

Terrorists' timing

by [Trudy Bush](#) in the [October 24, 2001](#) issue

Why september 11?" That question, said Israeli peace activist Uri Avnery, needs to be raised. "Preparations for the terrorist attack had been going on for years. Why did Osama bin Laden choose September, 2001 instead of a year ago, or [why not] wait until next year?"

The answer, said Avnery, speaking in Chicago recently, is that the situation in the Middle East was ripe for such an action. Rage against America was at its height. Bin Laden could act with the assurance that throughout the region many people would rejoice to see America bleed, feeling that the U.S. was getting a taste of what it has been handing out to others. The spark igniting that rage is the present explosive state of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and the images of that conflict now seen daily throughout the Arab world on the new Al-Jazeera television station, based in the Persian Gulf state of Qatar.

Avnery, the head of the Israeli peace bloc Gush Shalom and three-time member of the Israeli parliament, brings unusual credentials to his analysis: he is himself "a reformed terrorist," he says. As a teenager in 1938 he joined the Jewish underground, the Irgun, to fight the British, but left after three years because he disagreed with the organizations anti-Arab attitude and terrorist methods. "That experience left me with some insight into how terrorist organizations work," he said.

Terrorist groups are most effective if they are very small, he explained, but they need the support of many people—people who give them money and hiding places, people from whom they can recruit new members, people who will provide propaganda for the terrorists' cause. They commit their acts of terror to gain, not lose, popular support.

"Osama bin Laden doesn't really give a damn about the Palestinians," Avnery said. "But he is using their plight to mobilize the masses in order to achieve his own purpose of toppling Arab regimes—especially that of Saudi Arabia—and replacing them with revolutionary governments that express his version of Islam." To accomplish that end he needs the popular support that most of the current

governments of Islamic countries lack. The U.S. fits into this picture, said Avnery, because of its very visible support of Israel and, he contended, because it backs many unpopular regimes of the region in return for low oil prices.

Al-Jazeera, the independent Arab-language TV station founded in 1997, is enormously influential. And since the beginning of the current Israeli/Palestinian conflict, it has nightly shown images of Palestinians being shot by Israeli soldiers and Palestinian towns being bombarded by American-made weapons. According to Avnery, Al-Jazeera is a unifying force among the people of Arab countries, strengthening their feeling of belonging to one family and their perception of the Palestinians as persecuted brothers and sisters.

Until September 11, Avnery said, the Bush administration's attitude toward both Israel and the occupied territories was "let them bleed" until both sides are exhausted by the struggle. Then the U.S. might step in again to broker some kind of settlement. But September 11 has completely changed the American response to the conflict. "Colin Powell realized amazingly quickly that the U.S. had to move immediately to pull out the poisoned thorn in the region if it was to succeed in building an Arab, Muslim coalition" and counter the popular support bin Laden receives in the Middle East. That move to bring a just resolution to a decades-old conflict, combined with making America's voice heard on Al-Jazeera, may turn out to be the most effective weapon in the war against terrorism.