

# An Islamist Internationale?

## Transnational Links among Islamist Radical Groups

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Brief Analysis

**T**he Islamist Agenda The Israeli-Palestinian dispute is no longer the main issue on the Islamist agenda. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1990 and the development of national and Muslim-Christian disputes in various parts of Europe and central Asia assisted in the globalization of the Islamist struggle. In addition to the continuing troubles in Afghanistan and Kashmir, the 1990s have seen warfare in Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya, and parts of Indonesia (most prominently East Timor). All this brought about a transfer of the main Islamist struggle from the Arab world to the margins of the Middle East. Afghanistan has become the meeting point between the Arab Islamists and their Asian colleagues in the developing globalization of the Islamic radical struggle.

The Islamist movement represents a new ideological trend at the center of which is the perception that Muslims in general, and Islamists in particular, are confronting a global Western-Jewish conspiracy. In the Islamist view, the essence of this conspiracy is a cultural war waged against the Muslim world: The Muslims are the attacked and hence their jihad is a legitimate war of defense, in which every means is acceptable, including political violence, or what they complain Western political culture calls terrorism. The perception of the global jihad against the rest of the world came from the teachings of Dr. 'Abdallah 'Azzam, a Palestinian who moved in 1980 from Jordan to Afghanistan, and there became the ideological father of the Afghani struggle against the Soviet Union. As a Palestinian, 'Azzam also introduced the strong anti-Jewish (not just anti-Israeli) element to this ideology.

There is also a fanaticism among some Islamists that rejects other Islamic doctrines as illegitimate. This rejection is based on the theories of takfir, or excommunication, adhered to by the two main Egyptian groups that during the 1990s became Osama bin Ladin's primary allies: the Egyptian Jihad and the Islamic Group (Al-Gama'ah al-Islamiyyah). The jihad organizations have increasingly adopted the ideas of the takfir groups, employing the term in recent years as an equivalent of "jihad," especially with regard to the struggle in the Arab world against those rulers who are perceived as collaborators with the "Western infidel culture."

In most cases, the long-term goals of radical Islamist groups are vague. They rarely begin as pragmatic groups involved in normal political life, although they may evolve in this direction when confronted by force, as occurred in the late 1990s in such places as Egypt, Algeria, Yemen, and to some extent the Palestinian Authority. Islamists tend to be better educated than the population as a whole and more likely to have middle class and wealthy family backgrounds. Unable to fit in with mainstream society, they search for personal, psychological solutions by fighting in the name of Islam. They tend to see jihad as the supreme duty under Islam, although many may lack any profound knowledge of religious doctrine. A significant minority does not have any real religious motivation at all.

Although the links between the various Islamist groups are growing and becoming stronger, particularly in the last year or two, no real leader of the global Islamist cause has emerged. Although bin Ladin is a good organizer and financier, he is not a real principal. He is not dominant either politically or religiously and therefore would not be able to unite all the groups in a real Islamist internationale. Bin Ladin is also rumored to be suffering from several illnesses, and his movements are quite limited by the Taliban regime, even though the Taliban are his hosts and

provide him with refuge. Rumors have meanwhile been circulating that he is set to be replaced Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian physician and leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad. Even so, it appears that he has succeeded in activating other operations in the West, such as the attempted U.S.-Canadian border crossing by Algerian Islamists planning violence on the occasion of the millennial New Year, and the group arrested in Jordan arrested for the same cause.

Except for his famous declaration of jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders, bin Ladin does not talk about Israel in any of his speeches and interviews, even though there is no doubt that Israel, as an ally of the United States, is also considered an enemy.

Islamists in the West Many of the Islamists who survived persecution, arrests, and oppression in their homelands found refuge in the land of the "enemy," where they found democracy, freedom of movement, liberal attitudes, and in many cases political asylum and even citizenship. Furthermore, the growing Muslim population in most Western countries supplied a sympathetic environment for the political activities of the Islamists. But Muslim populations in the West are becoming increasingly alienated from their surrounding culture. Poverty and unemployment, difficulties in coping with Western modernization, and the clash between values and culture have brought about a growing social and political activism among these Western-based Islamists. By instilling the perception that Western culture is the enemy of all Muslims, Islamic social and welfare movements that are not part of the radical Islamist trend sometimes assist the radicals—consciously or unconsciously—with fundraising, recruitment, and distribution of publications.

Funding is raised among Western Muslims by various radical Islamist groups or by front organizations and institutions established by them. Some Islamic institutions in the West also launder large sums of money coming primarily from Persian Gulf countries; the money is usually transferred through bank accounts in Europe, the United States, or even the Middle East to the Arab or Muslim world by sophisticated and secret transactions. The occurrence of these money transfers gradually increased after the Gulf War when both the Gulf states and wealthy individuals in the Gulf stopped financing the Palestinian Liberation Organization and transferred their financial support to Islamic groups, organizations, and projects. As a result of this new influx of funding, the Islamic groups were able to set up many kinds of institutions, cultural centers, publications, research institutes, and welfare associations. Although many of their activities have been of a mainstream Islamic character, some groups are involved in actively spreading the radical Islamist message among Muslim populations in the West.

Until recently, radical Islamists felt that the United States was a terrorist hothouse, as illustrated in November 1995 when the head of a research center in Tampa, Florida was appointed secretary general of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. But in the past two years, the spreading of the ideas of radical Islam has begun to decline in the United States as a result of new laws and more vigorous investigation by federal law enforcement officials. These steps have so far not been undertaken by any of the European countries, however, and these states—especially the United Kingdom—continue to provide safe haven for radical Islamist activity. Countering the activities of such groups in the West, by legislation and other nonviolent means as well as cooperation among Western nations, is crucial in the fight against Islamist radical terrorism.

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