

Chilling document hints at 'Armageddon'

A letter, handwritten in Arabic and possibly the work of one of the September 11 hijackers, raises many puzzling questions, writes Brian Whitaker

By Brian Whitaker

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Four sides of paper, handwritten in Arabic, appeared on the FBI's website last Friday. The words are thought to have been written by one of the September 11 hijackers, possibly by Mohammed Atta whom the FBI now regards as a central figure in the attacks.

The script, which slopes regularly to the left, is tight and controlled - suggesting a writer with a strong sense of discipline - but every now and then a word ends in a sweepingly dramatic flourish.

At first glance it's a little reminiscent of the rambling letters newspapers occasionally received in English from people who describe how some vast conspiracy involving the royal family, freemasons and creatures from outer space has made their life a misery.

The FBI's website makes no comment on the document beyond a headline saying "Hijack letter found at three locations".

Arrows indicate that copies were found in the wreckage of Flight 93 which crashed in Pennsylvania, in a vehicle left at Dulles airport by a hijacker whose plane hit the Pentagon, and in Mohammed Atta's suitcase, which somehow failed to be loaded onto the plane that hit the north tower of the World Trade Centre.

The FBI is very pleased with these finds because they are clear evidence - of the sort that would convince a jury - that the hijackers on at least three of the four planes were connected. The finds are certainly very fortunate, though some might think them a little too fortunate.

At present, the FBI is saying nothing in public about the contents of the document - wisely, perhaps, since investigators originally described it as a suicide note, which it is not.

Nor has the FBI issued an English translation. This, again, is a sensible precaution in the light of previous translation gaffes by the American authorities. Remember the fuss when US investigators into the 1999 Egyptair crash announced that the co-pilot had uttered a "suicide prayer" which turned out to be nothing of the kind.

The FBI, incidentally, is desperately short of Arabic, Farsi and Pashto translators for its investigation and is offering up to \$38 (£25) an hour (applicants must be US citizens and willing to take a lie-detector test). Inclusion of the Farsi language suggests the FBI may be looking at Iranian as well as Arab and Afghan connections.

In the absence of an official translation of the document, newspapers have come up with their own versions, but many of the juicy snippets published over the last few days either do not appear at all in the Arabic version on the FBI website or bear only a passing resemblance to what is written there.

The only complete translation that I know of, which also seems to be reasonably accurate, is on the Los Angeles Times website (see link below). For anyone who wants an insight into the mentality of the hijackers, it is well worth reading in full.

The first thing to note about the document - so obvious that you can easily overlook it - is that it's almost totally unpolitical. There's one mention of "Western civilisations" but not a word about Israel, Palestine, global capitalism or any of the other issues that might be expected to concern terrorists.

Instead, the document is a guide to mental - or spiritual - preparation for the suicide attack, peppered with some bizarrely mundane advice, like what kind of socks to wear on the big day.

The guide is in three sections: the Last Night; the Second Stage (setting off from the airport to boarding the plane); and the Third Stage (boarding the plane to the moment of death).

The instructions for the Last Night - there are 16 altogether - are as follows.

1. Renew your covenant with God.
2. Know all aspects of the plan well and expect reaction and resistance from the enemy.

Instruction No 3 is to read the ninth sura (or chapter) of the Koran. This sura, usually known as al-Tawba (penitence) or al-Bara'at (immunity), is the only one among the 114 suras in the Koran which does not begin with the words:

"In the name of God, the compassionate, the merciful." Some have suggested that this is because of the stern injunctions it contains.

The sura relates to a specific situation that arose in year 8 of the Islamic era, when the prophet Mohammed was still alive and sections of the Koran were still being revealed.

That may seem a long time ago, but Muslims in general believe that everything in the Koran can be relevant to the present day. The salafi interpretation of Islam, which is popular in Yemen and parts of Saudi Arabia, and which seems to have been adopted by Osama bin Laden and his supporters, takes this idea a lot further.

Salafis seek to revert to what they regard as the purest form of Islam, based on a very literal interpretation of the Koran and copying the behaviour of the first three generations of Muslims.

It follows from this that events in the early years of Islam were very much alive in the minds of the hijackers - perhaps to the point where the events of year 8 became as much part of their own view of reality as the previous day's lesson in the flight simulator.

The ninth sura is mainly about conflict with idol-worshippers and unbelievers. It begins with a dispensation allowing Muslims to kill idol-worshippers, despite the existence of treaties, since the idol-worshippers had not kept their side of the bargain.

"When the sacred months have passed away, slay the idolaters wherever you find them, and take them captive and besiege them and lie in wait for them in every ambush, then if they repent and keep up prayer and pay the poor-rate, leave their way free to them; surely Allah is forgiving, merciful," reads the fifth verse. (It is worth noting that the idolaters of Mecca were given an opportunity to repent, unlike the occupants of the World Trade Centre and the hijacked planes.)

The sura also contains an important ruling which excluded idol-worshippers altogether from Mecca. At the time it signalled a triumph of religious principle over commerce, since the traders of Mecca were worried about losing business if the idol-worshippers were no longer allowed in.

Verse 28 reads: "O you who believe! The idolaters are nothing but unclean, so they shall not approach the Sacred Mosque after this year." This verse has been interpreted as providing religious grounds for opposing the presence of unbelievers (US forces, for example) in the Arabian peninsula and it is one of the foundations on which Bin Laden's whole political outlook is based.

About the time the sura was delivered, the Muslims, having consolidated their position in Arabia, were beginning to expand their empire beyond the peninsula, which brought them into conflict with Christians to the north - something that strikes a chord today among those who talk of a "clash of civilisations".

In one incident, a tiny band of Muslims confronted a huge army at M'utah in Syria. Despite the enormous odds against them - they were outnumbered 33-1 - the Muslims were not defeated. This idea, that a small number of people can make a great impact when supported by God, obviously appealed to the hijackers.

It is echoed elsewhere in the hijack document, which quotes another passage from the Koran, Sura III, verse 173. "Men say to them: 'A great army is gathering against you, so fear them,' but it only increased their faith. They said: 'God is our sufficiency ...'"

The ninth sura also refers to the Tabuk campaign - the last military action in which the prophet Mohammed personally took part. It severely rebukes those lukewarm Muslims who refused to take part and were unwilling to risk losing their wealth or sacrificing their lives for the sake of jihad.

There's a lot more that might be said about the ninth sura, but suffice it to say that - like the Book of Revelation in the New Testament - it has an obvious appeal to fringe elements and offers a good deal of scope for extreme interpretations.

What seems to emerge from the document released by the FBI, and from the hijackers' favourite passages in the Koran, is that they were more deeply engrossed in the early days of Islam than in the politics of the 21st century. In that respect they have a lot in common with the Armageddon cults that appear from time to time on the fringes of all religions.

There are a few other hints of cultish behaviour, too. Witnesses have described how, before the attacks, the hijackers usually moved about in pairs - as if each was watching the other, and always there to reassure him if doubts ever crept in.

As often with new disclosures, the FBI document has thrown up several additional mysteries.

A question that puzzles some academics who have read it is where, exactly, the hijackers stood in the spectrum of Islamic thought. One professor suggests that the numbered instructions for the last night resemble a Sufi rule for novices (Adab al-Salikin), and that the language is full of terminology from

mystical Islam. Bin Laden, so far as is known, has no interest in Sufism or Islamic mysticism, and Sufis are generally peaceful.

It is also clear that the four sides of writing on the FBI's website are not the whole document. The first page does not begin with the words "In the name of God", which is the way a devout Muslim would always begin such an important piece of writing.

The Washington Post seems to have had sight of at least one extra page, which would explain how it came to publish quotations which do not appear in the Arabic version released by the FBI.

Among these, presumably from the missing first page, it quotes the document as saying: "In the name of God, of myself and of my family ...", a formula that orthodox Muslims would regard as heretical.

The Washington Post also describes a doodle on the paper "of a small, arrowhead-like sword. Two circles entwine the shaft, which also has serpentine swirls drawn on to it. The doodle also resembles a key." It adds that the word "room" is written vertically in large letters at the end. None of these marks are visible on the pages released by the FBI.

All this raises some puzzling questions, and I hope to return to it in a future column. In the meantime, I would be interested to receive emails from any religious scholars or psychologists who can contribute further to the analysis of this strange and chilling document.