

TRB

FROM WASHINGTON

Fault Lines

COMING HOME LAST Friday night, I stumbled upon a candlelight vigil. Hundreds of my Dupont Circle neighbors were walking gravely down Q Street, holding signs and dispensing leaflets. As I stopped to watch, a man pulled up on his bicycle, surveyed the scene, and began to scream. "Why don't you just commit suicide?" he yelled at the marchers. A policeman rushed over and tried to quiet him down: "None of that," he said, "this is a vigil. No politics." "My brother died in New York," the man answered, "and these fuckers..." And then he sped off.

But the policeman was wrong. What the bicyclist had noticed was that the placards all said things like, "No Eye for an Eye," and "No More War." A leaflet demanded "No further U.S. violence." ("Further," a nice touch.) The cop's "no politics" plea was wishful thinking. In fact, this country's days-long hiatus from politics is already over. And the political debate that will frame the coming weeks is clear: Has America oppressed the Muslim world? Or, stated differently, does America have the moral authority to go to war?

The Nation answered almost immediately. "[T]his is not really the war of democracy versus terror that the world will be asked to believe in the coming days," wrote Robert Fisk in the magazine's October 1 issue. "It is also about US missiles smashing into Palestinian homes and US helicopters firing missiles into a Lebanese ambulance in 1996 and American shells crashing into a village called Qana and about a Lebanese militia—paid and uniformed by America's Israeli ally—hacking and raping and murdering their way through refugee camps." In other words, it's about America's support for Israel.

The left has proved remarkably creative over the years at blaming virtually any Middle Eastern malfaisance—from Iraq's invasion of Kuwait to repression in the Arab world—on the Jewish State. And Fisk continues that tradition, suggesting that the "hacking and raping and murdering" at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps helped provoke last week's attacks—even though Sabra and Shatila took place in

1982, when Osama bin Laden had not yet turned against the U.S. and was actually fighting side by side with the CIA in Afghanistan. (Fisk further illustrates his idiosyncratic theory of history when he writes, "Our broken promises, perhaps even our destruction of the Ottoman Empire[!], led inevitably to this tragedy.")

But if blaming terrorism on America's alliance with Israel was always tricky, today it is downright bizarre. After all, over the last year and a half, Washington has pushed Israel into offering the Palestinians a state in almost all of the West Bank and Gaza, with its capital in Jerusalem, and helped convince Israel to withdraw from Lebanon. It is a good barometer of Fisk's intellectual honesty that he says Muslims are right to hate America because of Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon, but neglects to mention that, thanks in part to America, Israel no longer occupies southern Lebanon.

Then there is Fisk's second example of American oppression of Muslims: U.S. sanctions against Iraq. It is now conventional wisdom among American liberals that the Muslim world has every right to be enraged by our vicious policy toward the people of Iraq. In news articles about Arab anti-Americanism after the attack, *The Boston Globe* wrote that sanctions have caused "widespread suffering among Iraqis," and *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* explained that they are responsible for "malnutrition and disease." But both these statements are false. As Michael Rubin noted in these pages ("Food Fight," June 18), Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq—which is subject to exactly the same sanctions as the rest of the country—suffers virtually no malnutrition. In fact, infant mortality rates in the North are *lower* than they were before the Gulf war. That's because, under revised UN sanctions, Iraq is now the world's second largest exporter of oil, and those exports provide Kurdish authorities plenty of revenue to buy medicines and food. The reason children elsewhere in the country go hungry is that Saddam resells needed supplies in order to fund his military. In recent years the United States has actually intercepted several Iraqi ships *exporting* food.

But perhaps the most pitiful thing about Fisk and *The Nation's* efforts to rationalize bin Laden's hatred of the United States is that they don't even correspond to what bin Laden himself says. (The left had this problem during the cold war, too—Moscow was always changing its script without informing its apologists in the West.) Longtime bin Laden watchers know he has never been especially concerned with the plight of the Palestinians. In a 1998 paper by Ely Karmon for the

Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Abdel-Bari Atwan, editor of London's *Al-Quds al-Arabi* newspaper, noted that bin Laden "has been criticized in the Arab world" for his relative indifference to the "Palestinian issue." Nor has bin Laden been a big supporter of Saddam. When the Iraqi dictator invaded Kuwait, bin Laden actually offered to send his men to defend Saudi Arabia *against* Iraq.

In bin Laden's mind, America's greatest offense—by far—is its military presence in his home country of Saudi Arabia. (The bin Laden-sponsored attacks on U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam occurred on the eighth anniversary of the dispatch of U.S. troops to the Gulf.) And that's a harder line for Western leftists to peddle. Because bin Laden isn't upset at the United States for bolstering Riyadh's oppressive policies—after all, the Saudi government's views on individual freedom and the status of women roughly mirror his own. Bin Laden is upset simply because non-Muslims live in the Holy Land around Mecca and Medina. His first priority is banishing Christians and Jews from Saudi Arabia. And his second priority is banishing Christians and Jews from every other Muslim country. As he told ABC News in 1998, "Allah ordered us in this religion to purify Muslim land of all non-believers, and especially the Arabian Peninsula."

When you think about it, this is not a very original idea. Although everyone is calling our struggle with bin Laden a "new war," in many ways it is a continuation of the same war the United States has been fighting since 1989. Bin Laden, after all, is an ethnic cleanser. And the United States is the only powerful country on Earth willing to take up arms to make sure that people of different religions and races can live together. The main difference between September 11 and what came before is that bin Laden desires ethnic cleansing on a scale far greater than the Hutus and the Serbs, a scale that has only one true twentieth century parallel.

If Fisk and *The Nation* really want to argue that America brought the World Trade Center attack on itself, they shouldn't delude themselves. They are not defending the Palestinians' right to a state or the Iraqis' right to medicine. They are defending a Muslim's right not to live with a non-Muslim. And in so doing they are renouncing this country's most sacred principles—principles that saved countless Muslim lives in Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s. When the left assembles at its candlelight vigils and peace marches in the coming weeks, let it proclaim this honestly. And other Americans will survey the scene, and scream.

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