

# The Middle East Quarterly March 1995

## Law Enforcement Views Radical Islam: Protecting America By Oliver Revell

*Oliver Revell is the founder and president of Revell Group International, Global Business and Security Consultants, Dallas, Texas. He served for thirty years as an agent and senior executive in the Federal Bureau of Investigation (1964-94). This article derives from a talk Mr. Revell delivered upon receiving the Middle East Forum's Albert J. Wood Public Affairs Award in recognition of "his efforts in the fight against international terrorism."*

On February 26, 1993, a truck bomb went off in the basement of the World Trade Center complex in New York City, killing six persons, injuring nearly one thousand more, and causing approximately \$500 million in damage. The attack also knocked out telecommunications and transportation links throughout the Manhattan area. It was the most devastating terrorist incident ever committed on U.S. soil. Had the terrorists been more proficient at bomb design and had the explosive device been more carefully placed, both of the complex's towers could have crashed, leading to the deaths of more than 50,000 individuals. The bombing could have been, in other words, by far the most lethal terrorist incident in history.

That day in February may have marked the end of the naïve belief that the United States is somehow invulnerable to terrorism. Even as the attacks continue, we in the West have not come to grips with this phenomenon known as fundamentalist Islamic extremism. It is time that we do so. Otherwise, we may face an ongoing campaign of terrorism similar to that experienced by the peoples of such countries as India, Israel, and the United Kingdom.

### **THE THREAT**

The United States has a long history of domestic terrorism, which includes, on the right, the Ku Klux Klan, the Minutemen, the American Nazi Party, the Christian Identity Movement, and the Jewish Defense League; and on the left, the Weather Underground Organization, the Armed Forces of National Liberation (FALN), and the Black Panther Party. But by far the greatest threat to the United States at this time comes from elements associated with radical fundamentalist Islam. Groups associated with this movement include Hizbullah (Party of God), Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement), Islamic Jihad, Palestine Islamic Jihad, and the Muslim Brethren (also known as the Muslim Brotherhood).

Hizbullah and Hamas are very active and extremely dangerous; however, it is the Iranian government, aided by its Sudanese counterpart, that drives fundamentalist Islam. Without the intensive support of these two regimes, none of the fundamentalist groups would pose nearly the threat they do. These two governments continue to work toward Ayatollah

Khomeini's oft-stated goal: The spread of his vision of the true nature of Islam and the creation of Islamic states throughout the Muslim world.

Fundamentalist terrorism against Americans is all the more lethal as a result of the sponsorship by Iran of such well-organized groups as Hizbullah or Hamas. State sponsorship allows the groups to be far-reaching in carrying out their attacks. Israeli intelligence has traced to Hizbullah the July 1994 bombings of the Jewish center in Buenos Aires and contemporaneous bombings in London. It seems highly unlikely that Hizbullah would have undertaken such serious actions without Tehran's direct approval and support.

The Iranian embassies and intelligence services provide critical support and possibly direction to pro-Iranian terrorist groups. The support by Iran makes the militant groups far more dangerous than extremist groups based on other religions. Only a state can provide the broad range of services needed to carry out terrorism on a global basis.

## **HOSTILITY TO THE UNITED STATES**

Muslim militants are hostile to the West, and to the United States in particular, for three main reasons. First, they see the United States as the main supporter of the State of Israel; and Israel they see as a Jewish and European creation in the midst of the Muslim world. Fundamentalists sometimes go further and see U.S. support for Israel as part of a covert crusade by the Christian West against Islam, in which Israel serves as a Western proxy.

Secondly, the U.S. government backs those moderate Muslim governments that fundamentalist militants regard as apostate regimes, opposing as they do the implementation of true Islam and the creation of a unitary Islamic state. This category includes the governments of Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Algeria.

Thirdly, the United States offers an attractive culture with materialistic and individualistic qualities that fundamentalist Muslims view as dangerously seductive and incompatible with the ethos of an Islamic moral order.

The cultural aspect is a subtle but important one. Fundamentalist Muslims tend to look at American culture through the prism of their own societies, and see in it a reflection of religious motives. For example, they view the American University in Beirut, the product of American Protestant missionaries in the nineteenth century, as part of a U.S. government conspiracy to subvert Islamic culture. Just as Middle East governments closely control the content of books and the media, so Muslim militants assume news reports coming from the United States, or even works of fiction coming from the United Kingdom (such as Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*), reflect calculated attempts by the West to undermine Islam.

For Americans doing business in the Middle East, this notion of America as a cultural enemy has particular importance. As countries such as Egypt and Algeria move away from the old, centralized, state-managed enterprises, they depend increasingly on

investment, technology, and expertise from abroad. When American businessmen and technological consultants set up offices abroad, they do more than work on a specific project; they also represent their civilization. To those who see the United States as the cultural enemy, American businessmen become targets.

This points to the fact that it is who Americans are--not their actions--that makes the fundamentalist extremists hostile to them. It doesn't matter if you inadvertently insult them or not, for they are hostile in either case.

These perceptions of Western affronts to Islam are likely to continue and provoke violent reactions, including terrorist threats and attacks against American citizens. U.S. diplomatic and military facilities overseas have been prepared for such attacks: terrorists in countries like Egypt and Algeria have therefore turned their attention to more accessible targets, including foreign businesses, tourists, and hotels or restaurants that cater to expatriates.

Although the stereotype of Muslim militancy portrays their thinking as irrational or fanatical, the leaders of these groups have displayed a very calculating and cold rationality. They are not inclined to sacrifice their assets or their own security recklessly. Terrorist acts are usually planned to invoke a specific response that in their minds will advance the cause.

## **ISLAMIC EXTREMIST TERROR IN THE UNITED STATES**

Radical and militant organizations have learned that the United States provides an almost perfect sanctuary for their activities.

In a remarkable piece of investigative journalism, Steven Emerson has shown in *Jihad in America*, a documentary that aired on public television in November 1994, that Muslim extremism has important strongholds in the United States. He reveals that Muslim radicals have infiltrated so deeply that they are now using the United States as a base of operations and support for their organizations worldwide. Emerson also shows that the extremist who masterminded the World Trade Center bombing has ties to other radical groups still operating in the United States, and establishes that these groups exploit the freedoms guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution to spread a message of hate and violence.

The large number of Iranian exiles in the United States includes a range of anti-Khomeini factions, including royalists (who favor a return of the late shah's son to the throne) and leftists (such as the People's Mojahedin). It also numbers Iranians loyal to the current regime, including members of the Iranian Mission to the United Nations and such foundations as the Mustazafin, which are actually fronts for the Iranian government, and members of Hizbullah and Islamic Jihad.

The first case of Iranian-backed violence on U.S. soil appears to have been the murder in a Washington, D.C. suburb of `Ali Akbar Tabataba'i by three members of the Islamic Guerrillas of America, a fundamentalist Shi`i organization composed of pro-Khomeini

black American Muslims, on July 22, 1980. Tabataba'i headed the Iran Freedom Foundation, an outspokenly pro-shah Iranian organization. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) arrested two of the three individuals responsible for Tabataba'i's murder on July 24, 1980. The third, David Belfield, also known as Daoud Salahuddin, was never apprehended. Law enforcement officials believe that shortly after the assassination, Belfield received sanctuary in the Iranian Interests Section, located in the Algerian embassy in Washington. He subsequently fled the United States to Iran, where he still resides today and is reportedly active with the Revolutionary Guards.

In December 1983, several pro-Khomeini students planned to firebomb a Seattle theater while an Iranian singing group performed for an audience made up of pro-shah Iranians. The FBI and the local law enforcement officials prevented this act of violence by interviewing the students prior to the planned concert. They learned that the pro-Khomeini students were planning to bar the doors of the hall, splash gasoline on the building, and set it on fire. If they had been successful, as many as five hundred of their countrymen could have been killed. Most of the pro-Khomeini students were being subsidized through various front groups by the Iranian government.

The two most dangerous Muslim extremist organizations presently represented in the United States are Hizbullah and Hamas.

**Hizbullah.** Hizbullah is an umbrella organization for several fundamentalist Shi'a Muslim terrorist groups and militias; it is directly sponsored by Iran. Since its emergence after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, Hizbullah has actively pursued its goals of establishing an Islamic Republic in Lebanon while exporting to the world the Shi'a Islamic revolution begun in Iran. Hizbullah was responsible for the taking of most of the hostages in Lebanon, including several US citizens. Several of these kidnappings were claimed in the name of Islamic Jihad. While many of its activities have involved fundraising and pro-Iranian propaganda, it has also repeatedly tried to intimidate opponents of the regime in Tehran, in several cases by resorting to violence.

Although Hizbullah has not engaged in a terrorist act within the United States, it has attacked U.S. citizens and installations abroad. Examples include the bombing of the American embassy in Beirut and the Marine barracks at the Beirut International Airport, both in 1983 as well as the holding of many American hostages in Lebanon.

Hizbullah has a history of terror in Europe, Asia, and South America. In March 1994, for example, the Thai authorities arrested a Hizbullah terrorist in Bangkok as he was driving a truck laden with explosives near the Israeli embassy. Had the truck detonated, it would have destroyed the entire Israeli embassy, probably killing several hundred people.

**Hamas.** The Palestinian terrorist organization known as Hamas is the most recent arrival of the fundamentalist groups in the United States. An offshoot of the Muslim Brethren, it came into existence in late 1987, one day after the intifada began. Numerous front groups supporting Hamas have been established in the United States and several collect funds as tax exempt 501(c)(3) organizations. These front organizations claim to be supporting

only humanitarian efforts but a careful analysis of their actions reveals a different story. The American taxpayer, ironically, is subsidizing militant organizations that support terrorist groups.

The Islamic Association for Palestine (IAP), headquartered in Fairfax County, Virginia (with offices in Chicago, Dallas, New York, and various other American cities), is one such organization. The IAP disclaims any connection with Hamas but there is substantial evidence to the contrary. It has sponsored many conferences in the United States where the speakers have not only espoused fundamentalist Islamic views but endorsed the violent operations of Hamas. At one such conference, held in Kansas City, Missouri in 1989, Yasser Bushnaq, the president of IAP, spoke glowingly of IAP support for Hamas. A member of the Hamas military wing was introduced at that conference and thanked the attendees for their assistance and support. He then went on to describe numerous terrorist acts that had been carried out by Hamas in Israel. The conference attendees jubilantly cheered and applauded each incident of violence and carnage.

The pending trial in New York of Sheikh `Umar `Abd ar-Rahman will probably reveal important information about the nature, activities, and extent of infiltration of militant Islamic groups into the United States. The American public, as well as the media and scholars, should follow the evidence in this trial very closely.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The U.S. government can and should take several steps to protect the country from international terrorism, including the following:

Create a central repository of information. Emerson has shown a direct connection between El Sayyid A. Nosair, the man who assassinated Meir Kahane in New York City in November 1990, and the conspiracy to bomb the World Trade Center, a connection that law enforcement agencies--including my own, the FBI--failed to make. Based upon the material Emerson revealed, the World Trade Center conspiracy should have been detected and could have been prevented by more diligent law enforcement efforts, as was done in the follow-up conspiracy to bomb various New York facilities in July 1993.

The failure of law enforcement fully to analyze and exploit the materials obtained in a search of Nosair's apartment graphically demonstrates a major gap in U.S. defenses against terrorism. The fragmentation of American law enforcement provides additional safety and concealment for terrorist organizations. At this time, information and intelligence acquired by one agency of the government need not be centrally processed or shared. The United States needs an all-source intelligence center, to which all agencies must submit any information with a possible bearing on terrorist activities. It would collect and analyze data concerning visas, immigration status, and activities of potential terrorists. In addition, this center would provide a mechanism to ensure coordination between the agencies dealing with counterterrorist issues.

Change asylum procedures. U.S. borders are so porous that they are practically open. And once an alien enters the United States, he has all the protections of the Constitution that a citizen enjoys. This means that expulsion from the country is practically impossible, for the extremely complex hearing and appeal process is heavily weighted toward the alien. Worse, thousands of people have entered the United States claiming a need for political asylum, allowed to enter by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), then paroled for a later hearing and processing; but then they disappear without a trace into the country. Some have been located only after their involvement with terrorist or other criminal acts. The political asylum process has been compromised and abused.

Take the case of Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, the fugitive in the World Trade Center bombing. He entered the United States in September 1992, claiming political asylum. On receiving temporary residence alien status, he immediately went to work on the World Trade Center bombing. What makes this case all the more amazing is that Yousef was allowed to enter the country even though the INS detained his traveling companion, Ahmed Ajaj, for carrying a false passport. An examination revealed that Ajaj was carrying a vast array of manuals and videotapes about bombmaking, all produced by a group called the International Islamic Resistance. Yousef fled the United States immediately after the trade center bombing and is now sought by the FBI as one of its ten most wanted fugitives. Yousef is believed to be in Afghanistan, where he is safe from arrest and extradition.

Despite these terrible drawbacks in the current regulations, the Immigration Bar, lawyers who specialize in immigration cases, strongly opposes any significant reforms and lobbies Congress to keep things unchanged as a way of protecting its own self-interest. There needs to be congressional action to revise laws concerning visa and passport requirements, the political asylum process, and the creation of an expeditious means to expel those who pose a threat to U.S. interests, either here or abroad.

Improve liaison with Middle Eastern states. The FBI, which has the principal counterterrorist responsibility within the United States and worldwide investigative jurisdiction for terrorist acts committed against Americans, has no office in North Africa or the Middle East. U.S. law enforcement needs to form a close working relationship with counterpart services in non-hostile Muslim countries in order to provide better protection for the people of both regions. Also, more Arab-Americans and Muslims in general should be recruited to join the ranks of law enforcement. And, most generally, Americans need to know more about the Middle East and Islam.

Prosecute more vigorously. The Crime Control Act of 1994 contained a statute prohibiting assistance of international terrorist groups. Material support of terrorist groups must be stopped, either through vigorous pursuit of prosecutions under this federal statute, or, if necessary, new laws to circumscribe funding and direct support of terrorist organizations from the United States.

Revise the attorney general's guidelines on investigations. The attorney general's guidelines presently prohibit federal law enforcement agencies from taking cognizance of

public information and open activities of organizations that support terrorism. To prevent terrorism -- rather than react to it after the fact -- law enforcement agencies, particularly the FBI, must be able to collect such information. When groups openly espouse force, violence, and terrorism in their press statements, publications, meetings, conferences, and radio and television productions, law enforcement agencies need to be aware of the threat these organizations may pose. At present, the media and academia have access to this open public information but unless or until the FBI has reason to believe that a crime has been or is about to be committed, it cannot monitor or evaluate such information. This often means that terrorist acts that could have been prevented by lawful means will not be due to these unrealistic limitations. Ours is the only government that requires its law enforcement agencies to be deaf, mute, and blind until there is blood on the streets.

It is possible to protect Americans from terrorism without violating constitutional rights. However, if we are unsuccessful in preventing significant acts of terrorism because of a failure to take prudent precautions, the ensuing public demand for action could result in draconian measures, thereby aiding the terrorists in their battle to discredit America.

To this end I thank the Middle East Forum for your outstanding efforts to foster awareness and knowledge concerning these subjects. I also want to thank you for your recognition of those who fight the daily battle against terrorism. For in honoring me, you are, in fact, honoring all of those in the FBI, law enforcement and intelligence communities who have worked together to prevent the scourge of terrorism from invading our shores and intimidating our people.