

# Terrorism, al-Qaeda, and the Muslim World

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Jul 10, 2003

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

On September 11, 2001, I was giving a lecture at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. My lecture was on the lessons of peacemaking in the Middle East. At the conclusion of the lecture, my hosts informed those assembled that two planes had been flown into the World Trade Towers and another had been crashed into the Pentagon -- and all the buildings were burning. Like everyone there, I was stunned. My questions were no different than anyone else's: How could this have happened? How could that many planes be hijacked at the same time? How many conspirators must have been involved and for how long had they been living here among us to pull off such a plan? How could we have been so catastrophically surprised?

The one thing I did not question was the Middle East connection. I knew instinctively there was such a connection. I knew it because the terrorists had attacked the very symbols of American power, influence, and affluence. I knew it because Middle Eastern terrorists, infused with a radical Islamic impulse toward martyrdom, were the ones most likely to be driven to suicidal attacks of such a scale. And, I knew it because the terrorist forces in the Middle East had been bred to believe that the U.S. was the source of evil, contaminating their faith, destroying their culture with materialism, "propping up" corrupt and oppressive regimes, and supporting the intruder, the Israelis, in their midst.

In the days after September 11, our desire as Americans to search for rational explanations of an irrational, unthinkable horrific act led some inevitably to suggest that the root cause must be the absence of peace in the Middle East. If only there was peace in the Middle East, they seemed to be saying, this would not have happened.

But September 11 did not happen because of the absence of Middle East peace. Osama Bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network had been planning this attack even when it looked like we were about to succeed in producing a solution to the core of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Indeed, had we succeeded either at Camp David or at the end of 2000 with the Clinton ideas in resolving the existential conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, Osama Bin Laden and the al-Qaeda terrorists would have been even more determined to carry out the attack.

Theirs was an attack on us; on civilization and modernity itself; on our support for the Saudi and Egyptian regimes -- regimes they believe betray Islam. They reject Israel's existence; for them, the very concept of peace with Israel is an anathema. To be sure, the absence of peace and the intifada (and its images of Palestinian kids taking on Israeli tanks) soured the climate in the area and created a more fertile breeding ground for anger and resentment -- the

stock in trade of Osama Bin Laden and the terrorist networks.

Unfortunately, anger, resentment, and frustration have deep roots in the psychology of the Middle East. Bin Laden, in an early videotape after September 11, spoke of eighty years of humiliation, implicitly referring to the broken promises and the imposition of colonial regimes and borders after World War I. The psychic landscape of the Arab Middle East is shaped by an overwhelming sense of betrayal and humiliation principally by the West. There is an abiding sense of rights and destiny denied; of being constantly victimized; of being entitled, but never responsible; all these perceptions contribute to a mindset that makes defiance of the powerful attractive to a broader audience that feels alienated and powerless. This is the appeal of Bin Laden -- and Saddam Husayn before him, and Khomeini before him, and Qadhafi before him, and Nasser before him.

The litany of those who have sought to be the hero, who have sought to play on the desire to defy the powerful, is a reminder that all those who have sought this role -- in Nasser's words, "the role in search of a hero" -- have failed. They have failed because they played only on resentment. Their efforts were geared toward destruction, not construction. In the end, leaders must produce, not only defy.

The weakness of current leaders in the Middle East is that power is usually an end in itself. They seek to hold it, not use it for good. Their peoples fall farther and farther behind. The revolution in global communications and finance tell their publics what everyone else has and what they lack. They lack opportunity for advancement, for participation, and for expression of their grievances. They know who holds power and who benefits from it. They are allowed to express their frustration and anger only with regard to Israel and the United States, not against their governments. And yet, the expression of frustration yields no result because Arab governments, while paying lip service to the cause of Palestine, have done very little actually to support it.

Peace in the Middle East would remove one source of real grievance. But it would not be a panacea. The sources of domestic instability would remain. The socioeconomic failings would have to be addressed. Political participation would have to be broadened beyond narrow elites. The requirements of modernity would have to be embraced, not resisted. In a word, responsibility would have to be assumed.

Some Arab observers recognized this in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. In an article entitled "It's Not All America's Fault," Hazem Saghiyeh wrote that it was up to the Muslim world to rethink "its relation to modernity," to Muslim and Arab leaders to resolve "the question of political legitimacy," and to Arab intellectuals to "encourage change," not continue to fail "in that role." Saghiyeh's plea was for the Arab world to look to itself for answers and not simply blame others for all the wrongs.

Saghiyeh is not alone. Last year, a number of Arab intellectuals drafted the Arab Human Development Report, offering an assessment of why the Arab world has lagged behind the rest of the world in the quest for modernity. After the demise of Saddam Husayn's regime and the collapse of Baghdad in the war, other reformers, like Shafeeq Ghabra and Hala Mustapha, have addressed the ills that plague Arab regimes. Their recommendations should read like ours for addressing what is wrong in the area: introduce a rule of law; develop an independent judiciary; fight corruption; foster transparency and accountability; promote tolerance; support womens' rights; and emphasize responsibility.

None of this can emerge overnight. All of this is necessary to create the basis for building governments that can be more representative of their societies and more decent toward their publics. Democracy can emerge from an environment in which civil society and institutions are developed from within, not imposed from without.

Why do I mention this in testifying before the 9-11 Commission? For one thing, it is essential for understanding the roots of hostility toward us that terrorists exploit. Anger toward the United States in the Middle East preceded September 11 and, judging by extensive polling, it has, if anything, worsened since that time. I don't subscribe to the

view that there is only one cause, but I do believe the perception of an American double standard certainly contributes to hostility toward us. Our support of Israel is an easy handle for some to explain the double standard. But there is another factor that should not be underestimated in this regard: the widespread view throughout the Arab and Islamic world that we use democracy as a weapon against those regimes we don't like, but never against those regimes that we do like.

It is this perception that we support regimes that serve our interests, even while they oppress their peoples, that fosters deep resentment toward us. The answer is not suddenly to withdraw our support from important U.S. friends like Saudi Arabia and Egypt. But we do need to be clearer with all our friends in the area that we stand for certain values, that those Arab liberals/reformers that embody these values will have our support, and that we will not be silent when they are suppressed.

Acting in this way would begin to address the issue of double standards, and, as importantly, create an environment in which reformers would stand a better chance of having an impact in the region. If we cannot begin to defuse the anger at us -- as well as the alienation from the local regimes -- there will continue to be a rich pool of recruits for Bin Ladenism.

One critical lesson is that how local regimes are dealing with the need for change is no longer strictly their concern alone. It will affect our security as well. We have a stake in how they treat their people, and whether they are fostering a sense that change is possible. Given the demographics of countries like Saudi Arabia, where 75 percent of the population is under the age of twenty-five, it is precisely the need to demonstrate that change is possible that is so important. A youthful population that is increasingly alienated can be transformed not by dramatic promises but by demonstrations of change and by proof that inclusion is possible. In the struggle going on between the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia in favor of reform and members of the Royal Family who oppose it, the U.S. should not be neutral.

None of this suggests that we should be focused only on soft forms of power in combating the terror that produced September 11. On the contrary, for Bin Laden and his organization, there is only a military answer. They understand only power -- and many who might otherwise be attracted to someone who defies the West must see that Bin Laden's philosophy produces only defeat and further humiliation.

But ultimately the war on terror can succeed not through military or intelligence or law enforcement means alone. As important as they are, as important as it is to cut off the financial flows of terror groups -- and their safe havens -- it is also critical to try to delegitimize what they represent. So long as terror is seen as a legitimate instrument for pursuing a cause, we will not win this battle. So long as violence against Israeli civilians is seen as a form of resistance and not terror -- and suicide bombers are glorified as martyrs -- we stand little chance of delegitimizing it in the Middle East or elsewhere. If terror is legitimate for a cause in one part of the world, it will be legitimate elsewhere.

In the end, the struggle against terror and the philosophy that produced September 11 must employ all the instruments available to us. We must employ hard power and soft power. We must defeat the groups and their leaders when necessary and possible. We must enlist others -- including political and religious leaders in the Middle East -- in discrediting the use of terror in any circumstances. We must try to deal with -- at a minimum defuse -- the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly given its resonance in the area and its use as a rallying point for those who embrace terror. We must stand for our values and promote far greater inclusion in the political process in states identified as our friends in the Middle East.

Creating hope is the best antidote to the anger and frustration that the Bin Ladens of the world prey upon. And, we must create models of success to prove that there is a different pathway -- and that it works. In this sense, we have an enormous stake in demonstrating that we actually have liberated Iraqis and helped them produce a better life for

themselves and a political and economic future that they own. Ultimately, it is the power of our example as much as our military power that will determine the outcome of this war.

Policy #773

---

## RECOMMENDED

---

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

### TOPICS

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

