

Bin Laden's Terrorism Isn't about the Palestinians

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In 1990, Saddam Hussein claimed that he had invaded Kuwait to help the Palestinians. He understood that he was isolated and needed to link his invasion to a cause that might appear legitimate. While his claim was absurd on its face, the United States had to fight the linkage argument as it put together the coalition against Iraq in 1990.

At that time the first intifada created enormous tensions in the region; many complained that the United States, as Israel's main ally and benefactor, was perpetuating Israeli occupation. Some of our allies argued that if Arabs were to join the coalition against Iraq, the United States needed to organize an international conference to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Bush administration wisely refused to link the two issues.

In an echo of 1990, Osama bin Laden tried, in his videotaped message this week, to make the same linkage, tying his actions to the cause of Palestine, declaring, "America will not live in peace before peace reigns in Palestine." Much like Saddam Hussein, he is trying to gain legitimacy by implying that his attack on America was about the plight of the Palestinians.

He is no more credible than Mr. Hussein was. His Al Qaeda network did not attack America because of the absence of peace in the Middle East. It had obviously begun planning its terrorist attack last year even as peace talks were progressing. Had we succeeded in 2000, when I thought a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was possible, the plans for the attack would undoubtedly have been accelerated, not stopped.

Peace in the Middle East would not make Osama Bin Laden and his and other terror networks disappear. Nor would it affect their determination to attack our civilization and modernity itself.

Does that mean pursuing Middle East peace is not important now? Of course not. It is clearly in our interest to stabilize the Middle East. But terror and those who carry it out are going to be a threat whether or not peace becomes possible again between Palestinians and Israelis.

Countries like Saudi Arabia and Egypt were well aware that Saddam Hussein's effort to eradicate the nation of Kuwait was a threat to them and could not be linked to any other issue. Today those countries support our current efforts, at least tacitly, because they understand that Mr. bin Laden's network is capable of committing atrocities against them on the level of those against the United States. Their support is not a favor to us; it is an act of self-defense.

Still, a different climate in the Middle East would make cooperation with us easier. Our Arab allies would feel less defensive about their ties to us if anger and frustration over the Palestinian situation were not so pronounced in the Arab world.

The question is whether the international effort against terrorism will itself force a change in the conflict in the Middle East. If we are to stand any chance of ending the war between Palestinians and Israelis, Yasir Arafat must feel that he now has to make a choice. Not surprisingly, the attacks on Sept. 11 did force him to respond. He feared being lumped in with Osama bin Laden. He saw his cause, the cause of Palestine, being discredited by terror. He knew that he could not allow himself to be positioned in one place and the international community in another. His initial call for a cease-fire and the steps that followed were promising.

But as he approached the threshold of harder steps arresting the bomb makers, for example he again retreated into inaction. Indeed, the more he came to believe that he was needed for the coalition, the less he seemed to feel the need to act. This, too, is not surprising, since his strategy is always to avoid hard choices unless he is compelled to make them.

But he cannot avoid action for long. He cannot afford for Osama bin Laden to become the champion of the Palestinian movement. The consequences for him internationally and domestically would be devastating. Mr. Arafat can never satisfy those who want to follow Mr. bin Laden. He understands that. And he understands as well that when Hamas and Islamic Jihad rally their supporters for Mr. bin Laden, they target his leadership as much as they target the United States. In the past, when Arafat moved against Hamas and Islamic Jihad, it was not because of what they did to Israel, but because of what he feared they might do to him. That is the reason he is cracking down seriously on the pro-bin Laden demonstrations now.

At a moment when his own interests argue for a crackdown, international pressure could be decisive in getting him to arrest those who plan and carry out terror attacks against Israel. The Israelis could then reciprocate and match his actions with a relaxation of their policies. The United States still needs to work to stabilize the region and, in time, to help create a negotiation process. Sept. 11 does not change that. Defusing the conflict in the Middle East remains as important as ever, but it need not be done for the sake of forging a coalition against terror. ❖

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