The Rumor

A Surprising Number of Muslims Are Asking Whether Israel Was behind the Attacks

Deborah Caldwell
© 2001 Beliefnet.com, reprinted with permission

October 29, 2001

Within hours of the terrorist attacks last month, the word was out: Israel was responsible for crashing airplanes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The reason? Its intelligence agency, Mossad, wanted to discredit Arab Muslims. The "evidence": 4,000 Israeli employees in the World Trade Center were said to be absent the day of the attacks because they had been tipped off.

This notion at first seemed to be the province of a small number of bin Laden allies. For instance, Muhammad Atta's father blamed the Israelis for the attacks during a press conference last month and called the United States the "root of terrorism." But in the month since the attacks, the rumor has spread, starting in Pakistan and the Mideast, moving throughout the World Wide Web and ending up in educated Muslim communities in the United States. Last week it was revealed that Salam Al-Marayati, a respected American Muslim leader prominent in national efforts to promote interfaith dialogue, said in an interview on a Los Angeles radio talk show that Israel should be on the "suspect list" of those who carried out the attacks. A few days later, another scandal emerged: Imam Mohammed Gemeaha of New York's prominent Islamic Cultural Center had fled to Cairo, where he gave an interview in Arabic stating that "Jews planned those terrorist attacks."

These comments by reputable religious leaders were milder versions of what is appearing by the thousands on web message boards. Thousands of message board posts have appeared on all sorts of sites, from the most moderate to the most strictly Muslim. Some writers seem angry, but most explain their views in calm terms, as if they are simply stating a fact that others have somehow, unfortunately, missed.

On Iviews, an American Islamic news site, a member named AB writes: "I now strongly believe that the Jews knew about the attack and its plans, and most probably helped a great deal in the 'penetration' of the US intelligence, and caused for the suicide attack to occur successfully."

A post on the Islamic Circle of North America's web site is also typical: "Zionists want to see that Muslims and Arabs are attacked and their properties burned down so that the environment of the Spanish Inquisition days are recreated in the 21st century United States, so that Muslims either leave Islam for their own security or are murdered or exiled."

Beliefnet member Jihaad wrote something similar, though he toned down the rhetoric: "I believe that... Israel is indirectly connected to our recent tragic events. Sure, Jews will attack me for this, but I believe that Israel's Mossad possibly had evidence that this attack would happen."

It can be dangerous to extrapolate from web message board posts to broad generalizations. But experts believe a significant number of American Muslims do harbor anti-Israel views because of the Middle East conflict and that those views sometimes slip into anti-Semitic feeling.

Michael Sells, an expert on Islam at Haverford College, says anti-Jewish rhetoric in the "classic European sense with the myth of Jews as Christ-killers" was imported into the Middle East and is now moving into American Muslim circles. "People in the Middle East know that the Israeli lobby in the US is one of the most powerful," Sells says. "So it's not hard to understand why they would slip into the conspiracy view that Jews control the world. But it's unacceptable in a religious leader, or anyone who's educated, and certainly anyone in the United States."

On the Islamic Circle of North America web site, a vigorous discussion about the subject is going on under the heading Israelis the devil. At another place on the site, a user named Mujahid Suleiman Solano writes:

"If the USA can keep the Zionists down, I am sure we 'peaceful Muslims' will be able to keep the dogs back."

Where did this rumor come from? Apparently, shortly after the attacks, a prominent Taliban cleric named Israr Ahmed started flooding mosques and Islamic centers in the United States with faxes that read: "The secret Israeli service Musad [sic] orchestrated these terrorist attacks ... [which] are a vital link in the chain of events that the Jews are undertaking to fulfill their dream of world domination." The rumor then spread to Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlass, who blamed the attacks on the Mossad. It became commonly accepted in Pakistan and the Middle East, and from there the rumor spread to the United States, often with the help of e-mail and the web.

Some American Jews have reacted angrily, including Abraham Foxman, executive director of the Anti-Defamation League. "It's a big lie, set out there maliciously to deflect what many in the Arab world saw and realized would be an anger directed at the Arab world," he said Monday. "It has taken on a life of its own. People talk about it as if it is a fact, and that's very, very dangerous."

But not all Jewish leaders think there's much to worry about. Rabbi Irwin Kula, president of the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, a Jewish think-tank, says what's going on in the Islamic community is simply the same demon that Christians and Jews have also wrestled with. "Every community has its dark side," he said. "It happens to be that this is a particularly bad strain going on in the Islamic community and we're caught in the middle."

But Kula contends that the rhetoric isn't necessarily anti-Semitic. He thinks it's mostly anti-Israel - which is not the same thing. "This isn't about being Jewish," he said. "If Israel were a democratic Christian country, it would still be the outpost of the infidel. And a large number of the power centers of American Jewish life do not want to make a credible offer for peace. Therefore, the vested interest right now is in ensuring the anti-Semitism, the worst parts of Islam, are out there."

What's more, he said, "there are a lot of Jews around America who say a lot of weird things that just don't get made public."

Ironically, some Muslim leaders argue a mirror-image of Kula's position: that Muslims need to behave better.

"Whenever you talk about Israel, it's not a neutral issue for Jews or Muslims," says Amir Hussain, a scholar of American Islam who teaches at California State University at Northridge. "Muslim Americans have to be very careful when they criticize the policies of the United States with regard to Israel that they know what they're talking about, and they do it in an appropriate manner. They may say things in an emotional way that may not hold up on an intellectual level."

That is what appears to have happened to Salam Al-Marayati. In the hours after the attacks on Sept. 11, Al-Marayati, executive director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council in Los Angeles, was asked who he thought was responsible. According to a transcript provided by Jewish groups, this is what he said: "If we're going to look at suspects, we should look at the groups that benefit the most from these kinds of incidents, and I think we should put the state of Israel on the suspect list because I think this diverts attention from what's happening in the Palestinian territories so that they can go on with their aggression and occupation and apartheid policies." He quickly apologized, saying the remark "gave regrettable and unintended offense to Jewish Americans."

On Monday, Al-Marayati said the comment erupted in a heated moment during an angry debate. "It was an unfortunate use of language," he said. At this point, "I prefer to just let go of it."

Al-Maraytati is worried the controversy will spin out of control, particularly because "the American public does not have the patience for a Muslim-Jewish shouting match. I think the complications have arisen since the beginning of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The distinction needs to be made between the notion of anti-Israeli sentiment versus anti-Jewish sentiment. Obviously, there are going to be a handful of extremists among Muslims who will not make that distinction, and that's wrong."

The scenario was different for Imam Gemeaha, a normally mild-mannered speaker who delivered a sermon in English in mid-September calling for peace among people of all religions, and then in early October proceeded to blame Jews for the terrorist attacks on an Arabic-language web site.

"Jews dominate the political decision-making and they own the economic and media institutions," Gemeaha reportedly said in the later statement.

Sells said both remarks set off warning bells - Gemeaha's more blatantly so, although because he isn't an American it may ultimately be easier to overlook. Al-Marayati's statement, however, is troublesome, Sells says, because it occupies a "middle ground" - not quite anti-Semitic, but still unacceptable.

"Once people start making that leap from being anti-Israel to assuming that anything that distracts from the Palestinian cause is some kind of Israeli plot - and he's getting pretty close

there - I think he's in the middle ground," Sells says. "He's moving toward the conspiratorial view."

Sells chalked up Al-Marayati's comments to a "bad habit of thinking" that he will be able to overcome. But Sells says the controversy lays bare a larger problem in American Islam: its leadership. "For a long time, a certain kind of Muslim leadership has been made the only voice, and this kind of leader is sometimes fallible. The current Muslim American leadership represents "only a very thin strand of what Islam is," Sells says.

Sells sees some good coming from the stew of anger, confusion, and prejudice welling up in American Muslims, however.

"A lot of Muslim leaders are saying, 'Wait, this is inaccurate and it's radicalizing elements of the community and hurting everyone,'" Sells says. "There's a really strong rise against this in the last week."

And that, he says, means a more diverse, more intellectual - and more tolerant - American Islam may finally be born.