

Unanswered questions regarding Kenya terror attacks

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US and Israeli sources have pointed the finger of blame at Al Qaeda for the November 28 bombing of the Israeli-owned Paradise Hotel in Mombassa, Kenya and the attempted missile attack on an Israeli passenger jet laden with returning Israeli holidaymakers.

The horrific blast on killed 16 people. Three Israelis, including two children, were among the dead. Ten of those killed were Kenyan hotel employees, including a dance troupe that was performing in the hotel foyer to welcome new guests.

Three of the dead were suicide bombers in a green Pajera jeep that crashed through the gates of the hotel and drove into the lobby where it exploded.

Some 20 minutes previously an Arika Airlines Boeing 757-300 reported that missiles had been fired at it as it took off from Mombassa en route for Tel Aviv. The plane was not hit and no one was injured. Witnesses reported seeing a white four-wheeled drive vehicle near the end of the runway. Police later recovered two unused Sam 7 missiles from the scene.

An unknown organisation calling itself the Army of Palestine claimed responsibility for the Kenyan attacks, but Israeli and US investigators have blamed Al Ittihad al Islamiya (AIAI), a Somali-based organisation, which they claim has links with Al Qaeda.

These savage attacks could easily have killed many more people. The plane that was targeted was carrying 140 passengers and 10 crew members. As for the hotel bomb, had it exploded slightly earlier, it would have caught a busload of newly arrived tourists. As it was, most of the guests had already gone through to breakfast or to their rooms. The two young boys killed had returned to watch the dancers.

Many of the dead came from the same village, where the local community depended on their earnings. Relatives could not even afford to pay the mortuary fees to bury their loved ones until a collection was taken amongst British tourists.

This bombing follows an earlier attack on the US embassy in the Kenyan capital Nairobi in 1998. That bomb killed 250 people and maimed a further 1,000, mostly Kenyans.

Neither the actions of the US state or the Israeli state justify these criminal acts that are calculated to murder innocent civilians going about their everyday business or simply seeking to enjoy a holiday. In no way do they assist the world's oppressed people oppose US aggression. Instead the effect of the Mombassa attacks is to provide a justification for extending the US-led "war against terrorism". Most significantly, it has given the Israeli government the opportunity to link Palestinian suicide bombings in Israel with wider US objectives in the Middle East.

The Mombassa bombing coincided with a gun attack on a Likud party office in Beit She'an, Israel the same day where primary elections were being held to select a new leader for the party. Six people were killed and 43 wounded in the incident. The Al Aksa Martyrs' Brigade claimed responsibility.

Israeli officials linked the Mombassa attacks to Al Qaeda because the simultaneous incidents at the airport and the hotel required a good deal of

planning and because tourists were the targets, as in the Bali bombing, which has also been blamed on Al Qaeda. Declaring that Israel was now also an Al Qaeda target, they offered the US their cooperation in hunting down the attackers.

So far the Bush administration has attempted to distance the Palestinian question from its war on terrorism, because Arab regimes would be unwilling to support its attacks on Iraq if Israel was brought directly into the picture. But Prime Minister Ariel Sharon is appealing to the most reckless right-wing forces in the US who are prepared to back him in his bid to wipe out the Palestinians and extend Israeli control in the Middle East.

Amidst news of attacks in Mombassa attacks and the Likud party office, Sharon was able to win a landslide victory over his rival for party leadership, Binyamin Netanyahu. Right up until the afternoon of November 28, Sharon seems to have thought that a low turnout threatened his position and that Netanyahu would win. According to the Israeli paper *Haaretz*, his office looked like a disaster zone and panic was spreading until someone thought of holding a press conference on security.

Netanyahu also held an unprecedented press conference in the Foreign Ministry's situation room, during which he was handed a fax naming the two children killed in Mombassa.

The Monday after the attack a message appeared on an Islamist Internet site, purportedly from Al Qaeda, claiming responsibility for the Mombassa attacks. Although the authenticity of this claim is questionable, since Al Qaeda has not issued such statements in the past, Israeli security services seized on this admission. Head of Israeli national security, Efrayim Halevi, told the press that the Mombassa attack should be treated as a "mega-terror attack" and warned that Israel would respond in an "unusual and unprecedented manner."

It may be entirely coincidence that the Mombassa bombing gave Sharon an opportunity to link Palestinian attacks on Israelis with Al Qaeda, and to swing the Likud election in his favour, but one cannot dismiss the possibility of Mossad—Israel's secret service—being involved in the Kenyan attacks.

While it is possible that the Sam 7 missiles were not accurate enough or that those using them had insufficient experience, it is puzzling that two heat-seeking missiles should have missed the plane at an altitude of 500 feet. What is more the Israeli jet seems to have been unusually well equipped to deal with a missile attack.

Experts have suggested that it was fitted with decoy flares like those normally used in military jets. Yigal Eyal, a lecturer on insurgency at the Hebrew University and former intelligence agent, said that the incident "could mark a successful application of some sort of antimissile technology aboard the plane". Israel had been working on methods of protecting civilian jets from missile attacks since the 1970s he said.

Reports from passengers tended to confirm the idea that some sort of antimissile defence system had been deployed. Eyewitnesses reported seeing a small explosion above one of the plane's wings suggesting that

decoy flares had been fired. This kind of technology is not usually installed on commercial airliners because of its expense. Arkia owns two Boeing 757-300s, one of which was used by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon when he flew to Washington earlier this year. If the same jet was involved in the Mombassa incident it could suggest an element of foreknowledge on the part of the Israeli authorities.

Mossad is known to have been involved in similar provocations. One of those accused of the 1986 Berlin disco bombing that provided the excuse for the US air assault on Libya later admitted that he was working for Mossad.

Most remarkable is the fact that warnings of an immediate terrorist threat in East Africa were ignored. Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammed, leader of the London-based Islamic organisation Al Muhajiroun, said that warnings had appeared on the Internet. "Militant groups who sympathise with Al Qaeda warned one week ago that there would be an attack on Kenya and they mentioned Israelis," he said.

The Australian government issued a warning of a "possible risk of terrorist attacks against sites in Kenya, particularly in Nairobi and Mombassa" two weeks prior to the bombing. It advised Australian tourists to defer all nonessential travel to Mombassa and those who were already there were told that they should leave. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the information came from British intelligence sources and was said to have been passed on to other governments, including Israel, as a matter of course. Germany, which also received the warning, took it seriously enough to warn its citizens.

Initially, Israeli government spokesmen denied that such a warning had been received. But four days after the blast, Brigadier-General Yossi Kuperwasser admitted that the Israeli military intelligence were aware of a threat in Kenya. He sought to downplay the significance of the information, claiming that it was not specific enough. Danny Yatom, former Mossad head, took a similar line, claiming that Israel got so many terror warnings they were not taken seriously.

Warning fatigue is an unconvincing excuse for the Israeli government's inaction. At the very least the Israeli government is guilty of putting its citizens in harm's way by not responding to intelligence that other governments recognised as serious enough and specific enough to act upon.

The attacks in Kenya took place against a background of a high level of Western military activity in the region. US forces are currently engaged in exercises with the Kenyan military north of Mombassa, codenamed *Edged Mallet*. Kenya and Tanzania have long been a base for US intelligence operations and the CIA is said to have a significant number of operatives in the region. US military personnel even have a base at Mombassa airport, where they are said to provide "logistical support" to Kenyan security forces.

Meanwhile the German air force is patrolling the skies off Mombassa monitoring all shipping between Kenya, Somalia and Pakistan. Add to this the western military presence in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa and the whole east coast of Africa can be seen to be under the most careful surveillance. Despite this extensive overt and covert presence, Somali or Al Qaeda terrorists are supposed to have entered the country and carried out the latest terrorist attacks undetected.

The only named suspect in the Mombassa bombing is Abdullah Ahmed Abdullah, a Yemeni who has also been indicted in the US for the 1998 embassy bombings. What his connection might be to Al Ittihad Al Islamiyah is unclear. He is said to have been travelling in Africa for the last five years and to have recently been attempting to set up a diamond deal in Sierra Leone for Al Qaeda. But there is no substantive evidence that he was in Kenya or had any connection with the latest attacks.

US spokesmen focused on Al Ittihad Al Islamiyah, an organisation that emerged in Somalia after the collapse of the state in 1991 when the US-backed Siad Barre regime fell. Its aim was to found an Islamic state that

would weld the warring clans of Somalia together. In the event the clan rivalries and military intervention from Ethiopia proved too powerful for it and it was wiped out as a military force in 1996. It played little part in organising opposition to the US intervention in Operation Restore Hope that ended in disaster for the Americans when 18 US soldiers were killed in Mogadishu in October 1993.

Allegations against Al Ittihad first surfaced last year in the *Washington Post*. The paper said that the US regarded the organisation as an affiliate of Al Qaeda. It alleged that Osama bin Laden had sent some of his lieutenants to Somalia where they had assisted the clan leader, Mohammed Aided, in killing the 18 US soldiers.

After the war in Afghanistan Al Qaeda members were said to have fled to Somalia, where they had set up training bases in conjunction with Al Ittihad. In September of this year the US administration had to drop charges that a Somali money transfer company, Al Barakaat, was responsible for financing Al Qaeda.

That discredited allegation has now been renewed. Al Barakaat's chairman, who was a leading member of Al Ittihad in the early 1990s, is alleged to have been siphoning profits into a bank account in the Bahamas held in bin Laden's name. On the same basis George Bush senior could be indicted as a financier of bin Laden since his Carlyle Group investment firm worked closely with the bin Laden family.

Richard Dowden, a leading analyst on African affairs, has pointed out that it would be unsafe for foreign activists to attempt to operate in Somalia because of the prevalence of clan politics. "Strangers," he wrote in the *Observer*, "especially rich ones, are simply a source of revenue. They are invariably kidnapped and ransomed for cash. Osama bin Laden would be an especially rich prize."

US-based experts concur in this. Ted Dagne of the Congressional Research Service called the US decision to close down Al Barakaat "a major blunder" which was based on "junk intelligence." Ken Menkhaus, a former adviser to the United Nations on Somalia who became a US government adviser, told the Bush administration last year that Al Ittihad no longer existed as a military organisation.

Despite extensive surveillance by air and sea, the Bush administration has produced no evidence to back up its claims that Al Qaeda or Al Ittihad training camps exist in Somalia. Its determination to continue to threaten one of the poorest countries in the world reflects US strategic interests in this region.

Somalia occupies the Horn of Africa, which all oil tankers from the Gulf must pass. Control of this region is vital if the US is to reap the full benefit of defeating Iraq and gaining control of its oilfields. The threat comes not from Al Ittihad, but from the possibility that a rival power might weaken US control over the world's oil supplies by seizing Somalia and so dominating this vital shipping route.

The former French colony of Djibouti to the north of Somalia has become the scene of the biggest mobilisation of German military forces since World War II. The US has established a base at Berbera, a deep-water port that is one of the best on the Indian Ocean. British and other European naval vessels are all engaged in patrolling these waters for supposed Al Qaeda terrorists.

Whoever carried out the bombing and missile attack in Mombassa, the effect of it will be to greatly exacerbate the conflicts in this region and to expose its people, who are already suffering from effects of poverty and disease, to intensified military operations.



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