



TEL AVIV NOTES

AN UPDATE ON POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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NO GREATER HATE: WHAT INSPIRES THE MUSLIM KAMIKAZES?

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No group has issued a claim of responsibility for the hijackings and devastating suicide attacks against the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Virginia. But the names of the hijackers, released by U.S. law enforcement agencies, confirm that the hijackers were Arab Muslims. The precise mix of their nationalities will become known in the coming days. From the names, they would appear to be mostly from Saudi Arabia. From other information, and the suicidal method employed by the terrorists, it seems clear that the United States has fallen victim to an attack by Islamic extremists.

The shorthand for these extremists, in American parlance, is "the network of Usama Bin Ladin," a reference to the elusive Saudi terrorist who has found shelter with the Taliban government in Afghanistan. It is not impossible that the conspiracy was hatched and planned independently of him. But the operation, in its conception and objectives, conforms closely to the precedents established by Bin Ladin in previous anti-American attacks.

What, then, is the message of these acts of mass terror? The perpetrators, by leaving no statement of intent, assume that we are intelligent enough to draw the conclusions ourselves. In fact, the

message is intrinsic in the very nature and magnitude of the attack, and understanding it must inform the American response.

One should begin by making it clear what the attack is *not*. It is not an attempt to compel the United States to reconsider or reverse one of its policies in the Middle East. If it were, the perpetrators would have indicated precisely which policy they had in mind.

The United States pursues an array of policies in the region that many Middle Easterners, especially Islamic extremists, find objectionable. U.S. support for Israel is regarded as a form of neo-colonialism. Its maintenance of sanctions against Iraq is deemed a crime against humanity. American backing for moderate Arab regimes, especially the monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf, is considered an instrument of foreign control over Islam's holiest places and oil resources. U.S. attempts to isolate the so-called "rogue regimes" of Iran, Sudan, Libya, and Afghanistan are resented as imperialist encirclements.

If it had been the intent of the perpetrators to intimidate America into reversing any one of its

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policies, they would have specified that policy. After all, every other aspect of the operation was meticulously planned.

This has not prevented some persons, inside and outside the Middle East, from attempting to present the act as a protest against one or another American policy. For example, Jordan's King Abdullah II, interviewed Wednesday by CNN, claimed that the attack might not have occurred had Israelis and Palestinians not been locked in a cycle of violence—the implication being that the absence of an American-driven “peace process” triggered the attack.

In fact, attacks by Islamic extremists against Americans gained momentum right through the 1990s, despite American-led progress in the “peace process.” These included the attempt to blow up the World Trade Center in 1993, the bombing of the U.S. military residence in Dhahran in 1996, and attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. There was no correlation between these attacks and the ups or downs of Israeli-Palestinian relations.

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Those who killed thousands in New York and Washington had a different agenda, many levels above resentment at any specific American policy. Their grievance combines all grievances and supersedes them. The problem, as they have diagnosed it, is not what America does, but what America is. By America's very nature, they believe, it is a power arrayed against Islam. Those who went happily to their deaths at the helm of four airliners were striking a blow against Satan incarnate—centers of a vast economic and military conspiracy to subordinate and enslave over a billion Muslims. Their message to America was this: cease to exercise your power now, or we will overpower you.

An audacious agenda? These same extremists believe that they single-handedly brought down another world power, the Soviet Union, by their

steadfast *jihad* in Afghanistan. As a result of their deeds, so they believe, Soviet forces retreated, the Soviet Union collapsed, and hundreds of millions of Muslims trapped in the Soviet empire gained their freedom. Islam's extremists believe that the fall of the Soviet Union was a triumph of Islamic belief over communist atheism. America, to them, represents the other face of unbelieving materialism; like the Soviet Union, America too will tumble.

And so the expectations of those who conceived and executed the attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon are limitless. Their campaign is meant to compel the withdrawal of American fleets from the shores of Muslim lands; the disappearance of American fighters, bombers, and cruise missiles from the skies over Muslim heads; a cut-off of American support for puppet regimes that control Mecca and the oil treasures of Islam; and an abandonment of the Jews, occupiers of a Muslim land—in short, a general American retreat from the Middle East, heartland of Islam.

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Ironically, the attacks against America have come at the low tide of Islamic extremism in the Middle East. Over the past decade, regimes in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and other threatened countries, have suppressed the domestic threat posed by extremists. Some scholars have even determined that the Middle East has entered a “post-Islamist” phase.

But it is precisely the success of suppression in the Arab world that has created the threat to the West in general, and the United States in particular. Extremism, unable to defeat the Arab regimes or Israel, now directly targets their American protector. In the past, the United States relied upon allies to bear the brunt of the battle against Islamic extremism. At this moment, it seeks to build a coalition. But in future, it will have no choice but to lead from the front.