

The Geographical Review

VOLUME 95

July 2005

NUMBER 3

THE GEOGRAPHICAL DIMENSIONS OF AL-QA'IDA RHETORIC

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the geographical ideology of al-Qa'ida. The central questions are to what extent al-Qa'ida terrorism is motivated by a desire to control geographical space, and how the organization defines that space as place in its communiqués. The study also asks whether al-Qa'ida's geographical rhetoric reveals the nature or locations of future attacks. Principal sources are statements and interviews by and with al-Qa'ida leaders. al-Qa'ida classifies distinctive geographical realms of legitimization, preparation, and action. Its geographical concerns and ambitions are hierarchical and based principally on perceptions of sacred space. The holy places of Mecca, Medina, and Jerusalem are the cornerstones of a greater Islamic holy land that al-Qa'ida seeks to rid of non-Islamic—especially U.S. and “Zionist”—elements and replace with a new caliphate. Terrorism directed principally against American civilians in the United States is one of the main tactics by which al-Qa'ida says it hopes to achieve its goals in geographical space. *Keywords:* *al-Qa'ida, environmental perception, sacred space, terrorism.*

In the wake of 9/11 the National Science Foundation sponsored a workshop of geographers and government officials to determine what geographers might do to help confront terrorism. The project answered federal agencies' urgent calls for research associated with the attacks on the United States. In a brief report entitled *The Geographical Dimensions of Terrorism: Action Items and Research Priorities* and in an edited volume that was published shortly thereafter (Cutter, Richardson, and Wilbanks 2002, 2003a), the team recommended several themes and broad areas as crucial national research priorities. One proposed research agenda for geographers was to answer these questions: How has political control of space (or lack thereof) fostered terrorism? What is the relevant regional space of terrorism, and how do territorial ideologies change it (Cutter, Richardson and Wilbanks 2003b, 225)? In a research agenda subsequently proposed, Colin Flint advocated that geographers of terrorism should ask what roles religious identities have in creating geopolitical visions (2003b, 164).

This article addresses those questions in the context of the al-Qa'ida movement by examining the geographical ideology of al-Qa'ida and proposing what insight that ideology may provide into the organization's roots, motivations, goals, and

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