

# The State of Denial

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

**W**ell into the second year of a global war on terrorism, key Arab journalists and intellectuals continue to whitewash Middle Eastern terrorism. In effect, there currently exists a pan-Arab state of denial.

The shallow nature of America's anti-terror partnerships in the Middle East is only partly a result of the State Department's ineffectual public-diplomacy campaign. Indeed, no information campaign can stand a chance so long as the region's hearts and minds continue to be poisoned by a media concerned less with addressing the Arab world's ills than with spinning conspiracy theories and (to borrow a term from Fouad Ajami) "endless escapes" to explain those ills away.

The Arab media deny most of the terrorist threat facing the world today, and excuse the rest. For example, in the wake of a Hamas suicide bombing in Jerusalem on November 21, 2002, several Egyptian newspaper editorials hailed the suicide attack as a "valiant, courageous operation" and "most honorable mission" (Al-Gumhuriyya, 11/22/02), and described the noncombatant, civilian victims as "terrorists" (Al-Akhbar, 11/22/02).

We can hardly expect the support of the Arab masses in the war on terror when their most respected journalists and intellectuals are apologists for terrorism. The Arab public readily accepts such apologetics and blame-shifting as fact, hungrily consuming them so long as the blame can be shifted elsewhere, and Arabs are not forced to take any responsibility for either the current state of affairs or the radicalism it fosters.

Regimes play on this rubber-and-glue mentality, molding their counterterrorism activities to suit their particular interests. Specifically, they cooperate in the war on terrorism only to the extent that the war coincides with their own interest in suppressing those elements threatening the ruling regime. Syria, therefore, provides limited cooperation targeting radical Sunni elements threatening the minority Alawite regime, and Yemen is forthcoming so long as America provides weapons and training to curb unruly tribal elements threatening Sanaa's central authority.

The prime example of this state of denial and intellectual atrophy is Jihad al-Khazen, an outspoken apologist for Middle Eastern terrorist groups like Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah and one of the region's most prominent editorialists. In fact, al-Khazen is not only considered the region's Tom Friedman, he is a senior editor for al-Hayat, the paper widely regarded as the New York Times of the Arab world. His prominence has gained him considerable prestige, including membership on the board of advisers to Georgetown University's Center for Contemporary Arab

Studies. With people like this feeding the Mideastern denial frenzy, it's no wonder the Arab street has responded with such hostility to Western efforts to expose international terrorist activities, even after September 11.

Jihad al-Khazen has now written three editorials in response to articles I've written about Middle Eastern terrorist groups. Would that he had taken issue with the substance of those articles, rather than merely dismissing my detailed analysis. Indeed, for denialists like al-Khazen there is simply no need to offer a substantive critique or counterargument to positions with which they disagree; for the Arab press, whitewashing terrorism requires no more than making personal attacks on one's opponents and then spreading a fresh layer of conspiratorial conclusions.

Still, the best example of al-Khazen's whitewashing of terrorism can be found in his assertion that the Damascus offices of Islamic Jihad could not possibly be involved in the group's terror attacks because -- brace yourself -- the group's leader told him so. That's right, Ramadan Shallah, the Damascus-based leader of Islamic Jihad, told him so. But we're to take Shallah, and by extension al-Khazen, at his word because al-Khazen "consider[s] Dr. Ramadan Shallah a personal friend."

Al-Khazen is a perfect example of the widespread denial in the Arab world, where there is no need to accept responsibility or institute change because all wrongs must be the fault of others. Figures like al-Khazen illustrate perfectly why the United States is not getting the kind of support it needs from the Middle East in the war on terrorism. Moreover, as an Arab Christian, al-Khazen can't even hide behind Islamism to justify his denial.

At minimum, our government should bar al-Khazen and those like him from entering the U.S., where the sponsorship of Georgetown and other American institutions continue to burnish their credentials and enhance their prestige. Under the USA Patriot Act, the U.S. can now exclude people who use their "prominence to endorse terrorist activity" or have "been associated with a terrorist organization" from entering the country. Al-Khazen brazenly endorses terrorism by Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad, and opposes a peaceful two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By his own admission, Ramadan Shallah the head of Islamic Jihad, and himself a Specially Designated Terrorist is a "personal friend."

The U.S. should not allow Arab elites to poison the Middle East with apologetics for terrorism and baseless, anti-American tirades. It's time to put an end to the mentality of denial in the Arab world. ❖

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