

Who Bombed the Embassies, And Why?

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

In the aftermath of the August 8, 1998, bombing of the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the United States has initiated investigation into who was responsible for the attacks, which wounded nearly 5,000 persons and killed 200, including 12 Americans. These bombings required extensive in-country infrastructure, logistical support and prior planning. Given the operational complexities of the bombings, it is likely that the individuals who perpetrated these attacks did not act alone. Support provided by states or an organized group was probably a key element in the success of the attack.

It is possible the attacks were motivated by African issues, such as the conflict between Hutu and Tutsi extremists. However, much of the current analysis of the bombings focuses on Middle East-oriented explanations. The discussion is not academic; Middle Eastern states, individuals, and organizations have motives and quite possibly the means to carry out the bombings.

Iran: Since the election of Muhammad Khatami as president, an internal power struggle has emerged in Iran between his "moderate" supporters, and the "conservatives," led by Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i. Recent overtures indicating a willingness by U.S. officials to discuss a "roadmap" to normal relations have alarmed the "conservatives." Launching a terrorist attack may have been an effort to scuttle the fledgling dialogue. There is precedent for this theory. In November 1979, the U.S. Embassy in Iran was seized days after U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski met Iran's Foreign Minister in Algiers. The hostage-takers aimed to torpedo any improvement in U.S.-Iranian relations.

Iranian involvement in the embassy bombings would presuppose one of three equally troubling scenarios:

- Khatami was aware of the bombing plot;
- Khamene'i knew of the plot, but Khatami was unaware;
- The bombing was a renegade operation, conceived and implemented without the knowledge of the most senior Iranian officials.

If Khatami knew of the operation, the U.S. assessment of Khatami is inaccurate (this scenario seems implausible); if

Khamene'i knew, but Khatami did not know, this would be a painful commentary on Khatami's power in the Iranian leadership hierarchy; if the bombing was a renegade operation, would the Iranian leadership pursue and punish the culprits?

> Iran, a leading suspect in the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing and the 1994 bombing of the Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires, has significant expertise in operations of this type. Furthermore, Iran has been active in East Africa; for instance, in September 1996, Iranian president Hashemi Rafsanjani visited Tanzania and Kenya. The Iranian Ambassador in Tanzania, Ali Saghalian, served in Argentina in 1994, and the cultural attache in Dar-es-Salaam was expelled from Jordan in 1993 for inciting radical Islamists.

Iraq: The motivations for Iraq to bomb the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania are perhaps the most transparent of any Middle Eastern state or actor. The July 27 issue of al-Thawrah implicitly threatened the United States with terrorism, stating: "It is common knowledge that the commission of acts of terror and subversion is not all that difficult." The claim of responsibility for the bombing by the "Islamic Army for the Liberation of Holy Places" indicated that the rationale for the attack was the American presence in Saudi Arabia. Since 1991, Iraq has been contained by the American presence in the Gulf -- a constant source of frustration for Saddam Husayn.

Given Iraq's growing confrontation with United Nations and UNSCOM, it appears that Saddam is once again determined to confront the U.S.. The Iraqi leader's penchant for brinkmanship games with the U.S. -- which has so far refused to respond -- has enhanced Saddam's regional prestige. For Iraq, the bombing of the American embassy in Nairobi could be perceived as a bonus. Kenya, currently on the UN Security Council, has repeatedly sided with the United States concerning international policy on Iraq.

> Iraq has the motive, but does it have the means? Aside from Iraq's close ties with Sudan, there is no known history of Iraqi clandestine activity in East Africa. In the past year, however, Iraqi diplomatic missions -- often staffed with members of the security services -- have visited Kenya to discuss UN issues.

Sudan: Sudan, which borders Kenya and is also on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism, has a history of launching terrorist attacks against the United States and U.S. interests abroad. Sudanese officials in New York were implicated in the plots to destroy the UN building and several tunnels in New York City following the World Trade Center bombing in 1993. In 1995, Sudanese terrorists attempted to assassinate Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; in 1996, a Sudanese operative attempted to assassinate Isaias Afwerki, president of Eritrea (the attempt was interdicted by the Sudanese Alliance Forces militia in eastern Sudan). However, it is not clear if Sudan has the operational wherewithal to implement complex terrorist operations abroad on the scale of the recent bombings.

The Sudanese government has reason to be angered with Washington. In December 1997, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met in Uganda with the Sudanese opposition forces. In effect, this meeting publicly sanctioned the opposition's efforts to topple the Islamist government in Khartoum. On the other hand, there seems to be a broad consensus in Sudan in favor of reconciliation with the U.S. government.

Osama bin Laden: Osama bin Laden, the Saudi terrorist financier, has been cited by American officials as a potential perpetrator of the embassy bombings. In February 1998, Bin Laden issued a fatwa on behalf of the "World Islamic Front Against Jews and Crusaders," exhorting Muslims to "kill the Americans and their allies, civilian and military...in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque [in Jerusalem], and the Holy Mosque [in Mecca] from their grip." The February 1998 Bin Laden fatwa reaffirmed Bin Laden's intentions to attack Americans. It was not the first time he had urged or supported the killing of Americans. Bin Laden is suspected of being behind the killings of 19 Americans in Somalia in 1992. Also, Bin Laden's priority has been to end the American presence in Saudi Arabia, which he reportedly believes defiles and profanes the Islamic holy sites in

Mecca and Medina. The name of the organization that claimed responsibility seems inspired by a similar goal.

> Bin Laden had extensive business interests in Africa, and particularly in Sudan, where he resided from 1991 to 1994. It is believed that he currently has some ties in East Africa; however, Bin Laden's ability to carry out such a coordinated operation is unclear.

Less Likely Middle East Scenarios: Libya and Syria are the two other Middle Eastern countries on the State Department's terrorism list. Although both states have, in the past, perceived terrorism against U.S. targets to be in their national interest, it would be difficult to explain Syrian and Libyan rationale for participating in this particular attack. Syrian-American relations have witnessed steady improvement since 1993. U.S. Secretaries of State Christopher and Albright have, since 1993, visited Syria on numerous occasions to meet with President Asad. In 1997, the U.S. removed Syria from the list of major drug producing and drug transit countries. Libyan-American relations have not seen a similar dramatic improvement. However, in recent years, U.S.-Libyan tensions have subsided, as Libya has started to emerge from its international isolation. With the "compromise" accepted by the Europeans and perhaps by Washington to try the Libyan-held Lockerbie suspects in Europe, the Libyans may see a light at the end of the sanctions tunnel. As for the means to carry out a bombing, Syria is not thought to have much of a presence in the area. In the 1980s, Libya was extensively involved in East Africa, but its regional ties are believed to have atrophied.

The Egyptian Islamic Jihad has also been mentioned by the media as a possible culprit in the bombings. According to this explanation, the United States aroused the ire of the Islamic Jihad by persuading the Albanian government to extradite three wanted Islamic Jihad terrorists to Egypt for execution in July 1998. While the Albanian explanation does explain a motivation for the attack, it seems unlikely given the complexity of the embassy operation that a few weeks of planning and preparation would be sufficient lead time.

Conclusion: This review of potential Middle East perpetrators is neither exclusive nor exhaustive. Likewise, it should be noted that terrorism is often a collaborative effort, involving one or more states and actors. Iranian complicity in these embassy bombings would not necessarily preclude Iraqi or Sudanese involvement.

David Schenker recently joined The Washington Institute as a research fellow specializing in Arab politics.

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