

# Mideast Clerics Speak Out

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Articles & Testimony

**A**merica has come full circle. In 1983, the idea of jihad, or Muslim holy war, was introduced in the contemporary Middle East as 241 American servicemen were killed in Beirut.

The United States beat a hasty exit, and Islamic militants saw this as a vindication that suicide bombing was religiously sanctioned as well as being deadly effective. It took the terror strikes of Sept. 11, almost exactly 18 years later, to galvanize America to action, resolving it to the idea that such terrorism must be eradicated.

President Bush made clear that this campaign is not just about Osama bin Laden but confronting an ideology that justifies killing in the name of religion. While correctly praising Islam as a religion, Mr. Bush declared, "Those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah. The terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying in effect to hijack Islam itself."

This is a battle that the United States cannot wage alone, nor should it. The Islamic militant challenge is not directed just at the United States. When confronted with such radicalism, Egypt stemmed the challenge and ultimately defeated these religious opponents in the 1990s.

Yet while Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Syria have sharply (and often ruthlessly) put down challenges from Islamicists, they have never laid a glove on Islamicism as an ideology so long as it was directed at others such as the United States. Thus the regimes deflected attention from their own failing economies.

It is wholly insufficient for Middle Eastern leaders and their clerics to denounce the perpetrators of the Sept. 11 attack. This is too easy. It's now time for them to do the hard part and discredit this revived ideology. If not, it only will be a matter of time before they once again face these militants. They need to make clear to their faithful that Islam does not sanction the wanton killing of innocents. Period. Terror attacks are utterly antithetical to Islam.

Dealing with the religious underpinning is at the core, and this must be addressed by Islamic clerics in the Middle East.

For the last decade, bin Laden has issued a number of religious rulings (fatwas) declaring that his goal was to uproot the United States from Saudi Arabia, Yemen and the Horn of Africa.

His group, Al Qaeda, says its goal is to "unite all Muslims and to establish a government which follows the rule of the

caliphs." He has consistently invoked religion to justify his cause. In a 1998 fatwa, bin Laden appealed for attacks on Americans in order to drive the United States out of "the lands of Islam in the holiest of places," alluding to Saudi Arabia's holiest city of Mecca.

There is a fiery resentment among Islamic radicals of all that America represents as a military, cultural and economic power and its focus on the individual at the center of society. America is viewed by these radicals as a revolutionary power that is disruptive of traditional Islamic society.

Indeed, the state-appointed Sheik Mohammed Sayed Tantawi of Cairo's Al-Azhar, Islam's oldest and most prominent religious institution, and the mufti of Saudi Arabia recently have been the exception among clerics in condemning terrorism.

Yet even in the aftermath of Sept. 11, the mufti of Jerusalem, Ikrima al-Sabri, opposed the killings in New York and Washington but reaffirmed that suicide bombings against innocents are allowed so long as they are carried out to liberate Palestine. It must be made clear that terrorism in any form is unacceptable, whether it is perpetrated against children at a Jerusalem pizzeria or a bond trader in lower Manhattan.

Dealing with Islamic clerics in halting violence is as important as dealing with them in attaining peace. Americans don't fully grasp the political sway religious leaders often hold in the Middle East, possibly because the United States separates church and state.

An international political coalition against terrorism must be matched by a religious coalition inside the Middle East of mainstream Islamic clerics who disavow a twisted ideology that claims to speak in the name of Islam. ❖

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