

# **THE SIEGE AT MECCA**

*A sourcebook for researchers*

**Declassified State Department Cables  
concerning the 1979 attack on the Grand Mosque**

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# THE SIEGE ON MECCA SOURCEBOOK

In 1979, several hundred Islamic militants seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, the holiest site in Islam. The event was jarring enough at the time, but its long-term consequences were nearly unimaginable.

Just months earlier, the Iranian Revolution had rocked the Muslim world. Although the regime created by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was Shi'ite, the birth of a new Islamic state stirred Sunnis to dreams of greater glory as well.

Against that backdrop, a small movement of radical Sunnis within Saudi Arabia began plotting a literally apocalyptic showdown.

Juhayman al-Utaybi led a band of militants according to an extreme theological strain that had come out of Egypt and mutated unpredictably. Utaybi had appointed himself as the herald to an Islamic messiah figure known as the *mahdi*. The concept of *mahdi* had originated among the Shi'as, but was subsequently co-opted by certain Sunni sects, albeit with substantial modifications and an inconsistent interpretation.

With anywhere between 300 and 600 followers in tow, Utaybi and his *mahdi*-designate (one Muhammad bin Abdullah) stormed the Grand Mosque on Nov. 20, 1979 -- the first day of the new millennium according to the Islamic calendar.

The band of militants intended to launch the apocalypse; the attack was designed to topple the Saudi government and meet certain prophetic requirements (as the militants imagined them) about the start of the "End Times." Although not in the way they intended, the militants were indeed a herald of things to come.

In real and direct ways, the militants at Mecca were precursors to al Qaeda. The theological justifications they offered for violence against the Saudi regime were strikingly similar to those later presented by Osama bin Laden. In fact, as the documents in this book reveal, bin Laden himself may have been linked to the group. Also revealed for the first time in these pages -- the link between the Mecca siege and an Egyptian extremist sect believed to have influenced Ayman Al-Zawahiri, whose standing in al Qaeda today is equal to that of bin Laden.

In 1979 (as in 2001), the Western mind was largely unprepared for this new brand of militant Islam. The documents in this book are cables from the State Department's Jeddah embassy -- a minute-by-minute account of the siege. They reveal the profound confusion and concern felt by the government's most experienced Middle Eastern diplomats.

From the first moments, in which virtually no information was available, rampant speculation broke out as to who was behind the attack, with initial suspicions pointing toward Iran or Communist South Yemen. As it turned out, the group was mostly

comprised of Saudis, with a strong representation from Egypt, Jordan, Somalia and other regions. Two Americans were members of the group and took part in the siege.

The first section of this book follows the two-week siege through agonizing days of uncertainty. The cables reveal how the Saudi government lied to the public and to the United States about the gravity of the situation and the status of the situation on the ground. The documents also reveal, for the first time, how the U.S. used American contractors working for the Saudi government to collect intelligence on the siege.

The second section of the book focuses on the investigation and aftermath of the attack, its political ramifications and its link to an Egyptian sect known as Takfir Wal Hijra, which has taken on a prominent role in the modern jihadist movement.

The documents herein were obtained from the State Department through the Freedom of Information Act. They are presented in roughly chronological order, with a general table of contents and minimal commentary.

I hope to follow this work with a comprehensive book and/or television documentary on the siege itself, using the documents as a base and expanding from my own reporting.

For now, however, I believe the priority is to make this material available as expeditiously as possible, given the increasing understanding among students of terrorism and jihadi culture of the importance of this historical event.

For updates on this material and news about the release of a companion volume, please visit my Web site [INTELWIRE.com](http://INTELWIRE.com).

--- *J.M. Berger*

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