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Bin Ladin's Jihad: Political Context (C)

Usama bin Ladin has launched his war against the United States at a time when US fortunes in the Middle East generally are at a low ebb. The stalemate in the peace process, fatigue with Iraqi and Libyan sanctions, and growing popular antipathy to US regional policies lead much of the moderate Arab public to see bin Ladin's terrorist violence as an understandable, though extreme, response to Washington's perceived hostility toward Arab and Muslim interests. (C)

Method to the madness

Bin Ladin's terrorism represents an extreme rejection of the increased US strategic and military domination of the Middle East--especially Saudi Arabia and the Gulf--that resulted from the Gulf war. Bin Ladin, though on the violent fringe, is not alone in detesting US policies and rejecting the US presence. In Saudi Arabia, senior mainstream religious leaders have voiced criticisms of the United States in language very similar to that used by bin Ladin--without, however, the calls for violence. The themes bin Ladin expresses have also been sounded for the last three years in the Arab media, with growing vehemence and frequency as the peace process deteriorated. (C)

Double-standard mantra

Arabs compare the US use of force against Arab states, and the lengths to which Washington has gone to enforce sanctions against Libya and Iraq--with significant humanitarian cost to the latter--to the apparent absence of US pressure on Israel to comply with its Oslo and Madrid commitments. Even moderate Arab leaders feel the United States has acquiesced in a deliberate Israeli campaign to undermine the peace process. This is the essence of the "double standard" argument and is central to the view held by many Arabs that the United States is a hostile power. Israeli unilateral actions affecting the status of Jerusalem; and the absence of US pressure to reverse them, have been a particular sore point for many Arabs, especially in the Arabian Peninsula, who otherwise care little for Chairman Arafat or the Palestinians. (C)

Fertile ground

Feelings of injustice and victimization--and growing conviction among Arab elites and masses alike that US policies prop up corrupt regimes; favor Israel at Arab expense; and are designed to divide, weaken, and exploit the Arab world--are rooted in negative Arab perceptions of specific US policies. Bin Ladin rides this tide of opinion. Though few Arabs endorse his terrorism, many share at least some of his

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political sentiments. A major theme of media commentary in the wake of the East African bombs was that such atrocities would not happen if the United States ceased pursuing such unjust and unpopular policies. (C)

For related analysis, see INR Brief on "Kenya... (title TSU)"; for additional Middle East analysis, see Briefs on "Iraq... (title TSU/NF)" and "Iran/Afghanistan: Border Buildup (U)"-- all August 28, 1998.

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