



INTERNATIONAL YOUNG SCHOLARS JOURNAL OF LANGUAGES

Volume 8 (2) 2025

AN ANALYSIS OF THE *LETTER TO AMERICA* BY OSAMA BIN LADEN

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ABSTRACT

This research project explores the rhetorical strategies of Osama Bin Laden's communication with the Western world. The study discovers themes related to the letter and emphasises bin Laden's strategic use of vocabulary, word choices, and grammatical aspects to criticise U.S. policies, evoke emotions, and advocate for resistance against perceived injustices. Additionally, the analysis underscores the persuasive impact of Osama bin Laden's linguistic techniques in portraying the U.S. as corrupt and oppressive, justifying violent resistance. The study acknowledges potential limitations such as language mistranslation and suggests future research directions to address these challenges and enhance the understanding of Osama bin Laden's rhetorical strategies and ideological impact.

Keywords: Discourse analysis, *Letter to America*, Osama Bin Laden

INTRODUCTION

The world was once dismayed by the unexpected turn of events on the morning of 11 September 2001. The United States of America has experienced a series of devastating terrorist attacks that significantly altered its history in which terrorists hijacked four planes, using them as weapons against key American landmarks. These attacks resulted in the collapse of the World Trade Center buildings (WTC) and nearly 3,000 fatalities, causing widespread destruction and profound grief. This event was later characterised as “an unprecedented environmental assault

for lower Manhattan” (Nordgren et al., 2002 as cited in Klitzman & Freudenberg, 2003). The perpetrator of this horrific incident, Osama bin Laden, was well-known as the founder of the militant organisation Al-Qaeda and was the mastermind of numerous attacks on America and Western countries. Aligned with Al-Qaeda's goal to eradicate a corrupted regime and bigger enemy which is the Westerners, this notorious leader continuously advocates jihad, or holy war, against Western nations and their allies, based on his radical interpretation of Islam (Byman, 2015).

Following his continual radicalisation and terrorism, Bin Laden has written a lot of letters to the leaders of Saudi Arabia and the West including the *Letter to America* which was published in 2002. The letter was widely disseminated, including by The Observer, a British newspaper intended for Western audiences, but was considered a failure (Marshall, 2023). However, in the heat of the debate on the Palestine-Israel war, the letter once again resurfaced on social media platforms, especially on TikTok which has sparked another discussion on the relevance of the attack. Some users were seen to praise the content of this two-decade-old letter and the act was categorised as “supporting terrorism”, therefore was banned by TikTok (Dang & Shepardson, 2023). The letter outlines Osama bin Laden’s grievances against the United States, including U.S. foreign policies in the Middle East, the presence of American troops in Saudi Arabia, and support for Israel. The letter reflects his extremist ideology and aims to justify violent actions as a response to perceived injustices committed by the United States.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

From a thorough research, it can be found that there is a lack of study done to address any of Osama Bin Laden's letters’ content. However, the resurfaced issue of *Letter to America*, which has raised several questions about the relevance of the terrorist act by Osama Bin Laden on 9/11, presents an opportunity for further investigation of its content. The study of linguistics of his speech and manifesto is relevant, as it not only helps to simplify the intricacies of the world (Why Study Linguistics, n.d.) perceived by Bin Laden but also comprehends the lexical roles for him to communicate with his audiences. Analyzing themes and lexicals that are found in the letter is important because it helps us understand how they spread their ideas and incite violence. This understanding can help governments, security agencies, and researchers develop better strategies to prevent radicalization and counter harmful messages. Therefore, this

research is needed to break down the language used by extremists and improve efforts to combat terrorism and promote peace.

Research Objective

- To identify the themes of the main points presented in the letter.
- To identify and explain the lexical that is used to describe the themes presented in the letter.

Research Question

- What are the themes of the main points presented in the letter?
- What are the lexical and explanations that are used to describe the themes presented in the letter?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will highlight three urgent points which are hate speech, the relationship between hate speech and terrorism, and the study of linguistics in hate speech.

Hate Speech

More than usual, people tend to express their thoughts, beliefs, and feelings through language. This includes hatred, which tends to be more prevalent and intense in diverse communities where individuals from different backgrounds, such as social, religious, and political backgrounds, coexist (Rabab'ah et al., 2024). Hate speech is a complex and challenging phenomenon to identify its portion in a text. Its definition is not only broad but also lacks clear, discriminative features, making it difficult to determine what constitutes hate speech (Perera et al., 2023). Meanwhile, according to a study, hate speech is a phenomenon that affects communication and undermines multicultural society by disrupting intercultural engagement (Zamri et al., 2023). It is knowledge as a complex concept where no definition was precisely accepted universally. However, it is agreed upon that anything that qualifies as hate speech is highly context-dependent and varies according to levels of tolerance (Bollinger, 2016). Research conducted in 2020 on the terms that match the identifying traits of groups generally covered by legal definitions of hate speech such as antisemitic discourse, hate discourse, racist

discourse, and Islamophobic discourse (Paz et al., 2020) on the Web of Science resulted in approximately 1000 papers found on the said topics and were recorded highest in the USA. To clarify further, hate speech exists within the realm of public discourse around the world.

Relationship between Hate Speech and Terrorism

According to Voda (2022), hate speech itself is rooted in intolerance, dehumanising certain groups of people, and alarmingly, it can promote violence and hate crimes if it is left unchecked. Unlike an act of crime, hate crimes prioritize the perpetrator's intent to harm or intimidate based on perceived differences. These crimes target both the immediate victim and their broader community, aiming to instill fear and create division (Voda, 2022). It is also mentioned as a tool of argument distortion of targeted groups and unjustly blames others for political and social issues beyond their control. Hate speech can indeed fuel terrorism domestically (Piazza, 2020; Hailou, 2019) and globally, such as in the Global North and South (Dias & Mbasalaki, 2021), and it is boosted mainly by political figures around the world. According to Mills et al. (2015), hate speech and terrorism might be more closely related to each other rather than a distant cause of societal destruction.

The Study Of Linguistics In Hate Speech

There are not many linguistic studies done on hate speech, especially from political leaders worldwide, despite how grave its role is in stirring social dispute and disagreement. For instance, a study on offensive language was utilised by a NATO leader, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, and a representative of a European Union (EU) member state, and its result displays offensive discourse characteristics through context-dependent linguistic expressions (Karapetjana et al., 2023). Not only that, but a result of discourse analysis of Donald Trump's speech revealed that his speech was categorised as hate speech rather than free speech as he tried to incite his supporters to storm the US Capitol to challenge the certification of Biden's victory in the recent election (Hamed, 2022). These two pieces of research depict the severity of hate speech of people with the power to disrupt community peace.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a mixed qualitative research design, focusing on a thematic analysis and discourse analysis to analyse the *Letter to America* by Osama bin Laden based on the research questions. Thematic analysis is employed to address Research Question 1, while

discourse analysis, utilizing Coulthard's approaches, is applied to Research Question 2. The research paper adopted to employ Coulthard's approach is *Discourse Analysis Theory: A New Perspective in Analysis* (Rahim, 2019).

For Research Question 1, which focuses on identifying the themes of the main points presented in the letter, thematic analysis is used as the primary method. The analysis involves examining the text to extract implicit and explicit themes systematically based on the research question. The process begins with data selection, which consists solely of the *Letter to America* by Osama bin Laden. The letter contains 4 pages and was selected due to its significance in understanding the ideological motivations behind bin Laden's actions and rhetoric. Next is familiarization with the text, followed by generating initial codes that capture significant points of the data. The codes are then assigned to potential themes, which are reviewed and refined to ensure the accuracy of the data. After defining and naming the themes, a total of nine themes are identified as the key points of the letter, namely: i) Rapacity, ii) Corporate Control, iii) Corruption, iv) Political Strategy, v) Criticism of Leadership, vi) Citizen Responsibility, vii) Liberation for Occupied Lands, viii) Military Aggression, and ix) Retaliation.

For Research Question 2, which examines the lexical used to describe the themes of the letter, discourse analysis based on Coulthard's (1977) approaches is utilized. Coulthard's theory emphasizes contextual linguistics, language, and the context in which discourse occurs. Firstly, contextual linguistics involves analyzing the surrounding words and sentences of the letter to determine their meaning within the broader context. Secondly, the active use of language for specific purposes with grammatical structure is analyzed through language function. Lastly, the context is analyzed in terms of the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the letter.

RESULTS

Table 1

Research Question 1: What are the themes of the main points presented in the letter?

No.	Codes	Themes
1.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Ethical Degradation ● Corruption ● Economic Vulnerability 	Corporate Control

2.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deceptive Intention and accountability 	Corruption
3.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policy's Aim Manipulation 	Political strategy
4.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leader's Decision Making Leader's Fruitless Motion 	Criticism of Leadership
5.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advocate for Reformation 	Citizen's Responsibility
6.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognition of occupation Call for Justice and Restoration Resistance and Struggle 	Liberation for Occupied Land
7.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Justified resistance 	Military Aggression
8.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Retribution Vengeance 	Retaliation
9.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Negative Impact of Capital Control 	Rapacity

Table 2

Research Question 2: What are the explanations of the lexical that are used to describe the themes presented in the letter?

No.	Themes (Content)	Codes	Words (Context)
1.	Corporate Control	Ethical Degradation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Corporation</i> <i>"...devours humanity..."</i> <i>"...devoid the precepts of God's law (Shari'a)."</i>
		Corruption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Corruption</i> <i>"...Congress stands with corporations."</i> <i>"Corruption is deep-rooted now..."</i>
		Economic Vulnerability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"...endanger the United States economy..."</i> <i>"...formulate the policies..."</i>

2.	Corruption	Deceptive Intention and accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “...continue to support the oppressive Israelis...” ● “In response to pressures on your administration...” ● “...enormous financial capabilities.” ● “...not withdraw from Iraq.” ● “...not serve the US interest but it is in the interest of the large corporation.”
3.	Political strategy	Policy’s Aim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “ ...the policies of the new administration realizes that the change is tactical and not strategic...” ● “...it does not at all agree with the change you seek.” ● “...was successful in implicating you...they are necessary for your security...” ● “...according to the promise...” ● “...without realizing the victory.”
		Manipulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “ The course of the new policies of the present administration...” ● “ ...to safeguard the people’s interest...” ● “...is no more than a train operator.”
4.	Criticism of Leadership	Leader’s Decision Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “Six-day war that started by President Bush” ● “Six years have not been enough to finish it”: ● “Wise men should question” ● “Obama leave one-third of the soldiers” ● “Possibility of Obama’s ordering the return of the forces” ● “ ...been better for him had he disagreed with the ethics of the previous administration”
		Leader’s Fruitless Motion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● “They are quilting fruitless solutions” ● “ ...not of concern to us...”

5.	Citizen's Responsibility	Advocate for Reformation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"The way for change..."</i> • <i>"...and freeing yourselves..."</i> • <i>"...through undertaking a great revolution..."</i> • <i>"...for freedom."</i> • <i>"...can implement the change..."</i> • <i>"...include improvement of your economic situation..."</i> • <i>"...ensure your security,..."</i> • <i>"...helps him in making a rational decision..."</i> • <i>"For the American youth..."</i> • <i>"...to succeed..."</i> • <i>"...in this change..."</i> • <i>"...they need to relive..."</i> • <i>"They need to understand..."</i>
6.	Liberation for Occupied Land	Recognition of occupation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"Occupation" & Liberation"</i> • <i>"Palestine has been under occupation for decades..."</i> • <i>"Returns the Palestine land to us, all of it, from the sea to the river":</i> • <i>"Islamic land"</i>
		Call for Justice and Restoration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"Justice is the strongest army"</i> • <i>"...occupying our land..."</i> • <i>"...killing our brothers..."</i>
		Resistance and Struggle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"...shall not be seen..."</i> • <i>"...captive..."</i> • <i>"We will try..."</i> • <i>"...break its shackles."</i>
7.	Military Aggression	Justified resistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"threw hundreds of thousands of soldiers..."</i> • <i>"... formed an alliance..."</i> • <i>"to oppress us..."</i> • <i>"That was the reason for our response"</i>
8.	Retaliation	Retribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"...terminating his killer..."</i>
		Vengeance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"...shall pay..."</i> • <i>"...with the blood..."</i>
9.	Rapacity	Negative Impact of Capital Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"Control of capital"</i> • <i>"The overwhelming control of capital..."</i> • <i>"The enormity of capital control"</i>

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- *and it has a cycle... ”*
 - *“The devastating Jewish control of capital...”*
 - *“...**Enslave** you...”*
 - *“The **tyranny** of the control of capital by large companies...”*
 - *“...**harmed** your economy...”*
 - *“...capitalists **with greed** for gold...”*
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DISCUSSIONS

Research Question 1: What are the themes of the main points presented in the letter?

Topical Clusters

Concerning the first RQ1, nine themes across the letter were found, and all of them are closely related to the United States itself. For instance, criticism of leadership, corruption, political strategy, rapacity, and corporate control focuses on the severity of the cause and effect in the political domain of the American government. It is clarified that, when politicians or state members exploit their position to unlawfully gain resources for themselves or others, it blurs the line between the public and corporations (Cerqueti & Coppier, 2019). Therefore, Bin Laden highlighted these themes in his letter to emphasise the causal sequence of unethical political decisions toward citizens and the economy. Next, themes such as citizen’s responsibility, liberation of occupied land, military aggression, and retaliation were suggested countermeasures or efforts to overthrow the cause. It can be seen that Bin Laden employed a structural problem-solution speech by providing the cause, effect, and approach accordingly in his letter. His technique is commendable as not all texts are immediately comprehensible because knowledge and ideas are non-linear. Therefore, effective organisation of messages is crucial for clarity and textual organisation is vital in conveying complex and non-linear ideas clearly (Coulthard, 1977; Ratanakul, 2017).

Research Question 2: What is the vocabulary that is used to describe the themes in the letter and how words used can be associated with the ideology and content?

Linguistic Categories

To address RQ2, this research has divided the findings into two categories, which are the grammatical and vocabulary aspects.

Grammatical Aspect

Packard et al. (2023) reveal that the use of the **present tense** can make the speaker appear more certain and persuasive. Past tense indeed indicates a specific condition or experience at a particular time; however, present tense delivers an ongoing truth. It implies that the communicator is asserting the current reality of the information, which can make it more convincing. Throughout the letter, Bin Laden effectively used the present tense to address the cause and effect of underlying problems in the United States administration. For instance, to highlight the harmful corporate control, he used “*stands*” and “*deep-rooted*” in phrases like “*...Congress stands with corporations.*” and “*Corruption is deep-rooted now...*” emphasise the biased decisions and actions by the American government instead of being responsible as the man with power in the country. To further elaborate, Bin Laden also mentioned “*...formulate the policies...*” referring to the present autonomy of corporations in the American political area. Not only that, but Bin Laden also manipulates the present tense to underline some important arguments, such as the political strategy made by the administration by mentioning “*realizes*” and a verb to be “*is*” in “*...the policies of the new administration realizes that the change is tactical and not strategic...*”. It shows the certainty of Bin Laden on the ongoing issue and asserts ‘the harsh truth’ of the way things currently are.

Some verbs have a weaker impact, whereas others are more powerful in their function. In establishing a persuasive discourse, the insertion of **powerful verbs and vivid adjectives** can evoke emotions and inspire a specific call to action (Birt, 2024). For example, Bin Laden used strong negative verbs such as “*devoid,*” “*devours,*” and “*enslave,*” making the statement of effect made by Bin Laden more impactful. He further employed profound action words such as “*undertaking*”, “*succeed*” and “*shall pay*” to make his advocacy statement more gripping. Bin Laden also employed the strong adjective word “*enormous*” to convey the status of the corporation's financial abilities. He, too, particularly mentioned “*overwhelming*”, “*enormity*”

and “*devastating*” referring to the dreadful control of the capital and “*oppressive*” for the Israelis, indicating their hostility. This step of inserting strong adjectives is also necessary to impress and tempt addressees (Ebaid, 2018) into believing the fact that is being delivered by Bin Laden.

Furthermore, the utilisation of explicit denial by using “*not*” and “*no*” strengthens one’s authority in persuasion to sell their viewpoints (Sun & Crosthwaite, 2022). Therefore, to indicate negation of the administration’s action, Bin Laden used negative structures such as “*not withdraw*”, “*not serve*” and “*no more than a train operator*”. This usage firmed the reader that the administration could have done the alternative but did otherwise. This can further clarify the justification of corruption that crept within the government's course of action. **Negation** indeed allows writers to express strong certainty in their statement and reject any other possibility for an alternative, however, in certain cases, it is used primarily to recognise other perspectives (Jiang & Hyland, 2022). For instance, the usage of “*not...but*” in “*Be assured that we do not fight for mere killing but to stop the killing of our people.*” shows the possible option course of action that is permissible only if with a proper justification making the choice viable and not strictly forbidden. It has a total of 4 sentences where Bin Laden employed this type of negation to advocate awareness for American citizens of its responsibility for reformation, such as “*...not to free Iraq from Saddam Hussein but to free the White House...*”.

Vocabulary Aspect

In addition, it can be seen in the letter that Bin Laden used several words and phrases in **repetition**. According to Salkie (2006, as cited in Alek et al., 2020), in addition to enhancing coherence and cohesion in the text, word repetition can be a powerful tool for demonstrating to the audience why the repeated words, phrases, or sentences are important to the author's intent. The word “*administration*” was used frequently by Bin Laden to underscore his critique of the U.S. government and its policies. This can be concluded under the theme of criticism of leadership, as he questioned the actions and decisions of the U.S. leadership. Moreover, in a repetition of seven times, the word “*change*” mentioned by bin Laden reflects his call for a global shift away from Western dominance, in his effort to urge Muslims and oppressed groups to seek a new path. Furthermore, not only did Bin Laden repeat several words, but he also used repetition for a phrase such as “*The British Parliament sided with corporations, then against*

the interests," highlighting the corporate control in the country. This phrase was repeated two times by bin Laden to emphasize the severity of corporate control over the administration. This direct repetition illuminates implicit points mentioned in the letter, in addition to the word *"interest"* appearing eight times in the letter. As stated by Sigar & Saeed (2022), the recurring content serves as a foundation for understanding the newly presented content, hence, this repetition of the word *"interest"* indicates one of the main points bin Laden intends to deliver throughout the letter.

Besides, several **metaphors**, such as *"Justice is the strongest army, and security offers the best livelihood,"* can be found in the letter, implying that bin Laden viewed justice as a powerful force, likening it to a military force. The role of metaphor here can be used to explain and persuade (Thibodeau et al., 2019), as according to Hatati et al. (2021), people's thought processes can be structured through metaphor. In this context, bin Laden argues that upholding justice will guarantee more power and protection than using force or engaging in aggression. Another metaphor used by bin Laden is *"train operator,"* which suggests that he implies that the U.S. President is merely a functionary who follows pre-set routes provided by influential lobbyists, in this case, the White House, regardless of his or her objectives. Toward the end of the letter, bin Laden stated another metaphorical statement *"The United States shall pay for its arrogance with the blood of Christians and their funds,"* suggesting retaliation as a consequence of American actions while incorporating his conviction in the value and strength of justice attained by lawful means. The use of metaphors in the letter, according to Surip et al., (2021), is not only an indicator of aesthetic and rhetorical language, but is prevalent in language use in science, politics, religion, and literature. It is proven to help in understanding difficult subjects, effective communication, and the persuasion of others (Thibodeau et al., 2019).

Next, there is also the presence of words and phrases that carry **connotative meanings**. Connotative meanings add layers of subjective, emotional, or cultural associations that involve understanding the context and emotional responses of words, as these factors provide clues about the additional layers of meaning beyond their literal definitions (Zuhdah & Alfain, 2020).

The letter by Bin Laden predominantly employs **negative connotations** when referring to the Americans, particularly their administration directly and indirectly. There are five identified connotative meanings presented in the letter which are all negative. Firstly, Bin Laden refers to the Americans as *"capitalists with greed for black gold"*. The word *"greed"* connotes exploitation and the excessive focus on making money and gaining power. It implies that

American actions, particularly in economic and foreign policy, are driven by selfish motives and a relentless pursuit of profit, often at the expense of others. Next, the letter indirectly labels Americans as arrogant from the statement, *"The United States shall pay for its arrogance"*. This word choice carries strongly negative and critical connotations. It suggests that American leaders and their policies are perceived as exhibiting a sense of superiority and a description of American imperialism, which he believes marginalizes and oppresses others globally. Moreover, the letter also indirectly characterizes Americans as oppressive and tyrannical when he asserts, *"when Bush realized that your oppression and the tyranny against us were part of the reason for the attack."* This term suggests a systematic use of authority and power to impose harsh and unjust restrictions over others. It implies a regime that exercises authority in a way that disregards individual freedom, often causing hardship. Finally, the statement, *"corruption is deep-rooted now in all higher authorities"* indirectly labels Americans as corrupt which carries strongly negative meanings. It shows that American leaders and institutions are seen as fundamentally dishonest and unethical. The word *"corruption"* is used to criticize what he sees as a widespread problem in the American government implying that dishonesty and moral decay are present at all levels of authority. This portrayal strengthens his argument that American actions are driven by corrupt motives, further damaging their moral standing and legitimacy.

These negative terms used in the letter collectively portray a critical and unfavourable view of the United States and its leadership. According to a study by Jayanti et al., (2019), the use of connotation in language carries implications where it can stimulate readers' feelings and can evoke both negative and positive reactions in the readers. With this, the letter uses these negative words to highlight perceived abuses of power, economic exploitation and disregard for human rights. It aims to evoke strong negative emotions and moral outrage among readers towards the United States and its government. Overall, the deliberate choice of negative connotations also strengthens Bin Laden's message of resistance against what he sees as oppressive Western dominance and exploitation. It seeks to rally support for his cause, presenting himself as a defender against perceived American imperialism and injustice.

CONCLUSION

This paper analyzes Osama bin Laden's *Letter to America* identifying nine themes: corporate control, corruption, political strategy, leadership criticism, citizen responsibility, liberation for occupied lands, military aggression, retaliation and rapacity. The analysis reveals that Bin

Laden strategically uses vocabulary, word choices and grammatical aspects such as powerful verbs, vivid adjectives, present tense, negations, repetitions, metaphors and connotations to criticize U.S., policies and leadership, evoke strong emotions and advocate for resistance. These linguistic techniques enhance the persuasive impact of his arguments, painting the U.S. as corrupt and oppressive while justifying violent resistance as a necessary response to perceived injustices. This may be in aiming to provoke moral outrage and support for his cause, though different audiences might interpret this language variably, with supporters viewing it as a justified call to action and others as manipulative incitement to hatred and violence. One significant limitation of this study is the potential for language mistranslation, as the original letter was written in Arabic. Nuances and cultural connotations might be lost or altered in translation, affecting the accuracy and depth of the analysis. Additionally, the paper primarily relies on a qualitative approach, which might not capture the full complexity of the text's linguistic features. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating a bilingual analysis and comparing the original Arabic text with its translations to better understand the nuances and cultural implications. Quantitative methods could also be employed to systematically analyze the frequency and impact of specific linguistic features. Lastly, further studies could also explore how different cultural and political contexts influence the interpretation of Bin Laden's letter, providing a more comprehensive understanding of its rhetorical strategies and ideological impact.

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APPENDIX

1. The full text of *Letter to America*

“(Fully Translated) Page 1 In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful. From
Usama Bin Muhammad Bin Ladin to the Americ.” DNI.gov,

[https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20to%20the%20American%
20people.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ubl/english/Letter%20to%20the%20American%20people.pdf).