

# The Language of Terrorism

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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## Brief Analysis

**A**fter a three-week hiatus following the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, Tuesday saw renewed car bombings in Israel. Yet, it is not only Israel that faces a threat from radical Islamist suicide terrorists, but also many Arab states. Given this fact, it is all the more striking that many mainstream Muslim religious leaders are still unwilling to condemn suicide bombings in general, irrespective of the cause that the bombers espouse.

## Declaration of Clerics and Leaders

On September 14, a declaration appeared in the prominent London-based Arabic daily Al-Quds al-Arabi, signed by forty-six Muslim leaders from nineteen countries -- what the newspaper described as "the religious clerics and leadership of the Muslim Community," including the top leadership of Hamas in Palestine and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Sudan. The declaration condemned the "killing, demolition, destruction and the attack" that took place on September 11, expressing "deepest sorrow and grief" about the events and "disavow[ing] them on humane and Islamic principles, in accordance with Islamic wisdom." In addition to these conciliatory words, the declaration condemned the mass media for the "widespread targeting of Islam and its adherents." While the communique is notable for its "condemn[ation of] all attacks on innocent bystanders," it is also notable for what it does not condemn -- namely, suicide bombings. In fact, many of the signatories have a long record of support for suicide attacks.

The most prominent signatory of the document is Yousef al-Qaradawi, head of the department of Sunnah Studies at the University of Qatar and host of a popular weekly show on the Qatari-based satellite television network Al-Jazeera. Qaradawi is perhaps the leading Islamic scholar advocating suicide bombings. For Qaradawi, Hamas attacks against Israel are not "suicide operations," but rather "heroic martyrdom operations." In his most recent television appearance, broadcast throughout the Arab world on September 16, Qaradawi reiterated his previously stated fatwa (religious edict) that "every [Palestinian] man has the right to become a human bomb" in Israel.

Not surprisingly, Hamas leader Ahmad Yasin -- who also signed the September 14 document -- echoes Qaradawi's sentiments. Yasin has gone so far as to characterize suicide bombing as a Palestinian "democratic right." Another prominent signatory, Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood leader Abdel Majid al-Thunaybat, has asserted that "resistance to Israeli occupation through [the example of] Khalid Masha'al . . . is a constitutional and legitimate right which no

government is entitled to forgo." Khalid Masha'al has called "for every Palestinian to turn into a time bomb -- to fight them [Israelis] with every means." Yet another signatory -- Rashid Ghannouchi, the exiled Tunisian Islamist sentenced to death in absentia for his role in the 1991 plot to assassinate the president of Tunisia -- was reported in 1991 to have given the order to "to create martyrs as soon as possible in order to contribute to the climate of insecurity that we are seeking."

Similar sentiments about suicide terrorism have been heard from various non-signatories, including the leading clerics of Egypt and the Palestinian Authority (PA). The Grand Sheik of Al-Azhar -- Mohammed Sayed Tantawi, who is an employee of the state of Egypt -- has offered a religious rationale to support suicide attacks against "aggressors" like Israel but has publicly condemned the attacks in America. "Fighting Israel is an obligation," he said in October 2000; it is "obligatory for the entire [Islamic world] to support [the Palestinians] in their Jihad." While Tantawi demurred regarding attacks against women and children "who have nothing to do with war" -- according to him, this is "not accepted by Islamic law" -- those who die attacking an enemy who is occupying their land or violating their sacred places or their freedom are considered "martyrs."

The PA-appointed mufti of Jerusalem, Ikrima Sabri, delivered a sermon in 1997 about "America, the chief of terrorists," calling on Allah to "destroy America." In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, Israeli authorities arrested Sabri. He had just returned from a visit to southern Lebanon, where he met with Hizballah officials. According to a September 17 report, while in custody, Sabri told Israeli authorities that "the White House will turn black, with God's help, and that America, Britain and Israel should be destroyed." By contrast, the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abd al-Aziz bin Abdallah Aal al-Sheikh, has condemned suicide bombings as "illegitimate," having "nothing to do with jihad in the cause of God." He denounced the September 11 attacks "as gross crimes and sinful acts." Abd al-Aziz was not the only Saudi religious leader to condemn these attacks. The Imam of the Holy Mosque in Makkah, Shaikh Abdulrahman Al-Sideis, urged clarification that "Islam absolutely disavows terrorism . . . Islam prohibits injustice, violence and savageness, and those who practice it are in actuality criminals." He exhorted dialogue and negotiation instead of violence.

#### Suicide Terror: The Arab Experience

By sanctioning some suicide bombings, the leading Arab Muslim clergy not only increase the risks of terrorism against Israel and the United States, they also threaten Arab states. Suicide attacks are a problem for several regimes in the Middle East.

Algeria has faced suicide attacks from the Group Islamique Arm (GIA) during the civil war between the Islamists and the military that began in 1991. For instance, in January 1994, a suicide bomber killed 42 people and injured some 300 others near the Algiers central police station. Later in 1994, in a case that has special resonance today, the GIA hijacked an Air France flight and forced it to land in Marseille; there, they demanded that extra fuel be loaded, intending to crash the fully fueled plane into the Eiffel Tower. The attack was foiled when the plane was stormed by French commandos.

Egypt has also experienced suicide attacks by Islamists. For example, in a 1997 attack in Luxor, six gunmen from the group al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya killed fifty-eight foreign tourists. The gunmen remained at the attack site for forty-five minutes, hunting down tourists who had hidden. The gunmen made no attempt to flee, sticking to their deadly task and casually drinking soft drinks until security forces finally arrived and killed them easily. This was, in other words, a suicide operation. The two most prominent radical Islamist groups in Egypt -- Gama'a and Islamic Jihad -- have also carried out two suicide attacks outside of that country. The first was directed at a police station in Croatia in October 1995, and the other at the Egyptian embassy in Pakistan one month later.

According to Jane's Intelligence Review, Lebanon has experienced forty-eight suicide attacks in the last twenty

years, carried out by Hizballah and other pro-Syrian groups in Lebanon. Kuwait has seen a suicide attack as well; in 1983, Islamic Jihad attacked the U.S. embassy there.

#### Lessons for U.S. Policymakers

If nothing else, the lesson of September 11 is that suicide bombing -- and the religion-based rationale used to justify it -- is a serious problem for both the United States and the Middle East. In addition to responding to the immediate challenge from Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda organization, America needs to convince its moderate allies in the Middle East to uproot their own terrorist cells -- cells that threaten those moderate Arab states as well as the United States. Each regime in the region would be well advised to point out to local clerics the implications of their endorsement of suicide bombings; namely, that this terrorism spills back to threaten their own countries. The battle against "incitement" is in the interests of all forces of moderation in the Middle East.

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