

# Terror against America: Assessment and Implications (Part I)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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## The Middle East Context

**E**ven before conclusive signs of a Middle Eastern connection in the outrages of New York City and Washington emerged, the Middle East had already become part of the story. As the Bush administration devises its strategy to respond to terrorism, it is important to keep the Middle East angle of the developing story in the proper perspective.

In the days since the attacks, no leader has projected more confidence, competence, and calm than Secretary of State Colin Powell. With clarity and precision that bespeaks his military origins, he has defined the goal of our war against terror and outlined the strategy to win it. On one issue, however, the general has erred -- implicitly mixing the war against terror with the morass of Arab-Israeli politics. When directly asked whether the terrorist attacks were linked to the Arab-Israeli dispute, Secretary Powell said neither "no" nor "yes." Instead, he replied: "I hope everybody will realize that, no matter what you might think about the crisis in the Middle East, this is not the way to solve it. This is not the way to express your views about that, by killing hundreds and thousands of innocent civilians."

On this topic, Powell misspoke -- one hopes, inadvertently so. The fact is that there is no connection between last week's terror, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and U.S. policy in the Middle East. If, as is now widely suspected, the radical Islamist terrorist Osama bin Laden and his band of followers, perhaps supported by a rogue state or two, are found to be the perpetrators of Tuesday's attacks, it would be a mistake to draw any link between their actions and the failure

of Arab-Israeli diplomacy, including the now-one-year-old Palestinian uprising. It would be an even more grievous error to believe that these mass murderers were somehow legitimate in their aims, if horribly misguided in their means.

## **An Attack on Culture, Not Policies**

**T**he reality is that for bin Laden and his ilk, America is enemy number one, not Israel. To them, the United States is the Great Satan, the engine, guide, and arbiter of a demonic culture that dominates the world in a way that they can only dream about. Israel is just a Small Satan, one among many, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict just one of several conflicts that fuel their bloodlust. Others they hate include Russia, for the struggle in Chechnya; India, for its control of Kashmir; Serbia, for the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo; China, for stifling the Uighurs of Central Asia; the Philippines, for combating the separatists of Mindanao. The list goes on.

But America has pride of place. They hate the United States because of who and what it is -- the magazines, the television, the music. They hate the American way of life, especially the openness, opportunity, religious tolerance, and sexual equality that are hallmarks of American society. Theirs is an animus born of envy at the country that defines global culture in the new millennium the way that the march of Islam defined the "new world order" fourteen centuries ago. Their rejection of American policies -- the friendship with Israel, the military support of moderate Arab states, the remarkably selfless effort to find a negotiated solution to the region's territorial and national disputes -- is derivative of their hatred for the United States.

## **More Fringe, Less Fringe**

**I**t may sound paradoxical, but this view is both more fringe and less fringe than one would think. On the one hand, exceedingly few in the Muslim world consider America as the enemy. From Turkey to Bangladesh to Nigeria to India, the United States has excellent relations with the vast majority of the world's Muslim-majority states. It also has excellent relations with the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia. Moreover, the vast majority of Muslims around the world do not share the militant ideology of radical Islamists, who seek to impose sharia-based rule wherever their power permits or circumstances allow. Indeed, if one were to poll the world's Muslims about what they would want the most from America, the preferred response almost surely would be "a green card."

On the other hand, there is a disturbingly large minority for whom the sort of attacks launched last week were, in principle at least, legitimate and acceptable. In fact, the legitimacy given to the concept of suicide bombing, even among mainstream religious leaders in many parts of the Muslim world, is shocking. Last June, four American journalists and I sat in a comfortable living room of an upper-middle class home in an Arab capital with, among others, a former minister of religious affairs and the secretary-general of an international Muslim charitable foundation. When the topic of suicide bombing arose, both Muslim leaders emphatically endorsed the killing of Israeli civilians, even children. They did admit that, according to Islam, this was not an open-and-shut case. Some Muslim scholars with impeccable credentials, they noted, did question the religious legality of killing oneself in the process of killing the infidel. In other words, only the suicide -- not the homicide -- was open to debate.

Such views are not limited to religious leaders. In cruel irony, a lead editorial in the Palestinian Authority's semi-official daily newspaper, al-Hayat al-Jadida, on the very day of the New York/Washington attacks, praised suicide bombers as "the noble successors of their noble predecessors . . . the Lebanese suicide bombers, who taught the U.S. Marines a tough lesson [in Beirut] . . . These suicide bombers are the salt of the earth, the engines of history . . . They are the most honorable among us."

## **No Apologies**

**T**he response to radical Islamist terrorism should neither see enemies where none exist nor ignore the enormity of





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