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Monday, 1 October, 2001, 18:47 GMT 19:47 UK

## Nigeria's firebrand Muslim leaders



Many northern states now operate under Islamic law

**By Dan Isaacs in Zaria, northern Nigeria**

His gold embossed calling card not only has a new telephone number on it, but also an e-mail address.

Ibraheem Zakzaky may well have a reputation as a firebrand Muslim preacher with a large and devoted following, but he also stays constantly in touch with world events.

"If we want a million people out on the streets on any issue we can do that," he says

This may be something of an exaggeration, and he has perhaps lost some of the zeal of his younger more militant days in the 1980s and 90s, but he still commands widespread support among the legions of impoverished Muslim youths in northern Nigeria.

“  
**It appears now as if the entire Muslim people are considered guilty, over one billion of them**  
”

**Ibraheem Zakzaky**

From his house in the dusty northern town of Zaria, he follows media coverage of the aftermath of the terror attacks on the United States via satellite on the BBC and CNN.

Every nuance of meaning, every word is absorbed and discussed.

### Terror attacks

He considers the attacks on America a crime, but the response of President Bush to be treading on very dangerous ground.

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The use of the word "crusade" was picked up as not simply insensitive, but a clear indication that America's retaliation for the attacks on 11 September is to be a war against islam, and not against terrorism.



It is only fairly recently that Zakzaky, leader of Nigeria's radical Islamic Movement, has been free to live without constant harassment by the authorities.

Ibraheem Zakzaky says he can mobilise huge numbers of people

The significance of his handing me a newly printed calling card at our meeting was that until a short while ago, he had been prevented from having a phone line.

Now, he not only has a working phone, but e-mail access too. He expressed his regret that his website was still under construction.

"Soon after the event we were all shocked and dismayed, because it appears now as if the entire Muslim people are considered guilty, over one billion of them," he says.

**For now the United States has the sympathy of Muslim people in this area**

**Ibraheem Zakzaky**

"This was a crime perpetrated by some individuals and justice demands that only those individuals that are responsible should be brought to book."

Ibraheem Zakzaky's comments are relevant not because they reflect the establishment view of Nigeria's traditional islamic leaders, but because they reflect a widely held view among Nigeria's poorer Muslims that in the coming confrontation led by America and its allies, they would show their support for Osama bin Laden, a man whose posters Zakzaky believes are now outselling those of Saddam Hussein.

"For now the United States has the sympathy of Muslim people in this area, but if the richest country decides to attack the poorest nation on earth, that would be another story," he warns.

"But if the American retaliation is anything like on the scale which is being currently talked about, then the protests in Nigeria could be strong".

But Zakzaky's voice is by no means the most radical in Nigeria. And as Zakzaky's rhetoric has softened over recent years, many of his followers have looked elsewhere for inspiration.

### Radical wing

Abubakar Mujahid has attempted to fill this gap. He broke away from his mentor a few years ago, and is now considered to lead a more radical Muslim faction in the north - known as the Ja'amutu Tajidmul Islami, The Movement for Islamic Revival.

He too has displeased the authorities sufficiently to have spent time in detention.

Mujahid lives in much more modest surroundings than does Zakzaky, and our meeting took place in the bare room of a village house, far from telephone or television.

His thick spectacles give the air of a bookish intellectual, but he too has a substantial following, and the tone of his words are harsh and uncompromising.



"Before we condemn this attack in America we have to see who carried it out, and then see their reasons. If you put a person in a corner then like a snake he may feel he has to strike back".

Abubakar Mujahid heads a more radical faction than his mentor

Any room for doubt in these words is quickly dispelled, as he continues by saying that "most of the people here are happy with the attacks because of what America stands for and what it does, in its attitude to the Palestinians, for example".

"America has yet to publish any evidence and if instead it is determined to go the cowboy way with two guns blazing to get Osama bin Laden dead or alive, it will definitely lead to a confrontation between America and the Islamic world," he says.

These are extremely sensitive issues for the authorities to deal with not only in Nigeria, but in any country with a substantial Muslim population.

Neither Ibraheem Zakzaky nor Abubakar Mujahid hold political office in Nigeria, and both

resolutely maintain their disdain for the power elite that rules Nigeria.

Neither is suggesting that Muslim anti-American sentiments in northern Nigeria will lead to major protests in the coming weeks.

But there is little doubt that the unswerving support for American military action expressed by Nigeria's leaders is being severely questioned by supporters of the country's populist Muslim preachers.

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