Beware of the Anti-U.S. Rants in the Mideast

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President Bush called Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to express his condolences for the innocent Israelis killed in Hamas' latest suicide bombing spree. But Sharon could have given his own condolences to Bush, since one of the victims was an American.

Given the current trend of Palestinian terrorism and rhetoric, it's not difficult to imagine that someday the U.S. president may routinely be receiving condolences from Israeli leaders.

Indeed, lost in the midst of the carnage was the fact that two recent suicide bombing sites were ostensibly American targets. The Aug. 9 blast destroyed a Sbarro pizzeria, an Israeli franchise of the New York-registered corporation. Less than a week later, a subsequent attack gutted the Wall Street Cafe, an establishment whose name -- if nothing else -- is an icon of U.S. wealth and power.

While it's possible that at least one of these targets was a haphazard decision -- by regional standards, the Wall Street Cafe bombing was decidedly less "successful" than the Sbarro outrage -- typically terrorists do not choose their targets randomly.

Just recall Ramzi Yousef, the mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Yousef chose his target, according to U.S. law enforcement officials, because the trade centers were "symbols of American capitalism."

There is no definitive evidence yet that U.S. citizens and U.S. establishments are in the crosshairs of Palestinian terrorists. But for Americans, the trend in rhetoric should be cause for serious concern.

Anti-Americanism in the Palestinian Authority goes well beyond burning Old Glory in Gaza demonstrations. Top Hamas and Fatah leaders routinely condemn the United States, oftentimes in terms that border on incitement to violence. A few examples provide clarity.

In January, a Gaza Hamas chief, Abdulaziz Rantisi, told the PA daily Al Hayat al Jadida, "America is always striving to impose backwardness on the Palestinian community." He added, "If we look to the future, conflict with the U.S. and Zionists is the only way to achieve our goals, aspirations and interests."

In a surreal return to the 1970s, both Hamas and Fatah leaders are urging the Arab world to boycott U.S. products. Hamas leaders have decreed an embargo a "religious and national duty."

Meanwhile, Fatah leaders are lobbying their Arab brethren to reinstitute the "oil as a weapon" policy. Perhaps more troublesome than the isolated statements of Hamas and Fatah leaders, however, is what they say together.

Nowadays, Hamas and Fatah are united under the umbrella of the National and Islamic Forces, the leading Palestinian coordinating body of the campaign of violence. This organization has made no secret of its disdain for the United States. It also has orchestrated unprecedented levels of operational collaboration between Hamas and Fatah in attacks against Israelis.

Notably, not only does the National and Islamic Forces advocate cutting Washington out of the peace process, in June it issued a communique "hold[ing] the American administration responsible" for Israeli attacks on Palestinian targets. The document neglects to mention what the consequences should be for Washington. These are strong, albeit cryptic, words. The significance of these statements is, no doubt, open to debate.

Bravado? Possibly.

An expression of Palestinian frustration? Certainly. At the end of the day, though, the question really is: Do these bellicose statements represent a clear and present danger to Americans, or are these comments just words disembodied from action?

The answer to these questions remains a mystery. In any case, it bears mention that in the Middle East, there is a long history of words inciting people to acts of violence. For example, when Arafat gave his now legendary "green light" to Hamas that touched off a spate of suicide bombings in 1997, according to those in the know, Arafat did not explicitly give an order.

Rather, the "order" came in the form of a tirade against Israel, which was taken as a clear signal to initiate operations. Within the next few months, Hamas launched attacks killing at least 23 Israelis.

Although it's now just a painful memory, in the 1980s Americans became a principal target of terrorists in Lebanon and were slaughtered by the hundreds. For the time being, it appears that these Fatah and Hamas tirades against America are just rhetoric.

Regrettably, though, if history is any indication, it may just be a matter of time until these words are translated into action. ❖

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