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[Home](#) > PRAIRIE FIRE OF TERRORISM SPREADS TO MOMBASA

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## PRAIRIE FIRE OF TERRORISM SPREADS TO MOMBASA

Submitted by asiaadmin2 on Mon, 09/24/2012 - 11:01

**Paper No. 556**

**28/11/2002**

**by B. Raman**

This is being recorded barely an hour after the first reports started coming in of a car bomb explosion outside an Israeli-owned hotel 27 kms from Mombasa in Kenya causing a large number of casualties, some of them reportedly fatal, and an abortive attempt to bring down a chartered Israeli plane carrying Israeli tourists returning home from Mombasa by firing two missiles at it from the ground. The available details are very sketchy and, hence, no definitive assessment is possible on who might have been responsible for what appears, as of now, to be co-ordinated terrorist strikes. Some tentative observations can, however, be made.

2. It is quite possible that many of the tourists staying in the hotel were not Israelis. If only the explosion outside the hotel had taken place, one would have been hesitant to say that the strike was directed at Israeli nationals. However, the abortive attack on an Israeli plane shortly before the explosion would show that the two co-ordinated strikes were directed at Israeli nationals/interests.

3. The possibility of the strikes being the work of Palestinian terrorist organisations is less than that of its being the work of either Al Qaeda or Osama bin Laden or Kenyan Muslim elements forming part of his International Islamic Front. The Palestinian organisations were not known to have an active presence in Kenyan territory. The Kenyan intelligence has had a long history of clandestine co-operation with the Mossad, the Israeli external intelligence agency, and the Shinbet, its internal agency, and the then Government of Kenya had secretly helped the Israeli raid into Entebbe in 1977 to rescue the hostages of a hijacked Air France plane, by allowing refuelling facilities as the Israeli planes were returning after the successful raid. The Mossad and the Shinbet have even now an active presence in Kenya and closely monitor the activities of Palestinians living in and visiting Kenya and local Muslims suspected to be sympathetic to the Palestinian terrorist organisations.

4. Al Qaeda has a much stronger presence in Kenya and has many sympathisers in the local Muslim community as was seen by its devastatingly successful explosion near the US Embassy in Nairobi in August, 1998, which was also carried out during the holy fasting period

of Ramadan, resulting in over 100 persons being killed. There was local Kenyan Muslim complicity/involvement in that explosion. It was subsequently found that some Kenyan Muslims had been visiting Pakistan and Afghanistan for undergoing training in bin Laden's training camps.

5. When bin Laden announced the formation of the International Islamic Front (IIF) in the beginning of 1998 and issued its first fatwa, it designated the USA and Israel ( the crusaders and the Jewish people as he put it) as the principal enemies of Islam and called for attacks on them. In many of his subsequent statements, this characterisation of the US and Israel as the principal enemies of Islam has been a recurring theme.

6. However, despite this, Al Qaeda and the other components of the IIF had confined their attacks mainly to US and other Western targets and avoided attacks on Israeli nationals and interests, though some Jewish persons were reported to have been killed in the terrorist strike by Al Qaeda in Tunisia earlier this year.

7. This was due to the anxiety of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and other organisations allied to it not to be perceived by the USA as having links with Al Qaeda or the IIF. The PLO used to be of the view that the Palestinians would never be able to achieve their political objective without the support of the USA and, therefore, wanted that the Palestinian organisations should keep away from bin Laden. While there are Palestinians serving in Al Qaeda, no Palestinian organisation is a member of the IIF.

8. Bin Laden too respected the concerns of the Palestinian organisations and avoided any terrorist strike against Israeli targets lest there be any difficulties for the Palestinian organisations in their attempt to get the political support of the West against Israel.

9. If the strikes in Mombasa are established to be the work of Al Qaeda or the IIF, this would show that this consideration no longer acts as a restraining factor. Either Al Qaeda and the IIF have decided to strike at Israeli targets without worrying about the concerns of the Palestinian organisations or they undertook the Mombasa operations with the approval or at the instance of the Palestinian organisations, which have been disillusioned with the failure of the US to restrain Israel and, therefore, see no longer any need to keep away from bin Laden.

10. More attacks on Israeli lives and interests are likely .

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