

Terrorism a la Bin Laden Is Not a Peace Process Problem

Oct 28, 1998



Brief Analysis

Concern about potential terrorist attacks from Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda organization have led the U.S. government to suspend activities or increase security at embassies from West Africa to Europe to Central Asia. To what extent might Bin Laden followers also target the Arab-Israeli peace process, which has suffered so much from past terrorism? While complacency would be inappropriate, it is useful to note that Bin Laden's main target is America, not Israel.

That is not what one would think from some analysts. After the Nairobi and Dar as Salaam bombings, columnist Robert Novak stated on CNN's Crossfire, "Let's be honest: it is our policy on Israel that's causing this." And the Christian Science Monitor editorialized, "Military strikes are secondary to diligent efforts to weaken terrorism's inner dynamic. In this regard, renewed commitment to a workable peace between Palestinians and Israel is crucial." The same theme was heard in the Arab press. Egypt's Al Ahram argued: "Are we exaggerating if we say that Washington is paying the price for not heeding the voice of reason that has been urging it to desist from the double standards policy [treating Israel different from Arabs]? . . . We do not think that we are exaggerating." In fact, Bin Laden's followers would still be carrying out their violent terrorism even if the Arab-Israeli conflict were completely settled.

Bin Laden Gives Palestine Low Priority. A close look at the ideology and strategy of Osama bin Laden and his followers shows that for them, the heart of the matter is the presence on the holy soil of Saudi Arabia of the United States, which they see as the bridgehead of a corruptive non-Muslim culture. Throughout Bin Laden's public statements and declarations runs one fundamental and predominant strategic goal: the expulsion of the American presence, military and civilian, from Saudi Arabia and the whole Gulf region.

According to his August 1996 "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," "The latest and the greatest of [the] aggressions, incurred by the Muslims since the death of the Prophet . . . is the occupation of the land of the two Holy Places -- the foundation of the house of Islam, the place of the revelation, the source of the message and the place of the noble Ka'ba, the Qiblah of all Muslims -- by the armies of the American Crusaders and their allies."

This theme is repeated in the fatwa, publicly presented in May 1998 to Muslim journalists in the name of the leaders of the International Islamic Front for the Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders. This fatwa presents as the primary reason for the declaration of Jihad against Americans the fact that "for over seven years the United States has been occupying the lands of Islam in the holiest of places, the Arabian Peninsula, plundering its riches, dictating to its rulers, humiliating its people, terrorizing its neighbors, and turning its bases in the peninsula into a spearhead through which to fight the neighboring Muslim peoples." Second comes the "devastation inflicted on the Iraqi people" and only in the third place the American role in serving the "Jews' petty state" and its occupation of Jerusalem.

Bin Laden and the Front he created do not forget what they see as crimes and wrongs done to the Muslim nation -- "the blood spilled in Palestine and Iraq . . . the massacre of Qana, in Lebanon . . . and the massacres in Tajikistan,

Burma, Kashmir, Assam, the Philippines, Fatani, Ogadin, Somalia, Eritrea, Chechnia, and in Bosnia-Herzegovina." But it is noteworthy that the Palestinian issue is given no special prominence.

Why Bin Laden Focuses on America. The question arises as to why Osama bin Laden has chosen the American presence in Saudi Arabia as the main focus of his ideological, strategic, and terrorist activity. There are obvious personal reasons pushing Bin Laden in this direction. He is Saudi (albeit of Yemeni origin) and his family's wealth is invested in Saudi Arabia. Above all, he firmly believes in the supremacy of Islam over other faiths and the importance of the purity of the Holy Places in keeping Islamic values alive and victorious.

Although obviously aware of the CIA's role in supporting the Afghan guerrillas in their fight against the Soviet army, Bin Laden apparently could not ideologically reconcile himself to the fact that the United States could intervene against a Muslim nation, Iraq, invading another Muslim land, Kuwait. Therefore, according to The Guardian, he proposed to the Saudi defense minister to help in defeating Baghdad "with the Islamic faith," on condition that the United States would not be involved. After the Gulf war, the continued American presence on Saudi soil soured Bin Laden on any relationship with the royal regime. He resolutely joined the ranks of the opposition.

Bin Laden's opposition to the U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia has expanded into an opposition to the Saudi royal family. In an interview with Nida'ul Islam in late 1996, bin Laden detailed what he saw as the advantages from the November 1995 bombs against the Saudi Arabia National Guard officer in Riyadh: "The people became aware that their main problems were caused by the American occupiers and their puppets in the Saudi regime. . . . These missions also paved the way for the raising of the voices of opposition against the American occupation from within the ruling family and the armed forces; in fact we can say that the remaining Gulf countries have been effected to the same degree, and that the voices of opposition to the American occupation have begun to be heard at the level of the ruling families and the governments of the . . . Gulf countries."

Bin Laden's statements are often laden with crude antisemitic and conspiracy motives. However, it seems that his use of this particular theme is mainly ideological and propagandistic. In any case, the "occupation" of Jerusalem by the Jews will not distract Bin Laden from his main ambition -- the expulsion of the United States' presence, military and civilian, from Saudi Arabia. According to Abdel-Bari Atwan, editor of the London-based Al-Quds al-Arabi, Bin Laden "has been criticized in the Arab world for focusing on such places as Afghanistan and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and [he] is therefore starting to concentrate more on the Palestinian issue." But even a future terrorist attack against an Israeli target will not be an indication of any change in the overall strategy of Bin Laden and his Front.

Bin Laden has drawn lessons from the events that have rocked the Middle East during the last two decades. His interviews and statements frequently cite the expulsion of U.S. troops from Lebanon and the shameful retreat of U.S. and Western troops from Somalia as glorious successes of the religious campaign against America and the West. He even boasts that he had an important role in supporting Somalia's victorious struggle against the Americans. The confessions of Mohammed Sadiq Odeh, the main suspect in the Nairobi bombing, would seem to corroborate Bin Laden's claims. Thus the strategy conceived by Bin Laden seems to him and his allies as a realistic option -- to expel U.S. military forces from Saudi Arabia and the whole of the Gulf region, thus permitting the overthrow of the reigning Saudi regime and the establishment of a revolutionary Islamic government.

Ely Karmon is a lecturer in the Political Science Department of Haifa University and a research fellow at the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) of the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya.

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



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)

TOPICS

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

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

