



## THE 2006 LEBANON WAR'S EFFECT ON GLOBAL JIHAD GROUPS

Reuven Paz\*

*The following article was adapted from a lecture presented at a GLORIA Center conference entitled "After Lebanon: A New Middle East?," made possible by the generosity of Mr. Joel Sprayregen.*

*This article explains that while the jihadist approach is not a new development in the Middle East, it has new global aspirations.*

In discussing the jihadist approach to the region—and we should remember that al-Qa'ida is only an ideological umbrella, not a commanding or organizing group—Lebanon is just one link in the chain. From the jihadists' point of view, everything that is connected to Lebanon is a reflection of what is currently happening in Iraq. They view Iraq as the harbinger of change in the Middle East.

Of course, there are two elements that must be mentioned. First, we are talking about groups that are Sunni and Arab. The entire phenomenon of jihadist activity, its doctrines, and its strategies originate in the Arab world and the Middle East. There are no new doctrines in Indonesia; there are no new doctrines in Nigeria; and there are no new jihadist doctrines in Uzbekistan. Everything originates in the Middle East, and especially in the Arab world.

Equally, there is the growing significance of political Islam, generally in the Arab world and the Middle East. All the popular doctrines and ideologies today are Islamist. There are no secular or national ones. The only ideology left in the Arab world and in the Middle East is the Islamist one.

We should also remember that the jihadist movement did not start in its

current phase or with Iraq. There have been a variety of radical Islamist ideologies, doctrines, and trends. The conflicts go back to Algeria after the free elections in 1991, when the country appeared to be heading toward an Islamist victory, but the elections were cancelled by a military coup. We witnessed a similar result in Egypt with the Muslim Brotherhood and in the Palestinian territories with Hamas. A similar pattern might have taken place in post-Saddam Hussein Iraq if there had been a Sunni Muslim majority. It could also happen in the future in Jordan or in other parts of the Arab world.

Of course, we are referring to groups with global aspirations, in contrast to the previous generation of Islamists. Their ambitions are not limited to the Arab world or to the Middle East. They are thinking in terms of a global Islamic nation, of the Islamic *umma*.

Wherever there exists a conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims, their interest is to get involved. The revolutionary Islamist effort in Somalia is an example, and similar events can be expected in that part of Africa in the future. The jihadist view is that there is a global conspiracy against Islam, fomented either by the Jews, Western countries, or now even by Iran as a "Shi'a

threat.” The jihadist views towards Iran are very interesting. For example, while Hizballah is trying to give the impression that Israel was defeated in the war, many Sunni jihadists disagree. They argue that Israel could not have been defeated, that the United States would not allow this. The outcome was due to a Western-Zionist effort to bring together and strengthen the Shi’a Muslims—that is, Iran and Hizballah—as part of a conspiracy against the Sunni world, the majority of Muslims, and Islam in general.

This is no ordinary political movement, but one with a strong sense of the apocalypse and Armageddon, of a life-and-death struggle over the future of the world. They see themselves as living during the most important period of history (with the exception of the time when Islam was founded in the seventh century). We are, in their view, approaching the end of the world. Many leading jihadists interpret daily events as the sign that a messiah is coming and that there will be a global war that will precede the end of the world. Whatever normative historical Islam has said, the jihadists have a very similar doctrine of Apocalypse to that of the Christians.

Thus, the war in Iraq, the expansion of Iranian power, events in Lebanon, the actions of Hizballah, and so on, are interpreted as signs of the coming Apocalypse. Hence, they are considering how to confront this conspiracy, intensify their struggle, and achieve total victory.

It should be emphasized that these groups do not seek limited political change or material goals that can be achieved by reforms or compromise. There is no possibility for compromise even if they fail, even when they are defeated. The Islamist defeat in Somalia—the fact that Ethiopia managed to push them out of Mogadishu—

is just another phase of the struggle. This includes the need to promote the permanent demonization of the other side. Not just the Jews or the United States or the West or Western culture in general, but also the immediate enemy—Shi’as, Christians, Kurdish nationalists, or their Arab Sunni Muslim political opponents.

In this new phase, jihadists clearly state that after the United States they are going to confront an Iranian (Shi’a) *Majus* conspiracy. This approach didn’t originate with Hizballah’s success in Lebanon. It started in early 2003 even before the American occupation of Iraq, when it was already clear that the United States was going to war with Iraq, and it was clear that the United States could defeat Saddam Hussein. At that time, the younger generation of clerics and scholars, mainly the Saudi ones (some becoming the architects of al-Qa’ida’s anti-Shi’a strategy in Iraq) started to pave the way to the post-American era. They predicted that at some point when the United States became less of a threat—whether the United States changed governments or policies—the Iranian Shi’a conspiracy would be the next threat to the jihadist-Salafist-Sunni-Arab world.

It was the strategy written by the younger generation of al-Qa’ida, not the strategy of bin Ladin or Ayman al-Zawahiri. The leading element in Iraq to push this strategy against Iran and its camp was Abu-Mus’ab al-Zarqawi, killed in June 2006. He didn’t join al-Qa’ida or declare his loyalty to al-Qa’ida until the second half of 2004. The Egyptian Islamic Jihad joined al-Qa’ida only recently, after a split. The Algerian GSPC (Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, or Group for Call and Combat), the most radical Algerian group, joined al-Qa’ida after many years of debate, internal disputes, and even the

killing of some senior members. The development beginning with Iraq and then the war in Lebanon was, for them, very important proof that this Shi'a conspiracy against them was progressing.

Yet there is also another trend among the Islamists, which might ultimately bring the Muslim Brotherhood closer to Iran. Remember that Hamas is the only Muslim Brotherhood group involved in systematic warfare. In some Brotherhood groups outside of Egypt—notably in Syria and Jordan—there are indications that the doctrine of Iranian revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini is being accepted. They are not accepting his rule by the clerics but rather his anti-imperialist, anti-Western doctrines as a continuation of the Brotherhood's founder, Hasan al-Bana, and its chief ideologist, Sayyid Qutb.

This is something never heard of before. After the revolution in Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood published several very important books attacking Khomeini's doctrine. Now they are starting to talk about Iran differently. The head of the pro-Muslim Brotherhood group in England, for example, an exiled Egyptian, spoke about Iran in very friendly terms. This is not only because the Iranians support the Palestinians and Hamas and are anti-Jewish, but also because their internal type of democracy could be much more accepted

and approved by the Muslim Brotherhood than the democracy of the Americans or the values of democracy that the United States is attempting to impose, in their view, on the Arab world and the Middle East.

We should view Iran, especially after the war in Lebanon, as a regional power that might infiltrate the Arab-Sunni world under much easier conditions than at the time following the Islamic Revolution in Iran, when they were talking about exporting the Revolution. Since then, we have slowly but surely witnessed some weaknesses in Sunni unity. The Iranians, on the other hand, are attempting, and somehow succeeding, to achieve more support. This may initially be for practical reasons—in order to get money for the Palestinian Authority (PA) or arms to Hizballah. Someday, however, they could legitimize the Shi'a in general and the Shi'a doctrine of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, to give them the legitimacy they never had ten or twenty years ago.

*\*Reuven Paz is founder and director of the [Project for the Research of Islamist Movements \(PRISM\)](#) at the *Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center, the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, and a long time researcher of radical Islam and Islamic movements.**