Family ties

The Muhammad Bin Laden Visiting Fellow at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, Professor Dale Eickelman, explains why he is happy that his academic work is associated with the Bin Laden family.

Dale F. Eickelman

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In mid-October I gave my first public talk at Oxford University, where I am currently the Muhammad Bin Ladin Visiting Fellow at Oxford's Centre for Islamic Studies.

Common to such occasions, I provided the person who introduced me with some appropriate biographical details. He mentioned a few of my books and academic details, but left out my current Bin Ladin title. As soon as I rose to speak, I filled in the gap. It was a small episode, but I didn't want to bury the fellowship's name under a rug. Hiding the fellowship's title would imply guilt by association and dishonour the memory of Muhammad bin Ladin, the Saudi construction magnate who died in 1968.

One of his other 52 siblings established the fellowship seven years ago in memory of their father. Far from being complicit in Osama bin Ladin's terrorism, the Bin Ladin family broke with Osama in the early 1990s. In the United States and Britain, we don't hold extended families responsible for the actions of one of their members.

I have never met any member of the Bin Ladin family, nor have I corresponded with them. However, from what has been written about them, many of Osama's brothers and sisters are fluent in English as well as Arabic - hardly surprising since many studied in Europe and the US - and they appear as comfortable in the west as in the east, readily crossing the rapidly dissolving imagined frontiers between the two. The family's donations to furthering Islamic studies in the west, both here at Oxford and at two US institutions, have the same goal. It's one that I share.

At Dartmouth, I'm the Ralph and Richard Lazarus Professor of anthropology and human relations. That means my name is linked with the founder and former CEO of Bloomingdale's. I never met him (although I do correspond occasionally with some members of the Lazarus family), nor have I ever been asked how funds derived from Bloomingdale's influence my work. I do, however, write on changing ideas and practices of religious and political authority in the Muslim world. In fact, the working title of the book I'm completing is optimistically called Inside the Islamic Reformation.

I've been especially concerned with how rising levels of education throughout much of the Muslim world and the proliferation of new media (satellite television, internet, and fax machines) creates new forms of association, challenging conventional patterns of religious and political authority. That topic does cut closer to the Bin Ladin name, and extremism and terror in the name of religion is an integral part of the topic. Unfortunately, we live in a world where extremist acts by a few zealots, in the name of religion or secular causes, can wreak havoc on large numbers of people. However, it's also an opportunity to remind audiences, in person and in print, of some of the basic tenets of responsibility and to avoid stereotyping.

My current location at Oxford - and conversations over the past month with colleagues in Iran, Japan, and the Arab world - offer some perspective on how September 11 influences their teaching. One colleague in an Arab Gulf state teaches a course on the cultural contexts of health and healing. He points out that standard topics, such as child neglect, take on a new meaning. The standard textbooks invoke western examples. He is inspired to look instead at examples from his own society. He writes that even a seemingly neutral topic, such as diseases of development, encourages new

questions: Will Arabs continue to invest their capital primarily in the west, or will they finally "limit their capital flight" to more risky under developed economies? In general, however, harder questions emerge in private discussions and not in lecture theatres. In Iran for a small conference on "political Islam" in late October, Iranian academic colleagues pointedly sought to emphasise their distinct academic voice. Their main concern was to rebuild ties with their foreign counterparts, and they pointedly avoided the calls of a few Iranians, none of whom remained for the core of the conference, to speak of nothing but the current situation in Afghanistan. The conference was planned well before the events of September 11.

I return to regular teaching in the US in January. Courses in Arabic and on Islam and the Middle East are heavily enrolled. My own course, thought and change in the Middle East and Central Asia, will probably see an upsurge in enrolment. I wrote one of the basic texts in the field, a book with a bread and butter title, The Middle East: An Anthropological Approach. The most recent edition, the fourth, just appeared, but no one could have anticipated the events of the September bombings and the war in Afghanistan. For the first time, I'll make heavy use of videos, showing parts of the Bin Ladin "recruitment" video that surfaced last summer, as well as the more recent videos and interviews. I regret to say some of the tapes are well made for their intended audiences. I always stress the complexities and competing voices in the Muslim world. This time around, my audience will not regard Islam as somehow distant and exotic.

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