

The Saudi Fatwa against Suicide Terrorism

May 2, 2001



Brief Analysis

On April 21, the grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, Shaykh Abd al-Aziz bin Abdallah Aal al-Shaykh, said that Islam forbids suicide terrorist attacks. This has raised a storm of criticism from supporters of the Palestinian intifada against Israel. However, the mufti may have been thinking more about Osama bin Laden than recent Palestinian actions.

Background Shaykh Abd al-Aziz is head of the Saudi commission of senior Islamic scholars and the supreme Islamic authority in the kingdom. In an interview with the London-based and Saudi-owned newspaper *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Shaykh Abd al-Aziz was asked for his view on several issues related to contemporary Islamist terrorism, such as the hijacking of airplanes, terrorism against security personnel, and suicide operations. In regard to the latter, he answered categorically: "What you call suicide bombings in my view are illegitimate and have nothing to do with jihad in the cause of God. I am afraid it is another form of killing oneself."

His reply was not formally an official Islamic ruling (fatwa), but since such rulings are answers by high religious authorities to questions, his interview was received in the Arab world as if he had issued a fatwa. Shaykh Abd al-Aziz is quite new in his position; he assumed his office last year following the death of Shaykh Abd al-Aziz Bin Baz. The latter individual was a powerful authority – not only in Saudi Arabia, but also throughout the Muslim world. He did not hesitate to differ with the Saudi royal family on a number of significant questions, both political and religious in nature. Bin Baz made persistent attempts to move Saudi Arabia in the direction of strict and severe fundamentalism, which was not popular with the younger generation of the royal family. He was never happy with official (and mainly unofficial) Saudi contacts with Israel. In 1989, Shaykh Bin Baz was the most senior Islamic authority to open the door to the religious legitimization of Palestinian terrorism, by declaring the Palestinian struggle a jihad. In the mid-1990s, other Saudi senior scholars, led by the respected Shaykh Muhammad Bin 'Uthaimin, blessed the suicide operations of Hamas. The contradictory declaration of the present Saudi grand mufti, even if not in the form of an official fatwa, was therefore a surprise.

An Old Dispute The dispute in the Islamic world over the suitability of suicide terrorism started in the early 1980s, when Shiite terrorists began to use the tactic. The leading Lebanese Shiite scholar, Shaykh Muhammad Husein Fadlallah, stated his reservation about these operations on several public occasions during the 1980s. His followers in Hizballah had to turn to Iran in order to legitimize these operations. In fact, such operations against the Israeli army in southern Lebanon stopped at the end of the 1980s.

At almost the same time, suicide bombings became more common in the Palestinian-Israeli arena. In the summer of 1989, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad published a long fatwa that legitimated these types of operations as permitted (istishhad) within the framework of jihad, but the fatwa was not signed by any Islamic scholars. And since the first suicide operation carried out by Hamas in April 1993, that organization has also emphasized the Islamic legitimacy of this type of activity. In 1998, Hamas even presented a whole book that granted legitimacy to suicide operations on its official website, although this book was not written by a high religious authority.

In 2000, the phenomenon of suicide bombings expanded to two other areas of Islamic struggle – Chechnya and

Kashmir. In both cases, especially in regard to the Chechen rebels of Arab and Afghan origin and the Kashmiri Islamist organizations of Lashkar-I-Taiba and Hizb-I-Mujahidin, they accompanied their operations with necessary rulings. The expansion of suicide operations to other parts of the Muslim world could be a source of anxiety to other regimes in the Middle East and Asia.

The source of the dispute is partly the religious objection to suicide. But there is also the concern among moderate Islamic scholars and organizations about the rise of Islamist activists who have no formal religious education or authority. These individuals write a lot of politico-religious material and give all kinds of self-described fatwas that are highly regarded by their followers and which often have quite a lot of support among the population at large.

Reactions to the Fatwa During the past week, there have been many articles and statements in reaction to the Saudi fatwa. The main theme of these articles has been the appropriateness of suicide operations against Israel. The general argument of various Islamist groups or individuals has been that "all means are legitimate to fight the Jews," as argued by Shaykh Sayyid Wafa, secretary-general of the Islamic research center of al-Azhar in Egypt. Shaykh al-Azhar Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi, the highest Islamic authority in Egypt (appointed by the Egyptian government), not only supported these suicide operations but also viewed them as an Islamic duty. His colleague Shaykh Ali Abu al-Hasan, chairman of the committee of rulings in al-Azhar, stated, "fighting the enemy with any kind of defense is a duty." He called the Palestinians to "go on hitting Jewish targets and bring an earthquake under the feet of the traitors, the people of the virus state."

Reactions have come from secular Arab circles as well. In an editorial in his newspaper on April 24, Ahmad al-Houny, editor of the London-based al-Arab, called the Saudi grand mufti's statement "the American fatwa." The main theme of secular reactions was that this fatwa was delivered under American pressure in order to stop the Palestinian uprising and armed resistance that has stood in the way of negotiations. The London based al-Quds al-Arabi wrote in its editorial the same day, under the title "Strange Fatwas from Governments' Ulama," that "the real scholars are those who issue fatwas condemning Arab official lassitude and failure to come to the support of those steadfast in defense and ready to sacrifice their blood for al-Aqsa."

Conclusion It is not clear why the Saudi grand mufti condemned suicide operations. He may well have acted primarily on the basis of Saudi fear of Osama Bin Laden and his colleagues. The suicide operation against the USS Cole in Aden and the hijacking of a Russian plane from Turkey to Saudi Arabia earlier this month may have been what precipitated the mufti's statements. There is no evidence he was thinking primarily about Palestinian suicide bombings. The same Saudi-owned newspaper that ran the interview with Shaykh Abd al-Aziz (al-Sharq al-Awsat) has strongly supported the suicide operations of Hamas, calling them the only way "to convince [Ariel] Sharon" in its editorial of March 5. In the absence of additional evidence, it would be inappropriate to see the Saudi grand mufti's fatwa as a sign of lessened support for anti-Israel terrorism.

Reuven Paz is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute.

Policy #323

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)

TOPICS

Gulf & Energy Policy (/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy)

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

