

Countering the theological case for 'economic Jihad' is vital

Dr Matthew Levitt explores the theological principles that underpin the fundraising methods of Islamic militants

On 4 May 2005, the US Department of the Treasury designated its 400th terrorist or terror financier. Such blocking measures are effective counter-terrorism tools, freezing funds and shutting key nodes in the matrix of terror financing. For example, they force militant groups away from formal finance channels and toward riskier and slower transfer mechanisms such as bulk cash smuggling and human couriers. But at least one battle in this war on financing cannot be won by shutting down their front organisations alone. Authorities tackling terror organisations also need to address the militant theological principles, used to raise financial support for these groups. 'Economic Jihad' is a theme that features prominently in Jihadist fundraising techniques. The concept is simple: leaders call on their supporters to engage in what they describe as a religious duty to engage in Jihad, if not by physically fighting Islam's enemies then by funding those that do. Proponents of this idea base their position on a Quranic verse in Surah 9 (Al-Tawbah) Verse 41: "Fight with your possessions and your souls in the way of Allah." Several Islamist spiritual leaders have emphasised the importance of 'economic Jihad' as a religious duty for all Muslims, and some Islamist groups have raised tremendous amounts of money using this technique.

Take, for example, a speech marking 'Jerusalem Day' in December 2003 in which Hizbullah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah told his audience: "We can all contribute money... We must not treat this matter lightly. All the institutions, committees, parties, private and collective initiatives throughout the Muslim world must be spurred on to collect money, everywhere in the world and to bring that money to Palestine. With it they will buy bread and rebuild their houses. The money will bandage their wounds. With that money they are assured of the ability to buy weapons, for the men and women of Palestine will not be weakened. The [challenge] of our era is found today in Palestine. If we cannot give them arms, we can give them the money to buy them."¹

Similarly, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Islamic theologian ruled that, instead of building mosques or going on the hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca required of every able Muslim once in their lifetime), Muslims should donate their money to "support Palestinians fighting occupation and other struggles of Muslim populations, such as in Bosnia".²

This is just one of many examples of the Sheikh's frequent calls for 'economic Jihad' to fund opposition to Israel or other militant Muslim causes worldwide. For example, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi was reported as stating in an interview with the Palestine Times that "the Islamic resistance in Lebanon and Palestine represents the glorious face of the Muslim umma [nation] and serves as an example to that effect".

He added: "If we can't carry out acts of Jihad ourselves, we at least should support and prop up the mujahideen financially and morally so that they will be steadfast until God's victory."³

Palestinian Islamic Jihad

For example, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) activist Fawaz Damra called on supporters in the US to engage in 'economic Jihad', to support PIJ activities targeting Israelis in Israel and the Palestinian

territories. Damra served as an officer of the Afghan Services Bureau (aka the Alkifah Refugee Center, aka Maktab al-Khidmat), a non-profit organisation based in Brooklyn, New York. Damra also served as a fundraiser for PIJ.⁴

Transcripts of phone conversations between Damra and various PIJ officials and videos of Damra sharing the dais with them - at times introducing them - at PIJ conferences were key pieces of evidence presented at Damra's 2004 trial in Cleveland, Ohio.

Damra's comments at various Islamic Jihad fundraising events in the US, illustrate his intention to use donations to support militant Islamic groups, often explaining to the audience that the funds they donate will be specifically earmarked for PIJ.

At one fundraiser in Cleveland, Ohio in September 1991, Damra told the audience: "O brothers, I would like to open the door to donations... to the Intifada, to Islamic Jihad in Palestine."

Later on he went a step further to entice potential donors, arguing that the donation would be in the name of a PIJ martyr: "I ask you to donate to Islamic Jihad. Nidal Zalloum, of Islamic Jihad, who grabbed a dagger and stabbed four Jews in the courtyard of the Holy Sanctuary. Nidal Zalloum, from Islamic Jihad, is saying to you: 'Be compassionate upon my blood. Avenge my blood.' And that mujahid, who took the bus and killed more than 20 Jews. He is from Islamic Jihad. This is the Islamic Jihad movement. I say to you donate so that this money will serve you with God. I am offering the chance for this medal so that a brother steps forward and donates for the sake of God." Damra then conducted an auction for a medal in honour of these martyrs.⁶

At the same fundraiser, Damra said: "If we only read the Messenger's, God bless him and grant him salvation, words, whereupon he says: 'Whoever equipped a raider for the sake of God, he himself has raided. Equipped a raider... the one who supports a mujahid, a raider, gains an honorarium. It is as if he himself has raided... His honorarium is that of one who undertakes Jihad.' You sit here in America. Some say: 'We have donated a great deal.' I would like to ask each one of us: 'How much have you donated to the Intifada since its inception?'"⁷ On 29 September 1991, Damra again made similar remarks at a fundraiser at Currie High School. There Damra said: "You may not be able yourself to go on a Jihad, but fight the good fight with your wealth."⁸

This technique is used not only by radical leaders and fundraisers seeking support for PIJ and Hizbullah, but for Hamas and Al-Qaeda as well. Indeed, other militant individuals and organisations often issue calls for 'economic Jihad' on behalf of both Hamas and Al-Qaeda.

Damra was sentenced in September 2004 to two months in federal prison and four months of house arrest for concealing his connections to groups the US government defines as 'terrorist'. The defence, which called no witnesses, said Damra may have supported certain groups, but he did not consider himself a member or affiliate of them. On appeal, in March 2005, Damra's attorneys said their client did not belong to PIJ and that the prosecutors' use of 'affiliation' was unclear. But a three-judge panel of the 6th Circuit US Court of Appeals unanimously ruled to deny Damra's appeals.

In stark contrast to much of the funds terrorist groups raise through charitable front organisations, which are often fraudulently raised under the pretext of humanitarian support and good works, the call for 'economic Jihad' involves the knowing and wilful support of acts of violence on the part of donors. In this case, the fraud is that donors are convinced by militant preachers and fundraisers that by supporting those carrying out acts of violence they are actually fulfilling a religious obligation.

Some argue that combating financing of militant groups is a waste of time and resources since any given attack costs relatively small amounts of money. This assumption, however, neglects to account for the cost of maintaining an infrastructure of the kind that Hamas maintains in the West Bank and Gaza, or the kind that Al-Qaeda built and relied on to carry out the attacks of 11 September 2001.

Consider the Elehssan Society. In May 2005 it was designated by the US Department of the Treasury a charitable front for PIJ. According to the department, financial contributions to the Elehssan Society

supported PIJ activities, including recruitment and training through the Elehssan Society's youth centres and summer camps.⁹ Moreover, not only can relatively small-scale attacks be extremely effective and lethal, they are often more expensive than many assume. In an interview in 2002, Salah Shehadeh, the founder of the Ezzedin al-Qassam Brigades, claimed an operation could cost anywhere from US\$3,500 to US\$50,000.¹⁰

Let there be no doubt: cutting off the flow of funds to Jihadist organisations bent on carrying out acts of violence is critical. Shutting down militant organisations is an important part of that strategy, but undermining the theological foundation of 'economic Jihad' is equally important. Unlike the tactical process of shutting down fronts, however, denying terrorists the ability to raise funds under the concept of 'economic Jihad' demands a strategic effort to engage in the battle of ideas in the 'war on terror'.

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Notes

1 Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Center for Special Studies, "The speech given by Hassan Nasrallah, Hizbollah leader", Special Information Bulletin: Jerusalem Day, December 2003. Website: <http://www.intelligence.org.il/eng/bu/iran/jerusalem.htm>.

2 Amany Abdel-Moneim, "Online with the Sheikh", in *Al Ahram Weekly* online, Issue No 563, December 2001.

3 "Sheikh Yousuf al-Qaradawi: Hamas and the Islamic Jihad represent the glorious face of the Islamic Umma - Interview", in the *Palestine Times*, September 1999. Website: <http://www.ptimes.org/issue99/index0.htm>.

4 *United States of America vs Fawaz Damra*, United States District Court for the Northern District of Ohio, Eastern Division, 2004; and *United States of America vs al Arian et al*, United States District Court for the Middle District of Florida, Tampa Division, 2005.

5 Residence, Box 9, Tape #12. Fundraiser, Beit Hanina Club. Cleveland, Ohio, 27 Septmeber 1991, p3, in court documents from *United States of America vs Fawaz Damra*, United States District Court for the Northern District of Ohio, Eastern Division, 2004.

6 "A Round Table Discussion about Jihad and the Intifada", Cleveland, Ohio, 7 April 1991 in court documents from *United States of America vs Fawaz Damra*, United States District Court for the Northern District of Ohio, Eastern Division, 2004.

7 Residence, Box 9, Tape #12. Fundraiser, Beit Hanina Club. Cleveland, Ohio, 27 September 1991, in court documents from *United States of America vs Fawaz Damra*, United States District Court for the Northern District of Ohio, Eastern Division, 2004.

8 Currie High School tape, Residence, Box 9, Tape 5, 29 September 1991, transcript section is at p4 of the section beginning at 2:17:17, in court documents from *United States of America vs Fawaz Damra*, United States District Court for the Northern District of Ohio, Eastern Division, 2004.

9 "Treasury Designates Charity Funneling Money to Palestinian Islamic Jihad - Action Marks 400th Designation of a Terrorist or Financier", JS-2426, Office of Public Affairs, United States Department of the Treasury, 4 May 2005. Website: <http://www.treas.gov/press/releases/js2426.htm>.

10 Moore, Molly and John Ward Anderson, "Suicide Bombers Change Mideast's Military Balance", in the *Washington Post*, 18 August 2002.