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PALESTINIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD USAMA BIN LADEN

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For the Palestinian Authority (PA), the September 11 attack on New York and Washington and the subsequent US war on terrorism provide both challenges and opportunities.

The celebrations of the attack in PA-controlled cities reflected a popular desire to punish the US for its support of Israel but also animosity towards American power among those who are losers in the global race for modernization. One common view held that "America thinks it can play God, but this proves that God is greater," and some described the attacks as "a gift from God to the Palestinian and Iraqi people." The chanting for Bin Laden to "bomb Tel Aviv" reflected a Palestinian tendency – as was the case with Gamal Abd al-Nasser of Egypt during the 1960s and with Saddam Husayn in 1991 – to look for outside saviors who could deal a blow to Israel and its supporters. But other Palestinians were shaken by the scope of death and carnage and expressed this disapproval. It is impossible to determine which view predominated.

PA Chairman Yasir Arafat feared that identification of the Palestinians with terrorism would harm his relations with the US in the same way that Palestinian support of Saddam Husayn brought the PLO to the brink of collapse following the Gulf War and forced it to make

painful concessions in the Oslo Accords. Islamist terrorism might divert American attention from the Palestinian-Israeli conflict just when Arafat was hoping for American pressure on Israel. It could also give added weight to Israel's arguments in its own struggle against terrorism and provide Israel with the opportunity to inflict more punishment on the PA in order to force an end to Palestinian violence. Finally, it was clear that the US would not tolerate an escalation of Middle Eastern violence that would harm the more urgent struggle against Bin Laden.

Consequently, Arafat and other PA officials hastened to denounce the attack as a "crime against mankind," sent their condolences to the American people, and offered their help to the US. Arafat also declared a cease-fire in the confrontation with Israel, though he did little to enforce it. The PA police prevented the foreign media from documenting popular expressions of joy at the attack, while some PA diplomats argued that film footage was fabricated. The PA and Palestinian press denounced Israeli attempts to associate Palestinian violence with terrorism, describing their own actions as legitimate resistance to Israeli occupation.

Palestinian opposition movements expressed a more ambivalent attitude, as they were less

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concerned with appealing to American public opinion. Spokesmen for the Islamist Hamas condemned attacks on innocent civilians but also argued that the US should examine the actions that produced such hatred. It should be noted that Hamas differentiates between foreign and Israeli civilians; it regards the latter as part of the Zionist state and therefore legitimate targets. Hamas also deplored American "arrogance" in the form of pressure on others either to join the US or be on the side of terrorism. Some Hamas officials described the attack on the World Trade Center as a Jewish-Zionist provocation to vilify Islam and push the world to fight Muslims.

In a similar vein, spokesmen of the Palestinian left explained that their movements rejected any action that harms civilians or establishments that have nothing to do with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. But they also expressed implicit understanding of "these incidents" as possibly "related to US foreign policy not only towards the Middle East, but also towards all peoples in the world."

American efforts to build an international coalition against the Bin Laden group, in which Arab states were to play an important role, improved the PA position. It could now hope for effective Arab pressure on the US to change its Middle Eastern policy in order to allay popular Arab animosity. Israel's exclusion from the coalition appeared to diminish its strategic value to the US while enhancing Arab leverage. In addition, the PA hoped that American public opinion would draw a link between support of Israel and the occurrence of terrorism on its soil. Palestinians also felt satisfied that most countries rejected Israel's claim that terrorism was one universal phenomenon and regarded Palestinian violent struggle as legitimate. American pressure on Israel to resume high-level contacts with Arafat appeared to him as vindication of his plan to force Israel to hold negotiations under fire and eventually make more concessions.

Still, the beginning of the American offensive confronted Arafat with a dilemma. He could not condemn the attack on Afghanistan lest he alienate the US, but he could not come out against Bin Laden, who appeared increasingly popular on the Palestinian street. He therefore denounced terrorism in general and condoned US actions against it, while omitting any specific reference to Bin Laden and branding Israel's actions in the territories as state terrorism.

Hamas, by contrast, came out flatly against the US attack on Afghanistan, describing it as an "aggression against Islam and Muslims" whose goal is to "strike at Islam, and not at terrorism." According to Hamas, if the US was "serious about striking at terrorism, it would have directed its strikes and bombs at the Zionist enemy." Hamas also welcomed Bin Laden's linkage of his activity to the Palestinian plight as a proof that "real terrorism" is what the Zionist enemy does.

The pro-Bin Laden demonstrations in Gaza on 8 October and their suppression by the PA police, which killed three demonstrators and injured dozens, reflected the gap between popular feelings and the PA's political considerations. These events exposed, not only the Islamists' desire to challenge Arafat's authority to determine Palestinian foreign policy, but also the limitations that both parties faced. While denouncing the PA, Hamas pledged to avoid open confrontations with it. Hamas claimed that such clashes would only serve Israel, but it also feared a possible defeat. As before, these incidents showed that Arafat is willing to use force whenever the PA's vital interests are at stake. But having himself employed Islamist discourse and symbols against Israel, particularly during the last year, Arafat may find it increasingly difficult to suppress the Islamist organizations that openly support Bin Laden and continue their terrorism against Israel.