

# Keeping al-Qaeda Out of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Dec 3, 2002



## Brief Analysis

Initial suspicions, select intelligence reports, and growing evidence have indicated that al-Qaeda played a role in Thursday's attacks on an Israeli-owned hotel and airliner in Mombasa, Kenya. If this evidence proves accurate, the attacks signal a shift in al-Qaeda's choice of targets and demonstrate a new danger to immediate U.S. interests in the Middle East. After almost a year of silence, Osama bin Laden (or someone speaking in his name) has resurfaced with a revised political agenda meant to mobilize the Arab and Muslim worlds against the United States. Through two recent communications -- a November 12 statement and a less publicized "Letter to the American People" distributed on the internet and translated by the British Observer on November 24 -- al-Qaeda has made the Palestinian issue the new focal point of its allegations against the United States.

## Background

In two previous fatwas (religious rulings) -- the 1996 "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places" and the 1998 "Declaration of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders" -- bin Laden emphasized that the presence of U.S. soldiers in Saudi Arabia, the home of Islam's two holiest places, was the greatest affront perpetrated by the United States against the Muslim people, followed by the continued killing of Muslims in Iraq, and then by the crimes against Muslims in Palestine. In the 1998 fatwa, he stated, "Since God laid down the Arabian peninsula . . . no calamity has ever befallen it" that could compare with its occupation by American forces. In interviews as well, bin Laden focused on the U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia as its greatest transgression against Muslims and made clear that U.S. support of local regimes -- considered heretical -- was unacceptable.

In televised messages following the September 11, 2001, attacks, however, al-Qaeda's platform was altered in an attempt to garner greater support for the organization in the Arab and Muslim worlds and to depict it as an army of warriors defending Islam. For example, al-Qaeda's leadership prioritized the Palestinian issue; in an October 2001, statement, the infamous killing of Muhammad al-Durrah, a Palestinian child, was mentioned before criticism of the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, in a November 2001, statement, al-Qaeda broadened the scope of its message when bin Laden cited other places where atrocities were inflicted on Muslims (e.g., Bosnia, Chechnya, East Timor, the Philippines, Sudan, and Somalia).

## A Revised Platform

With the quick fall of the Taliban and the disappearance of bin Laden, al-Qaeda's brief campaign to broaden its appeal failed. Yet, the two most recent communications -- followed by the Mombasa attacks -- mark a renewed attempt to capitalize on anti-American sentiment and to gain popular support for the organization by altering its message. For example, given bin Laden's Saudi origins and his past emphasis on the Muslim holy places in Saudi Arabia, one notes with amazement that the country is not named even once in the November 12 and November 24 statements. In contrast, the words "Palestine" and "Palestinian" are mentioned a total of sixteen times in the November 24 letter, while a derivation of the word "Jew" is mentioned eleven times, "Israel" is named nine times, and even "Torah" and "Sharon" appear three and two times, respectively. Direct American aggression or support for

anti-Muslim action in Somalia, Chechnya, Kashmir, and even Lebanon are all specifically cited in this letter, as are America's responsibility for the spread of AIDS, American maltreatment of women, American racism against nonwhites, and the American refusal to sign the Kyoto agreement. Yet, only nonexplicit reference is made to the "corrupt" Middle Eastern governments that prevent the implementation of shari'a (Islamic law), steal their people's wealth, and betray the Palestinian cause. In the early and mid-1990s, these governments were al-Qaeda's primary target, while U.S. interests were only a secondary target due to Washington's support for these regimes.

Even as al-Qaeda attempts to exploit different sources of anti-Americanism, the Palestinian issue is the focus of the organization's grievances in its most recent documents and should therefore be the greatest source of concern for U.S. policymakers. For example, the massacre of Palestinians receives high mention in the November 12 statement, second only to a brief reference to the murder of Iraqi children. Moreover, the November 24 letter cites the Palestinian issue first when listing al-Qaeda's reasons for fighting the American people. The letter also claims that the Jewish occupation of Palestine "overflow[s] with oppression, tyranny, crimes, killing, expulsion, destruction, and devastation" and that "the creation of Israel is a crime which must be erased." In fact, after rhetorically asking why New York and Washington were attacked on September 11, the letter immediately makes reference to Ariel Sharon, implying that retribution for Israeli aggression was central to the attacks in America. This new emphasis on the Palestinian issue corresponds not only with the Mombasa attack, but also with the targeting of German tourists in a Tunisian synagogue in April.

Al-Qaeda's focus on the Palestinian issue is a tactical maneuver to win Arab and Muslim solidarity and sympathy. The November 24 letter bluntly states, "You must know that the Palestinians do not cry alone; their women are not widowed alone; their sons are not orphaned alone." The fate of the Palestinian people is one of the most emotionally charged issues in the Middle East, and U.S. policy on this score is a great source of anti-American sentiment in the region. Neither American, Israeli, nor Palestinian interests would be served if al-Qaeda and bin Laden (if he is indeed still alive) assumed the role of Palestinian heroes. At a time of increasing and unwelcome American involvement in the region, an alliance between radical Islamic groups such as al-Qaeda and populaces that largely disapprove of U.S. support for Israel would be dangerous to U.S. interests. A popular linking of al-Qaeda to the Palestinian cause would make regional governments' cooperation in the war on terrorism -- and a potential war with Iraq -- more unpopular, less reliable, and even further hostage to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. In addition, allowing al-Qaeda to drag the Palestinian cause back into the arena of international terrorism would cripple any potential for Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking along the lines of the U.S. roadmap.

#### Policy Recommendation

With the disarmament of Iraq and the slated proposal of the Israeli-Palestinian roadmap on the immediate agenda, the Bush administration cannot allow al-Qaeda to gain popular support by capitalizing on widespread pro-Palestinian sympathies in the Middle East. The repeated characterization that bin Laden "hates Americans and all freedom-loving people" is not a suitable antidote to this problem. Rather, the administration and its diplomatic corps need to present the more sophisticated and accurate argument that bin Laden and al-Qaeda want to destroy not only Israel, but all of the region's regimes, and that they target U.S. citizens and interests because of U.S. support for some of these governments. Even a future Palestinian state would not be exempt from this doctrine. Bin Laden's minions seek to create an Islamic state ruled by Islamic law, without national boundaries, eventually encompassing all of the Muslim world. Washington should launch a campaign elucidating these very goals as part of the battle to win the hearts and minds of Arabs and Muslims and to confront al-Qaeda's focus on the Palestinian issue. Bin Laden's verbose statements and intentions are in the public record in Arabic and English, and the Taliban's Afghanistan is still a vivid memory in the region. The Bush administration should work to publicize al-Qaeda's real intentions to the right audience.

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