers left no “paper trails” in the form of mobile phone bills or credit card receipts. They did not use laptops and stored nothing on computer hard drives. The money they received from abroad was sent in small amounts to avoid detection. The only certainty was that the attacks had been a considerable time in the planning – as much as five years, according to FBI officials.

An independent writer can hardly hope to succeed where the FBI has so signally failed. I make no claim to produce factual evidence not already in the public domain. My purpose has been rather to explore the religious, ideological and political background behind the atrocities: the classical doctrine of jihad (holy war) and the influence of the “martyr” Sayyid Qutb (1906–66) on modern Islamist activism; the love–hate relationship between sections of Muslim youth and “the West”, and the desperate acts of “self-martyrdom” by which some young Muslims seek to resolve the

painful personal conflicts engendered by “cultural schizophrenia”; the axis of oil that ties profligate American consumers to the tribal absolutism of Saudi Arabia; the possibility – unproven – of an “Iraqi connection” with the September 11th attacks; the much discussed “clash of civilizations” between the Islamic and Western worlds.

I could never have completed the project in such a relatively short time without assistance from other people. James Howarth provided valuable help with Arabic and English texts and material on the Internet. James Price and Dr Michelle Spuler also supplied me with useful material during the early stages of the project. Sajidah Ahmad’s editorial contribution went beyond the call of duty. Dr Charles Tripp, who read the typescript in draft, made several valuable suggestions, to which I have tried to respond within the constraints of a very tight deadline. None of the above bears any responsibility whatsoever for the tenor of my interpretations or for factual errors. I also received useful help from Steve Bonella, Prunella Bramwell-Davies, Dr Susan Buckley, Gurbir Dhillon, Professor Fawaz Gerges, Tim Hodgkinson, Trevor Mostyn, Elfi Pallis and Benjamin Shaw. My thanks to all of them, and especially to Tiggy for her critical eye and her forbearance; to Neil Belton for his continuing patience and support; and to the staff of the British Library for their efficiency and courtesy.

La Jolla, California, 1 May 2002



## GLOSSARY

*‘abd* servant, slave

*‘abda* female servant, slave

*agal* headrope worn around the *kaffiya* (head-dress); originally rope used for camels

*ahl* family, people

*ahl al-bait* family of the Prophet

*ahl al-kitab* people of the book

*ahl al-hadith* people of tradition – those who opposed the Mu‘tazalite rationalists

*al* family, house (as in Al Sa‘ud)

*al-* definite article

*‘alim* (pl. *‘ulama*) learned man, religious scholar; though Islam has no priesthood, the *‘ulama* are often described as the “guardians” of the religious tradition

**Allah** the name for God in Arabic, used by all Muslims and also by Arabic-speaking Christians and Jews; it incorporates the definite article *al-*, giving it a more abstract meaning than the English word God (i.e. “the god” or even “the deity”)

**Allahu Akbar** “God is Greater!”

*amir* (pl. *umara’*) commander; also prince

amirate, emirate Muslim state ruled by an amir

*‘anqud* (pl. *‘anaqid*) cluster or bunch, as in grapes – a term used

- to describe the self-contained cellular structure of the Islamist movements in Egypt
- ard* (pl. *aradi*) earth, land
- aradi amariyya* princely lands
- 'asabiyya* group feeling, “a corporate spirit oriented towards obtaining and keeping power” (Albert Hourani), a concept employed in Ibn Khaldun’s theory of cyclical renewal
- asbab al-nuzul* occasions of revelation – a technical term used by scholars to coordinate passages in the Quran with episodes in the life of the Prophet Muhammad
- asnam* (sing. *sanam*) idols
- aya* (pl. *ayat*) sign or “miracle” from God – a term used for both the “miracles” of nature and individual verses of the Quran
- bai'a* oath of allegiance to a leader
- bhakti* (Sanskrit) devotion
- bin* (also *ibn*) son of, often abbreviated to b.
- bint* daughter of
- bled al siba* (Morocco) “lands of insolence”, where the writ of the state is weak
- burqa* the complete covering used by women in some parts of the Muslim world, notably Afghanistan
- caliphate* the realm ruled by the Caliph (see *Khalifa*), often synonymous in early Islamic times with *dar al-islam*; also reign or the period of time that any given Caliph ruled (e.g. the caliphate of al-Ma'mun)
- dar* home, abode, sphere
- dar al-harb* the abode or sphere of war (i.e. non-Islamic lands)
- dar al-hijra* abode of emigration – a term used for the agricultural settlements established by Ibn Sa'ud in the 1920s
- dar al-islam* the abode or sphere of Islam
- da'wa* preaching or missionary activity
- dhikr* “remembrance” of God – a term applied to rituals performed by different Sufi orders
- dhimmi, ahl al-dhimma* a protected subject of the Muslim state; originally applied to Christians and Jews, *dhimmi* status was

- extended to Zoroastrians, Hindus and other subjects of the Muslim state
- din* religion
- din al-fitra* “natural religion” – a term sometimes applied to Islam by its advocates
- diya* blood money; composition (i.e. compensation) for murder
- dunya* world
- fard ‘ain* an individual duty or obligation in Islam
- fard kifaya* a collective duty or obligation in Islam
- fatwa* a legal ruling, opinion or advice given by a *mufti*, a qualified legal scholar
- fiqh* jurisprudence (lit. “understanding” the will of God)
- fitna* strife, social unrest – a term used for any period of conflict, for example the civil wars in the decades after Muhammad’s death in 632
- ghadba* “fury” or outrage
- hadd* (pl. *hudud*) “boundaries” or limits – a term used for the moral limits established by God in the Quran; the Islamic laws imposed under martial law by the Pakistani dictator General Zia ul-Haqq were known as the “Hudood Ordinances”
- hadith* (pl. *ahadith*) tradition, saying or action attributed to the Prophet Muhammad or his contemporaries; these were passed down orally for two or more centuries after Muhammad’s death in 632
- Hajj* the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the five duties or obligations of Islam, which every practising Muslim is expected to perform at least once in his or her lifetime
- Hajji* one who has performed the Hajj
- hakimiyya* sovereignty, governance
- hakm* (pl. *ahkam*) rule
- haram* sacred, forbidden; also sanctuary, such as in Mecca
- al-haramain* the two sanctuaries of Mecca and Medina; *bilad al-haramain*, “Lands of the Two Sanctuaries”, is a term used by, among others, Osama bin Laden for the Arabian peninsula
- Haram al-Sharif* the Noble Sanctuary, Jerusalem
- harim* female part of the household, to which, in traditional

- Muslim societies, nonrelated males are not admitted
- hijab** “veil” worn by some Muslim women, from a Quranic term used for curtain or screen
- hijra** (sometimes *hegira*) the migration of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions from Mecca to Medina in 622; it came to be used by extension to mean the emigration of Muslims from *dar al-harb* to *dar al-islam* either physically or spiritually
- hijri** (adj.) appertaining to the Muslim (*hijri*) lunar calendar, which starts in 622, the year of the *hijra*; dates are therefore given as AH, *anno hegirae*, and 2000 CE, for example, was 1421 AH
- himaya** protection – that is, granted by a superior to a subordinate tribe
- ibn** (pl. *bin*) son of
- i‘jaz** inimitability; the miraculous quality of the Quran’s language
- ijtihad** effort, endeavour or diligence; most commonly used to denote an individual interpretation of the Quran, or independent judgement in a legal or a theological question
- ilhad** heresy
- iman** faith
- insan** human being, humanity; *al-insan al-kamil* is the perfect man or complete human being – a concept defined by Ibn ‘Arabi and thereafter widely used in Sufism
- intihar** suicide
- irhab** terrorism
- Islam** submission or self-surrender to God, the name given to what would become a major world religion
- Isma‘ili** a minority tradition of the Shi‘a who follow leaders in the line of Isma‘il b. Ja‘afar; the Isma‘ilis are now divided into two main groupings: the Nizaris, who regard the Aga Khan as their “Living Imam”, and the Mustalians or Bohras, whose Imam is in concealment or occultation
- istishhad** “self-martyrdom” – a term now used for suicide bombings
- ittihad** unity, union; *muttahid*, united
- jahiliyya** the period of “ignorance” or paganism prior to the revelation of Islam; used by Islamists as a term of abuse against

contemporary rulers or other Muslims considered insufficiently pious or radical

*jama'a* (pl. *jama'at*) assembly, association

*al-Jama'at al-Islamiya* (Ar.) Islamic associations – a term used for the Islamist groups in Egypt

*Jama'at-i-Islami* (Urdu) South Asian Islamist party founded by Abu'l-'Ala Maududi in 1941

*jihād* “struggle” – a term used for holy war; the “greater jihād” is sometimes used to refer to the struggle against one’s own evil tendencies, while the “lesser jihād” is the physical struggle against one’s enemies or the enemies of Islam

*jizya* the poll tax paid by *dhimmis*

*kafala* sponsorship

*kafil* sponsor

*kafir*, (pl. *kuffar* or *kafirun*) infidel, nonbeliever in Islam

*kata'ib* (sing. *katiba*) battalion, brigade, Phalange (a Lebanese political party); some of the Palestinian suicide bombers wear bandanas proclaiming their membership of *kata'ib al-Qassam*, the al-Qassam Martyrs Brigade

*Khalifa* Caliph, politico-religious leader of the community of Muslims after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, God’s vice-regent on Earth

*khariji* (pl. *khawarij*) Kharijite, seceder – a term applied to the first sectarian dissenters who “went out” (*kharaja*) from the Muslim community; neo-kharijites modern sectarians, such as the Takfir wa-l-Hijra (TwH), who have seceded from the main body of the Muslim community to form their own sectarian communities

*khuwwa* extraction

*kitab* (pl. *kutub*) book

*kufr* disbelief in God – a term sometimes employed polemically by Muslims of different persuasions against each other

*Mahdi* messianic figure in Islamic eschatology

*mahram* people of the opposite sex to whom one is forbidden (that is, to marry)

*majlis al-shura* consultative council

- mamluk** (pl. *mamalik*) “owned” – a term used for the technically slave status of the rulers of Egypt from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries
- mashura** see shura
- maslaha** public interest
- mawlid** feast day commemorating birth of saintly person
- mihna** “inquisition” established under caliphate of al-Ma’mun to enforce Mu’tazilite doctrine
- mufti** see fatwa
- muhajir** (pl. *muhajirun, muhajirin* [colloquial]) one who migrates (from evil, or from a non-Muslim state) in emulation of the migration (*hijra*) of the Prophet and his companions from Mecca to Medina in 622, the event which marks the beginning of the Muslim era
- mujahid** (pl. *mujahidun, mujahidin* [colloquial]) one who struggles or fights for God’s cause; a holy warrior
- mujtahid** a scholar who interprets the Quran using individual reasoning, of *ijtihad*
- mukhabarat** intelligence services, secret police
- mushrik** (pl. *mushrikun, mushrikin* [colloquial]) an “associator” or idolator – a term of abuse often levelled at one’s religious opponents
- Muslim** (pl. *Muslimun, Muslimin* [colloquial]) one who professes Islam, or who is born into a Muslim family; nonpractising Muslims are sometimes described as “cultural Muslims”
- Muslima** a female Muslim
- mustashhid** a self-martyr – a term used for suicide bombers
- mutawwa’in** religious police; short term for members of the “committee for upholding the good and forbidding the evil” (*al-amr bi’l-ma’ruf wa’l-nahy an ‘al-munkar*), as found in Saudi Arabia and in Afghanistan under the Saudi-sponsored Taliban regime
- mu’tazila** Mu’tazilites, “those who keep themselves apart”, often described as “rationalists”, who believed that the Quran was created in time
- nafa** (pl. *anas*) self; soul; also spirit, person, being identity

**naskh** abrogation – a technical term used in Quranic exegesis to designate the abrogation of some Quranic verses by others, or of previous scriptures by the Quran

**nikah** marriage contract

**pir** (Urdu, Pers.) a Sufi saint or spiritual master

**al-Qa'ida** the foundation, the base; the word can also mean model or principle, as in something one should aspire to follow

**al-salaf al-salih** the “righteous ancestors”; *salafi* and *salafiyya* are now used by Islamist radicals who look to the righteous ancestors for inspiration, but the same term was used by modernists in an earlier period referring to the righteous ancestors in order to find ways of accommodating Islam to contemporary realities

**shahada** the declaration of faith, one of the five duties or “pillars” of Islam, according to the formula “There is no God but Allah. Muhammad is the messenger of Allah”

**shahid** a martyr or “witness” for the faith

**shaikh** elder; religious or tribal leader

**Shi'a** party, group, coming to mean the “party” of 'Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's closest male relative, whose supporters believe he was cheated of the caliphate; the Shi'a became the minority tradition in Islam

**Shi'i** a Shi'ite or member of the Shi'a, the minority tradition

**shirk** “association” of lesser beings with the deity; polytheism

**shura** consultation, sometimes used as Quranic justification for democratic institutions

**Sufi** an Islamic mystic

**Sufism** the mystical tradition in Islam

**sultan** holder of authority – a title used by Muslim rulers

**sultaniyya** authority

**sunna** custom or practice of the Prophet Muhammad, as transmitted through the corpus of hadiths; the term Sunni is given to the majority tradition in Islam, which is distinguished from the Shi'a minority

**suq** (pl. *aswaq*) market

- takfir** the declaration that someone is a *kafir* or infidel; excommunication
- al-Takfir wa-l-Hijra** “excommunication and migration” – the name given to the Islamist Society of Muslims in Egypt; a group of the same name based in Algeria is on the US State Department’s list of proscribed terrorist organizations
- taqiyya** “dissimulation” – a term used for the practice of some Shi‘a dissidents who concealed their true allegiance to an Imam from the House of ‘Ali behind the outward veneer of Sunni conformity
- tariq** road
- tariqa** “way” – prescribed by a Sufi mystical order
- al-tariqa al-mutawasita** the “middle way” of Islam
- al-tawassur al-islami** Islamic conception – a term used by Sayyid Qutb
- tawhid** divine unity or unicity
- thawb** robe or garment worn by men; some Wahhabis wore them short (i.e. above the ankle) in imitation of what they considered to have been the practice of the Prophet Muhammad
- ‘ulama** (sing. *‘alim*) the legal scholars of Islam, “guardians” of the faith
- Umma** the world-wide community of Muslims
- ‘Umra** the lesser pilgrimage to the shrine at Mecca which can be performed throughout the year
- wafd** delegation – name given to Egypt’s first modern nationalist party after Britain prevented the government from sending a delegation to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919
- waqf** (pl. *awqaf*) religious foundation or trust
- zakat** purifying dues or ritual charity, one of the five “pillars” or duties of Islam

## *Chapter One*

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# September 11th

The images at first seemed like a disaster movie. The smoke and the flames were billowing out of the twin towers of the World Trade Center, once the world's tallest skyscraper, still, in the age of globalization, the most vivid symbol of America's economic might. It was only when we saw the sequences over and over again that the message really came home. Those tiny antlike figures jumping into oblivion were real people, not actors or stuntmen, human beings caught in their final, desperate moments. We saw the towers implode and collapse into a heap of crumbling masonry and twisted metal, the clouds of dust filling streets full of people running or staggering away. These scenes, constantly played and replayed on the screen and in our heads, generated a hypnagogic state lying somewhere between dream and wakeful fantasy. The repetitions, the absence of a musical score, and the familiar, authoritative voices of the newscasters ground them into the part of the brain that experiences the world as real.

As the days passed, a flood of personal narratives, jarred, twisted and severed, invaded our feelings. The message "I love you" left on a husband's answering machine from the wife who was trapped in the burning building; the husband who called from the toilet in one of the doomed planes repeating those same three simple words; the

heroism of the passengers on the fourth hijacked plane who fought the terrorists, causing the plane to crash before it could hit its destined target, the White House or Capitol; the banker who struggled down fifty flights of steps from one of the collapsing towers, only to discover that his mother and sister were passengers on one of the hijacked planes.

The terror had come to New York on a bright sunny morning out of a clear blue sky. People having breakfast in the Windows of the World restaurant on the 107th floor of the North Tower could see for forty miles. Below them tens of thousands of people were setting about their tasks at the start of another day in one of the world's largest, and busiest, office complexes. They came from many different backgrounds.

One of the survivors, financial services executive Adam Mayblum, was checking e-mails at 8.47 a.m. when American Airlines flight 111 – a Boeing 767 – hit the North Tower between the 95th and 103rd floors. “The building lurched violently and shook as if it were an earthquake. People screamed. I watched out of my window as the building seemed to move 10 to 20 feet in each direction. Light fixtures and parts of the ceiling collapsed. The kitchen was destroyed. We were certain it was a bomb.” Mayblum was lucky: he made it to the bottom down the emergency stairwells.<sup>1</sup> Eric Levine, a trader with Morgan Stanley, was on the 64th floor of the South Tower when the second plane, United Airlines flight 175 – another Boeing 767 – hit the building at about the 80th floor. He was already in the stairwell being evacuated when he heard a huge explosion that “shook the whole building . . . I tried to stand up but the building was still shaking and the lights were flickering on and off . . . then the building began to sink, that’s the only way I can describe it. The floor began to lower under your feet and all I could think about was that it would crack open and I would fall hundreds of feet to my death. People began screaming and crying and praying out loud for God to help them. I remember that I began to pray once the floor gave out. Asking God to just let the building stop shaking long enough for me to get out . . . Somewhere along the route between the 44th and 34th floors I lost

sight of the little Filipina woman who had been hanging on to my arm for dear life. She was there one moment and gone the next . . . Around the 25th floor we began to smell jet fuel and a lot of it . . . After what seemed like an eternity, but actually took about 40 minutes, we saw our first glimpse of the outside world. People were screaming and running everywhere, emergency vehicles wherever you looked . . . I could not believe what I was seeing. Both buildings were on fire with flames shooting out of them about 100 feet high. Huge plumes of thick black smoke were billowing out of them and when I looked at Tower 2 you could still see the tail end of the jet hanging out of the building. I ran 15 blocks to my apartment where I sat in shock watching the replay of the buildings falling.”<sup>2</sup>

There were 115 nationalities among the almost 3,000 confirmed deaths. All walks of life were represented, from the financial traders of companies like Cantor FitzGerald to the janitors who cleaned the offices and scrubbed the toilets. Over the following months their obituaries, accompanied by postage-stamp-sized portraits, would appear in the pages of the *New York Times*. “Here in the democracy of the dead,” wrote Harold Evans, “is a marvellous mosaic of a great city, of dreams small and large, of fretful talents and settled routines, of large ambitions and little common decencies, people of all faiths and none.”<sup>3</sup> In catastrophic situations such common decencies become acts of heroism: people risked their lives, sometimes died, for courtesies like helping a fat or lame person on the stairs. The heroism of the fire department has passed into legend. One group that suffered badly for its courage was the fire department’s “special operations command”, the first to appear on the scene, whose job it is to rush into burning buildings when everyone else is pouring out. On the morning of September 11th the group lost 75 members of the more than 300 firefighters who died.<sup>4</sup>

Standing 1,360 feet above street level, 100 feet higher than the Empire State Building, the World Trade Center was an obvious target for terrorist attack. In 1993, Ramzi Yousef (who may have been an Iraqi agent and would later be described as “the world’s

The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington were carried out by men steeped in Islamist ideology, an amalgam of traditional Islamic concepts such as 'jihad' and extremist ideas adapted from European leftism, fascism and anarchism. All of the nineteen suicide skyjackers were Arabs connected with al-Qa'ida, the extremist Islamist network presided over by the Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden. Fifteen of the terrorists came from Saudi Arabia, America's closest ally in the Arab world.

In *A Fury for God* Malise Ruthven traces the religious and intellectual background behind the Islamist attack on America. He investigates the hijacker's motives, particularly those of Mohammed Atta, their leader, a personality troubled like many of his contemporaries by the clash between 'Islamic' and 'Western' values, including unresolved conflicts over gender and sexuality. He also shows that it would be a mistake to treat these people as medieval fanatics: their attitude to modernity is dangerous and ambivalent.


And in a challenging analysis, the author exposes the crucial importance of the Saudi connection, the massive sponsorship of 'fundamentalism' by an authoritarian tribal regime cynically armed and tolerated for its oil. Whilst rejecting the thesis that the Western and Islamic worlds are heading inevitably for a clash between 'civilizations', he concludes by suggesting that, if left unchecked, pressures from religious fundamentalists in America and Israel, added to the religious forces at work in the Muslim world, might well conspire to produce just such an outcome.

*Praise for Malise Ruthven's Islam in the World:*

**'This is an unusual book, full of original ideas and judgements based upon wide reading and personal observation. Its most valuable feature is its attempt to show the relationship between the modern doctrines of Islam and the ways in which Muslims live in the modern world'** Albert Hourani, author of *A History of the*

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