

# MERIA

## ISLAMISTS AND ANTI-AMERICANISM

By Reuven Paz\*

*The leading element of anti-Americanism in contemporary world politics is the radical Islamist one, which, since the 1990s, has viewed the United States as its strongest and principal enemy. This perception, especially after the American occupation of Iraq, is often accompanied by a demonization of the United States in an apocalyptic sense within a concept of a war that heralds the end of the world.*

Since the September 11, 2001 attacks and the onset of a global war against terrorism led by the United States, anti-Americanism has become an integral part of world politics. The debate over war in Iraq and then the war itself, invoked even more anti-Americanism in the Arab and Muslim World, as well as in parts of Europe. In parts of the world, anti-Americanism is also linked to anti-Globalization.

Yet, the leading element of anti-Americanism in contemporary world politics is the radical Islamist one, which, since the 1990s, has viewed the United States as its strongest and principal enemy. This perception, especially after the American occupation of Iraq, is often accompanied by a demonization of the United States in an apocalyptic sense within a concept of a war that heralds the end of the world.

The roots of Islamist anti-Americanism were deep long before the rise of the Jihadist movement in the 1990s, or the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. They were developed by the anti-American atmosphere of secular Arab regimes, such as the Nasserist and Ba'thist ones, and encouraged by their alliance with the Soviet Union. Millions of Arabs grew up with and were indoctrinated by anti-American slogans, and the perception of the United States as

an enemy that was plotting against them by supporting Israel.

Secular Arab anti-Americanism was mainly political, and not part of a cultural worldview. But, it heavily contributed to the development of Islamist anti-Americanism, by contributing one very important element -- the sense of a global Western conspiracy against the Arabs and the Arab and Muslim world.

The sense of confronting a conspiracy is a crucial element in understanding contemporary Islamist anti-Americanism. It provides the Islamists with their main justification and motive for developing the image of the "American enemy." The fact that the Islamists became the leading proponents of anti-Americanism in our time supported the notion that a cultural clash of civilizations was occurring. In previous decades, Arabs and Muslims had vacillated between being pressured by their governments to espouse political hatred of the United States, while, at the same time, there was admiration for its culture, education, freedom, and wealth. Millions of Arabs and Muslims had been dreaming about immigration to the United States and some of them managed to fulfill these dreams. The Islamists managed to turn this dual situation among certain circles--especially intellectuals and highly educated Muslims--into a war of cultures. They spread anti-American

feelings, not to mention support and justification for terrorism against the United States.

### **SAYYID QUTB--THE ROOTS OF ISLAMIST ANTI-AMERICANISM**

The first Islamist to declare a cultural war against the United States and Western civilization was the Egyptian scholar Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966). Qutb was a senior official in the Egyptian Ministry of Education in the late 1940s, and a member of the then influential movement of the Muslim Brotherhood. In 1949 he was sent to the United States for two years to study methods of education. During the two years that he spent in the United States, he began to develop his radical ideas and doctrines, which, in the 1960s and 1970s, would become the philosophical basis of a wide spectrum of Jihadi groups.

Malise Ruthven, who spent time exploring the writings of Sayyid Qutb, wrote that he "was as significant in that world as Lenin was to Communism." Ruthven characterized his visit to the United States as "the defining moment or watershed from which 'the Islamist war against America' would flow."

Sayyid Qutb wrote many articles and letters from the United States. Many of them were collected in a book published in Saudi Arabia in 1985.<sup>(1)</sup> Many references to his views on the United States are found in his writings, including his monumental interpretation of the Koran, "In the Shadow of the Koran" (Fi Zalal al-Koran).

In his letters and writings, Sayyid Qutb laid the foundation for the perception that American society, and hence Western culture, was the new form of Jahiliyyah--the pre-Islamic period, which represents ignorance of God's rule and the rule of arbitrary law instead. In his famous book, *Milestones* (Ma'alim fi al-Tariq), Qutb draws the most important element of his conclusions from his

interpretation of Western society in the American paradigm:

The leadership of mankind by Western man is now on the decline, not because Western culture has become poor materially or because its economic and military power has become weak. The period of the Western system has come to an end primarily because it is deprived of those life-giving values, which enabled it to be the leader of mankind.

It is necessary for the new leadership to preserve and develop the material fruits of the creative genius of Europe, and also to provide mankind with such high ideals and values as have so far remained undiscovered by mankind, and which will also acquaint humanity with a way of life which is harmonious with human nature, which is positive and constructive, and which is practicable.

Islam is the only System, which possesses these values and this way of life.

From these conclusions, he then defines the nature of the clash between Islam and the West/United States:

The enemies of the Believers may wish to change this struggle into an economic or political or racial struggle, so that the Believers become confused concerning the true nature of the struggle and the flame of belief in their hearts becomes extinguished. The Believers must not be deceived, and must understand that this is a trick. The enemy, by changing the nature of the struggle, intends to deprive them of their weapon of true victory, the victory, which

can take any form, be it the victory of the freedom of spirit....(2)

Qutb argued that the worst form of colonialism, which had outlasted the formal end of European colonialism, was "intellectual and spiritual colonialism." He advised the Islamic world to destroy the influence of the West within itself, to eradicate its residue "within our feelings." Anti-Americanism, according to Qutb's philosophical legacy for the generations that followed him, was "the greater Jihad" in Islam--the Jihad of the self or Jihad al-Nafs. This Jihad would therefore require the emergence of a new generation of Muslims who should fight the West primarily in their own minds long before moving to launch a military Jihad.

Twenty-five years after Sayyid Qutb's Milestones, one of his major followers, the Palestinian Dr. Abdallah 'Azzam, spiritual father of Qa'idat al-Jihad, wrote an article in Afghanistan that set the principles of the group that would become al-Qa'ida:

Every principle needs a vanguard (Tali'ah) to carry it forward and, while forcing its way into society, puts up with heavy tasks and enormous sacrifices. There is no ideology, neither earthly nor heavenly, that does not require such a vanguard that gives everything it possesses in order to achieve victory for this ideology. It carries the flag all along the sheer endless and difficult path until it reaches its destination in the reality of life, since Allah has destined that it should make it and manifest itself. This vanguard constitutes the solid base (al-Qa'ida al-Sulbah) for the expected society.

As long as the ideology - even

if it originates from the Lord of the Worlds--does not find this self-sacrificing vanguard that spends everything in its possession for the sake of making its ideology prevail, this ideology will be still-born, perishing before it sees light and life. The motto of those who carry this ideology forward must be:

'Call your partners (of Allah), and then plot against me, and give me no respite. My protector is Allah, who has revealed the Book. He will choose and support the righteous.' (Surat al-A'raf, 195-196)...

Now America is trying to grab the fruits of this great Jihad and to rule without recourse to Allah's book. Accordingly, the solid base has to face international pressures and temptations from all over the world. But they refused to bow their heads before the storm. They decided to continue their march along a path of sweat and tears and blood.(3)

Sayyid Qutb not only laid the basis for radical Islamist anti-Americanism, but was also one of the ideologues that most influenced the emergence of various trends of present-day Islamism and its sense of being attacked by a global, American led, conspiracy.

Islamists tend to give a "scientific" cover to their analysis of global and historical developments. However, their analysis is rather unscientific since the model for the norms of true Islamic behavior is always Muhammad the Prophet and the first generation of Muslims (Al-Salaf al-Salih). Further, the way to relate to this model is through evidence derived from a series of citations from the sacred sources of Islam, and the historical developments of the Muslims.

In some ways, Qutb's influence was similar. He wrote his impressions of American society and culture at a time when the United States was still a mystery for most Muslims, especially in the Arab Muslim world. The enemy then was Great Britain, either in the Arab world, India or Malaysia. In the 1950s, even the creation of Israel was still perceived as a British conspiracy.

In the eyes of many Islamists, the change of developments in the Middle East and the growing direct involvement of the United States made Sayyid Qutb seem quite prescient. Therefore, his writings about American society and culture became a kind of sacred source to refer to in developing the blunt anti-Americanism of the 1990s. Sayyid Qutb introduced anti-Americanism to the Islamic world. His followers developed and merged this element into their interpretation of Islam, and made it a part of the religion and one's religious duties.

An Egyptian Islamist, Dr. Tareq Hilmi, opened his October 2003 article entitled "America that We Hate," with the statement: "We worship Allah by hatred of America." Then he gave a summary of the reasons for this hatred, culled from numerous other articles and publications:

"This is the America that declared war against Islam and the Muslims under the title of world terrorism. This is the America that gives unlimited and unconditional support for the Zionist entity. This is the America that wants the Muslims to surrender and submit to the forces of occupation, otherwise they are considered terrorists. This is the America that is using weapons that are internationally prohibited to crush the Muslims of Iraq and Afghanistan, and is using its planes and missiles to attack the Muslims in Palestine. This is the America that protects the agent

governments in the Islamic world, which act against the will of the Muslim peoples... The history of America is full of evilness against humanity...

"This is the America that occupies the world with the culture of sex and deviation. This is the pagan civilization in Christian disguise... This is the American civilization whose object is the body and its means is materialism. The spirit has no place in the system of American values. They are dressed with Christian clothes on hearts that know nothing but stealing, robbing, and occupying the possessions of others. Has America left one place in our lives as Muslims without corrupting it?" (4)

#### **THE CULTURE OF GLOBAL JIHAD**

These kinds of articles are primarily aimed at "The cursed, who are not fighting by Jihad... their brothers are killed and they remain asleep... their sacred laws are violated and they remain calm... they love miserable life and hate the honorable death." These articles portray the United States as the "mother of all evils" in the world. They demonize American politics, culture, and society, in everything they do. Is this just the search for the devil and its allies by religious people indoctrinated by Islam to divide the world into two strict parts--the world of Islamic belief and sovereignty (Dar al-Islam) vis-a-vis the world of the infidels against whom there must be waged a constant war (Dar al-Harb)?

The answer lies in the emergence of what we might call the "culture of global jihad." Since the 1990s, anti-Americanism, like the doctrines of modern Islamic anti-Judaism and the doctrines of a global conspiracy against Islam and the Muslims, has been a means to mobilize the Muslim world within the culture of global Jihad. Such a culture is

as much based on the enemy as it is on its own particular innovations.

The public support for Islamist terrorist groups, so vital to their success, is the consequence of several social and psychological factors underlying the Islamic social-political renaissance:

--Islamic and Islamist movements and groups have succeeded in the past three decades in planting in Arab and Muslim societies the notion of a global cultural war, in which they are confronting a global conspiracy against Islam as a religion, culture, and way of life. Thus, many in the Islamic world now view concepts synonymous in Western political culture with terrorism and political violence to be Islamic religious duties. Such concepts include Jihad, Takfir (refutation), Istishhad (Martyrdom, including by suicide), and Shahid (Martyr). The central notion, common to most of the Islamic movements and groups--those that carry out terrorism and political violence, and those that justify it and feed the atmosphere that promotes such activity--is that of being in a state of siege, which calls for self defense. To those who believe in this concept, the confrontation justifies the use of all means--particularly when these means are given religious legitimacy.

--Many of the Islamist and Islamic movements and groups have succeeded in convincing many in the Muslim world that they represent the true contemporary interpretation of Islam. Moreover, most of these groups developed out of the perceived need to return to the earliest fundamental sources of Islam. Thus, they based their views on Islamic scholars like Ibn Hanbal and Ibn Taymiyyah of the Middle Ages, and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab of the 18th century, who were the leading fundamentalist religious scholars, as well as the most unyielding.

--The success of the Islamist movements lies in the basic diversity of Islam. However it also owes a lot, on the

one hand, to the lack of a single Islamic center that enjoys the confidence of the majority of the Muslim world, and, on the other, to the control the modern secular regimes in the Arab and Muslim World have over the religious establishments. Large parts of the public view those religious establishments as servants and puppets of the secular state ('Ulama' al-Salatin), whose interpretations and rulings buttress the interests of the state. Thus, Islamic and Islamist groups and individuals have become the spiritual guides of a large Islamic population, and maintain a great deal of power and influence.

--Most of the Islamic movements and groups, primarily those that emerged during the 1970s and after, portray the Arab and Muslim regimes--and in some cases rightfully--as symbols of arbitrary oppression and distortion of the social justice that is rooted in orthodox Islam. Thus, they instill in and bring their followers to sympathize with and support those who present themselves as the protectors of the weaker elements of society. In many cases they manage to recruit the social, political, cultural and economic elements that are protesting against various Arab and Muslim regimes. These elements also see themselves as opposing the alleged global enemies and conspirators: The United States, Israel, the Jews, Western "Crusader" heretic culture, etc.

--The Islamic socio-political revival, particularly since the 1960s, has been linked both to social changes in the Arab and Muslim World, and to the formation of an educated middle class in different countries. This middle class has in part distanced itself from Western secular modernization and the institutions of the modern state: the military, government administration, social and economic institutions controlled by the state, the public media, etc. Another part of this class--mainly members of respected

professions such as physicians, lawyers, pharmacists, engineers, academic scholars, or merchants who have suffered from the state's tendency to nationalize the economy--have found in the Islam propounded by modern Islamists the solution to their problems. This process created a large and highly educated group of individuals, who viewed themselves as a social vanguard, and adopted Islamic and Islamist theories as the basis of their social struggle.

--The next stage was characterized by massive activity within the existing Islamic groups, along with the formation of new Islamic radical groups, followed by the publication of new doctrines and ideologies that did not necessarily correspond with orthodox Islam. Many of these new doctrines won many adherents in the course of the ensuing violent struggle.

--All these processes assisted the Islamist groups in gaining more power and public support, and enabled them in some cases to attract a certain segment of society who were protesting and struggling for increased human and civil rights. But, there is another very important element to note here. This is what we may call the "Islamic atmosphere" that is created by movements and groups that are not connected to political violence or terrorism, some of whom even publicly condemn it or express their reservations about the use of violence. Their importance concerning anti-Americanism lies in two linked elements:

-- These groups and movements carry out the vast majority of political, social, cultural and educational Islamic work, both in the Muslim world and among Muslim communities in the West. Therefore, they serve as the most important elements in creating and preserving the "Islamic atmosphere" that is used by more extremist and violent Islamist groups. They are, in many cases, a sort of greenhouse for the emergence of

violent groups as well as the preservation of worldviews where hostility towards the West or Western culture dominates.

-- On the one hand, the social, political, cultural, economic, educational, and charity infrastructures of these movements are the main avenues of finance and support for Islamic projects that, as a by-product, are also used to finance violent and terrorist groups. On the other hand, they are most active in consolidating Muslim communities in the West, and therefore set the stage for massive fundraising, political support, and, in some cases, recruitment for militant Islamist groups, among their communities.

--The Islamist "terrorist culture" can be sketched as a pyramid. The base is the large-scale activity of the Islamic moderate and non-violent groups, associations, institutes, and projects of all kinds. The top of the pyramid is the radical Islamists and pro-terrorist activity. The middle is the various processes that refine certain social elements into hatred, revenge, and the search for power and violence. This violence is in many cases indirectly supported and financed by innocent elements as a result of the culturally violent influences.

These elements are consolidated through the creation of a common enemy -- the United States. Ayatollah Khomeini tried to use this anti-Americanism to export his Islamic revolution to the Sunni Muslim world, but failed. The scholars that stand behind Qa'idat al-Jihad are using anti-Americanism to create a culture of global Jihad, which they hope will spread all over the Arab and Muslim world to Muslim communities in the West -- and eventually the whole world -- thus opening new fronts in the war against the same enemy. United by hatred of the United States and the sense of a global conspiracy, this war is conceived as an asymmetric war of self-defense. In such a war, Jihad becomes terrorism justified as a religious duty.

### **JUSTIFICATION OF TERRORISM**

The first Islamic ruling (Fatwah) to legitimize the September 11 attacks by Qa'idat al-Jihad, was issued by the Saudi Salafist Shaykh Hammoud al-'Uqla al-Shu'aybi:

... Having said this, you should know that America is a kufr state that is totally against Islam and Muslims. In fact it has reached the peak of that arrogance in the form of open attacks on several Muslim nations as it did in Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Philistine, Libya and others, where it -- America -- allied with the forces of Kufr such as Britain, Russia and others in attacking and trying to exterminate them. Similarly, America expelled the Palestinians from their homes and housed the 'brothers of pigs and apes' in them; and stood firmly in support of the criminal Zionist state of the Jews, giving them all they need in the form of wealth, weapons and training.

How then can America after all these things not be considered an enemy of the Muslim nations and at war with them?

But, because they have reached the peak of tyranny and arrogance; because they have seen the collapse of the Soviet Union in the hands of the Muslims in Afghanistan, they thought that they are the Ultimate Power above which there is no power. Unfortunately, they forgot that Allah, the Exalted and Mighty, is stronger than them and can humble and destroy them.

We pray to Allah that He helps His Religion and raises His Word and exalts Islam and the Muslims and the Mujahideen and to

destroy America and its followers and those who assist them. Verily He has that power and is able to do so.(5)

Al-Shu'aybi paved the way for the issuance of dozens of fatwas by many scholars, all of them Arabs, which gave Islamic legitimacy to every act of terrorism carried out by Islamists against the United States, Western targets, or Israeli and Jewish ones. Dozens of Islamist scholars legitimized not just acts of terrorism but the wish to destroy the United States. Since September 2001, the object of the war against the United States is not just to push the Americans out of the Middle East, but also to follow the Americans to their homeland in order to destroy it. The easy occupation of Iraq played a great part in this development. Another element was the shift in al-Qa'ida's policy to begin launching terrorist attacks against Westerners on Muslim soil as well, even at the cost of Muslims being killed as well.

Anti-Americanism was no longer just an ideology to consolidate support for Islamist groups, but a justified Jihad as an integral part of religious personal duty. It became the war of the Army of God--Jund Allah--against the army of the Devil--Jund al-Shaytan. It was accompanied by apocalyptic visions, marked by the end of the United States.(6)

The Saudi Shaykh Salman al-'Awdah, a leading figure in crafting Islamist doctrines of Global Jihad wrote in one of his articles entitled the "End of History":

... I pray for Allah to witness with our own eyes his victory over the dominant infidel nations of the West. We wish him to show us and our descendents the collapse of these nations that controlled the Muslims, enslaved them, dominated their minds, ruled their

media, and destroyed their economy. May Allah take revenge on them. The oppressors are the swords of Allah on earth. First Allah takes his revenge by them, and then against them.

The same as Allah has used, in Islamist eyes, the United States in order to destroy the Soviet Union, so he will take revenge against the Americans by destroying them.(7)

## CONCLUSION

The nature of Islamist anti-Americanism is cultural rather than military or political. It is based on the sense of an ongoing and eternal global conspiracy against Islam and the Muslims. The threat emerged in the Prophet's time, continued with the Crusaders, and through the Muslim defeats in the twentieth century, until salvation emerged in Afghanistan in the form of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of *Qa'idat al-Jihad* and similar groups. The United States is just another force in history that represents the devilish factors seeking to fight the true believers.

Surrounded and supported by such doctrines, Islamist anti-Americanism is part of a broad religious worldview. Hence, it is not subject to compromise. In Islamist eyes, since this is a war of self-defense and an asymmetric one as well, hatred of the enemy is total. As a result of the religious nature of this worldview, Islamists are publishing dozens of fatwas, articles, and books, which rely on the Koran and the sacred Islamic sources to mobilize large parts of the Muslim world into adopting various degrees of anti-Americanism.

In December 2001, one of these scholars, Muhammad Abu 'Arafah, wrote an article that became very popular. It is entitled "The Glorious Koran Foresees the Destruction of the United States and the Drowning of the American Army."(8) According to the author, the article is an

analysis prepared shortly after the September 11 attacks. The "analysis" is based on the Koranic stories that were taken from the Bible about Pharaoh in the book of Exodus. According to Abu 'Arafah, the end of the United States is going to be in 2004, with the end of the rule of President George W. Bush, "Ramses the 2nd."

Present day anti-Americanism makes such articles very popular among Islamist youngsters, whether they actually believe it or just read it as expressions of wishful thinking. Yet there is a strong wish for a very violent revenge. As the only superpower, the United States is perceived as the major target against which to channel this struggle for Muslim honor. Islamist anti-Americanism is also a kind of default act among a wide range of Muslims, and easily adoptable by broad circles.

As long as there is a need for an enemy and for revenge, anti-Americanism will remain part of Islamist religious and cultural doctrines, and will go on fueling the Islamist Jihad, either its violence and terrorism, or its political element. A change away from this approach can only come from within the Muslim world, through social and cultural developments.

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## NOTES

1. Salah Abd al-Fattah al-Khalidi, "Amrika min al-Dakhil bi-minzar Sayyid Qutb [Inside America in the Eyes of Sayyid Qutb]" (Jeddah: Dar al-Manarah, 1985).
2. Sayyid Qutb, *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* (Milestones). For an English translation



- on-line, see:  
<[http://www.masmn.org/Books/Syed\\_Qu tb/Milestones/001.htm](http://www.masmn.org/Books/Syed_Qu tb/Milestones/001.htm)>.
3. Abdallah 'Azzam, "Al-Qa'ida al-Sulbah (The Solid Base)", *al-Jihad* (Afghanistan), No. 41 (April 1988), pp. 46-49.
4. Dr. Tareq Hilmi, "Amrika alati nabghad (America That We Hate)," *Al-Sha'b*, October 17, 2003. See on-line at: <<http://alarabnews.com/alshaab/GIF/17-10-2003/tareq.htm>>.
5. Fatwa on events following September 11, October 2001, <<http://centralparkattack.cher.tiscali.fr/islam.html>>.
6. For a typical example of such writings, see Khaled Abd al-Wahid, "Wa'd al-'Aakhirah: Nihayat Israeil wal-Wilayat al-Mutahhidah al-Amrikiyyah (The Ultimate Promise: the End of Israel and the United States)," 1<sup>st</sup> edition, July 20, 2001; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, October 15, 2001. On-line at: <<http://www.geocities.com/kalwid/index>>.
7. Shaykh Salman bin Fahd al-'Awdah, "Nihayat al-Ta'rikh (End of History)," January 2003, at: <<http://www.islamtoday.net>>.
8. Muhammad Salah al-Din Abu 'Arafah, "Al-Qur'an al-'Azim yunabbi' bidamar al-Wilayat al-Mutahhidah wagharq al-Jaysh al-Amriki," December 2001, <[http://www.homepagez.com/quran/article\\_1.html](http://www.homepagez.com/quran/article_1.html)>.

Anti-Americanism is hostility towards the people, policies and culture of the United States of America. Many Islamic and Marxist regimes are noted for their anti-American sentiments - often disguised as criticism of the War on Terror. Those with anti-American sentiments often lack the liberty celebrated in America and therefore hate America because of the freedoms available to the American people. Many anti-Americans, which include even some American citizens, are liberals who believe that other "Anti-American feelings had always been strong in Islamic countries although they were slightly subdued with the support of the U.S. and the West at large to massive protests of the Arab Spring, which toppled a number of regimes. Washington hoped to overcome the serious crisis in the relations with the Islamic world.Â Radical Islamists are strengthening their positions, which means the United States - the Arab Spring project sponsor - failed to achieve its goals in full, the expert said. "The current developments strengthen the position of radical Islamists in the Middle East.Â The outbreak of anti-Americanism does not mean that Washington is unable to influence the regional situation, he said. Anti-Semitism was, and remains, a plague that endangers us all. There is an urgent need to quell, rather than appease, Muslim anti-Semitism.Â The Islamist Perspective. In Rubin, B., and Rubin, J. C. (eds.), *The Loathing of America: Anti-Americanism Old and New*. Herzliya: Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center, Interdisciplinary Center. URL: <http://www.rubincenter.org/projects/p-r-i-s-m/>.