

Editor: **Mark A. Heller**

December 9, 2004

GLOBAL JIHAD AS REACTION TO AMERICAN POLICY: A DANGEROUS DELUSION

Yoram Schweitzer
Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies

Critics of American foreign policy frequently argue that the terrorism inflicted by al-Qaeda and its affiliates on the US in particular and the west in general is mainly a result of flawed American policy towards Israel. In addition, politicians and officials in various countries have asserted that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the root cause of the terrorism and that removing this cause would make it possible to end the confrontation between "global jihad" and the rest of the world.

The policy recommendations implicit in such analyses are that the American administration change its one-sided policy with respect to Israel and the Arab world and that Israel promptly solve its historic conflict with the Palestinians. The consequences of those changes, it is suggested, are that the hostility to the US and its allies would evaporate and that the main reason for the wave of terrorism directed by the global jihadists against the west would disappear.

This argument has been given new impetus by Michael Scheuer, a former Central Intelligence Agency department head whose responsibilities included the "Usama Bin Laden" file. In a recent interview in an Israeli newspaper, Scheuer strongly criticized the "blind American support for Israeli policy, which endangers national security and the lives of US citizens." He argued that "Bin Laden declared war on the United

States because of American policy with respect to the Arab states and Israel and not because of the American way of life." Notwithstanding Scheuer's record as an intelligence professional, such claims need to be checked against the factual record.

Declarations of al-Qaeda spokesmen, including Bin Laden's deputy, Ayman Zawahri, in his book, *The Cavaliers under the Prophet's Banner*, make it clear that the US has been targeted mainly because it is seen as the leading rival power and principal obstacle to the achievement of al-Qaeda's objectives. The foremost objective is to replace the "apostate" rulers in Arab and Muslim states with regimes guided by Islamic law. The US not only supports many of these hated regimes; it is itself the embodiment of western secular culture and of a repugnant way of life totally contrary to that which al-Qaeda wants to establish throughout the world. Al-Qaeda therefore views the United States as an infidel, tyrannical and extreme anti-Islamic power against which Muslims are enjoined to wage war without compromise.

In terms of the number of attacks directed against its citizens, Israel is not high up on al-Qaeda's target list. But Israel does figure prominently in al-Qaeda's propaganda because it represents "world Jewry" and, together with its American ally, forms what is defined as the

Published by TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies & The Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies
through the generosity of Sari and Israel Roizman, Philadelphia

www.tau.ac.il/jcss/

www.dayan.org/

"Judeo-Crusader" alliance that underlies the axis of evil. International political realities are merely interpreted to confirm this theological world-view of a total religious and cultural contradiction between Islam, as al-Qaeda interprets it, and the liberal west. The rhetoric of jihad justifies terrorism as an explicitly defensive measure against the Judeo-Crusader conspiracy and its Muslim collaborators. Consequently, al-Qaeda and its affiliates have attacked targets across a wide range of geographical, religious, national and political targets.

True, terrorists have sometimes tried to tie attacks on "apostate" Muslim regimes or other western powers to American policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That makes perfect instrumental sense, since it enables them to broaden their emotional appeal to those who may not share their path but do oppose Israel. But it is less clear why western experts accept this linkage without checking it against the actual record of the "global jihad." For example, the Qaeda-supported terrorists who in May 2004 launched a wave of suicide bombings against western companies and housing complexes and regime targets in Saudi Arabia referred to the ruling family as "Pharaonic" and collaborators with American imperialism. The response of senior Saudi personalities was to claim that the attacks were the result of a Zionist conspiracy. By hinting that Bin Laden and his associates are tools of Israel, they merely demonstrated that each side uses the same slogans to delegitimize the other.

Another example comes from Indonesia, which is geographically remote and unconnected to any Middle Eastern or Israeli-Palestinian context. In the trial of a senior Jama'a Islamiyya operative accused of being chief planner of the October 2002 bombing in Bali that killed 202 people (including 88 Australians), the defendant blamed the killing of western tourists on the imperialistic, anti-Muslim, pro-Zionist policy of the United States. The adoption of such jihadi rhetoric is explained by the fact that the Bali

bombers, like other terrorists, underwent indoctrination in Bin Laden's training camps in Afghanistan. But shortly after the bombing, Bin Laden himself sent a video cassette to *al-Jazeera* television in which he blamed the attack, this time, on "Australian imperialism" which had dared to intervene in East Timor and helped to usurp "Muslim land."

Thirdly, the local Islamist network that carried out the March 2004 train bombings in Madrid, which killed 191 people, explained the attacks as a response to Spain's pro-American policy and specifically to the presence of Spanish troops in Iraq. This, too, was depicted as part of the Judeo-Crusader alliance against the Muslim world, but without any ostensible connection either to American policy towards Israel or to the Israeli Palestinian conflict.

Bin Laden has spared no effort to hitch his global struggle to the local/national conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. But the Palestinians themselves have generally resisted his advances and refused any identification of their cause with his. The rejection of Bin Laden's embrace makes obvious tactical sense for the Palestinians. He is, after all, the object of a world-wide man hunt. But it also stems from a substantive gap between the Palestinians, who have used any means, including the most brutal, in order to take their place in the world, and Bin Laden, who has used any means in order to destroy it.

Dealing effectively with the ongoing terrorist threat requires a broad understanding of the circumstances in which it unfolds and some focused knowledge about the perpetrators and supporters of terrorism. Such understanding and knowledge are obscured by the illusion of a simple, causal link between a localized Israeli-Palestinian conflict – and even more so, between American policy on the conflict – and the global jihad of Bin Laden.

KEYWORD: terrorism