

## The fallout from Amman

By James Howarth,  
Created 2005-11-16 00:00

The 9 November bombs in Amman that slaughtered fifty-seven people in three hotels were unprecedented for two reasons: they were the first ever suicide attacks in Jordan, and the first such attacks anywhere perpetrated by a married couple. This revelation – apparently confirmed by Sajida al-Rishawi's [confession](#) [1] on Jordanian television – has added a macabre new twist in the bloodstrewn trail of events since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. It comes as no surprise to hear that three of her brothers, one of whom was allegedly a confidant of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, had been killed in the fighting there.

The attacks have posed a brutal challenge to the country's status as a peaceful haven wedged between conflict zones. Now certified as the work of the nascent but deadly "al-Qaida in Iraq" organisation, they raise critical questions over the relationship between moderate Jordan and chaotic Iraq. All four [bombers](#) [2] were from the neighbouring Anbar province in western Iraq where US troops have been sucked into a grisly struggle against insurgents. Tensions are simmering here in Amman, where the large community of Iraqi exiles – the "new Palestinians" – remains nervous of a backlash, despite assurances that they are welcome. Their anxiety is mixed with genuine sorrow and on all sides there is a [resolve](#) [3] that nothing should change in the wake of the blasts.

**James Howarth is an analyst for Prince Hassan bin Talal of Jordan and translator of *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden* [4] (Verso, 2005).**

Also by James Howarth in openDemocracy, an instant assessment of the Amman bombs:

["Jordan's 9/11](#) [4]"

If you find this material valuable please consider supporting **openDemocracy** by sending us a [donation](#) [4] so that we can continue our work for democratic dialogue

It is clearly worrying that the terror dragon just goes on growing new heads. But the strong public reaction in Jordan denouncing the attacks, and Jordanian-born [al-Zarqawi](#) [5] in particular, has given observers some cause for cautious optimism amidst the carnage. For days, the city has been filled with demonstrators and processions of horn-blaring cars expressing both disgust at the terrorists and support for the Hashemite administration. Jordanian society stands united in rejecting the spread of terror over its borders. This is a far cry from the Pew survey in July 2005 which found that [57% of Jordanians](#) [6] deemed suicide bombings and other violent actions justifiable in the defence of Islam.

[Prince Hassan](#) [7], the uncle of King Abdullah II and a respected international voice, told CNN outside the Radisson SAS Hotel where a wedding party was blown to pieces that Jordan must continue along its path of progressive social reform. The strategy – given that "hard security"

can never be entirely watertight – would be based on a long-term “soft security” approach involving economic inclusion and good governance.

## **The crisis of al-Qaida**

At one level the Amman attacks – like the London bombs and the [French riots](#) [7] – represent a shocking expression of dissent. But the similarity ends there. From a regional perspective and in light of the Iraq war, they come at the fragmented end of over four decades of an Islamist ideology that awoke in the 1960s when the Egyptian writer [Sayyid Qutb](#) [8] – traumatised by a two-year working trip to mid-west America as well as imprisonment and torture under [Gamal Abdel Nasser](#) [9] – became the leading theorist for the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood had its origins in [Sufism](#) [10], but against the backdrop of modern social and political malaise, adapted to form a political movement inspired by both leftist and rightist European ideas, based a supposedly catch-all ideology (“Islam is the solution”) that aimed for a full-scale takeover of the state.

The Islamist movement, having failed to achieve its principal objective, resorted to ever-more desperate measures, but only succeeded in alienating the peaceful, law-abiding Egyptian populace. One of its main protagonists, [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#) [11], went on to become the main ideologue for al-Qaida during its Sudan and Afghanistan days. Now in its Iraqi incarnation, and aiming to spread terror across the region from its new recruitment and training ground there, it seems this time to have shot itself in the foot. Whatever armchair support existed in Jordan has undeniably [decreased](#) [12].

Al-Qaida, lacking any positive social or political programme, [contains](#) [13] the seeds of its own destruction. In its current guise under [al-Zarqawi](#) [14], the movement cannot set its sights on much more than anarchist criminality. They may be able to make life almost impossible for the US army in Iraq, but they lack the political capacity to win the war outright.

The logic behind the Amman attacks was no doubt to open up an unsettling rift between the monarchy and a population who were overwhelmingly against the Iraq war. If anything, it has achieved the opposite, and the alienation of whatever support may have existed in Jordan may well prove to be another step in the inevitable decay of [radical Islamism](#) [15]. A relative newcomer to al-Qaida, al-Zarqawi clearly lacks not only Qutb’s intellectual erudition and political vision but also bin Laden’s rhetorical and media skills. His naivety and rashness are symptomatic of the decline. What was once considered *the* definitive global terror network may be splintering into a haze of localised and practically unconnected outbursts.

As with historical precedents, however, Islamist movements generally are [bifurcating](#) [16] between those who wish to continue a futile violent struggle and those who may prove amenable to negotiation and adaptation. The fact that behind the scenes talks are being conducted with the likes of [Hamas](#) [17] and [Hizbollah](#) [18] reveals a western strategy of trying to co-opt political Islam into a compromise with democratic processes and strengthen their more moderate wings, encouraging these hardline organisations to chart a similar route to the [IRA](#) [18] and officially renounce violence.

This may lead to a much sought-after reconciliation between the demand for democracy in the region and the resurgence of Islamic sentiment, regardless of the potential pitfall of legitimising political violence. That [Jordan’s own Islamists](#) [19] have at certain times been allowed reasonable political space to operate may be one reason why the country has escaped the violence until now.

## **Jordan’s path**

It may have seemed only a matter of time before violence of this nature hit a Jordan stuck between [20] a lawless Iraq, an overheated Israel-Palestine, a hardline Saudi Arabia and a hesitant Syria. But the hope in Amman is that the heartening show of solidarity here from all sections of society might prove to be a turning-point. Could it spur a long-awaited popular regional backlash against the ideas of bin Laden and al-Zarqawi?

As his regular statements [21] ground to a halt nearly a year ago, bin Laden may well be dead. The handing over of his mantle to a protégé devoid of any real strategy can be seen as a sign both of strength and weakness. The movement will continue for now, but could be fatally undermining itself in the process. Terror in the name of Islam may actually now start to go the way of all the many other movements that have tried to change the world through violence, such as the 19th century anarchists and far-left groups like the Red Brigades in Italy. Iraq and localised conflicts notwithstanding, global jihadism [21] is petrifying intellectually and, if it continues its increasingly desperate and miscalculated strikes, will lose the battle for hearts and minds.

One way for Arab governments and intellectuals to accelerate this process would be to fight back the extremists on two levels: the practical and the theological. Jordan itself – most recently at the Amman conference [22] in July 2005, when 170 Muslim scholars from forty countries came to discuss "the reality of Islam and its role in contemporary society" – has pioneered the argument that radical Islamism involves a perverted understanding of the faith. As for external powers, there is undoubtedly a need to better understand and define the basic parameters of the opponent before any meaningful strategy can be formulated. Senior international security analysts readily admit there is a long way to go towards developing a conceptual apparatus to deal with the challenge.

Moreover, the internal weakness of *jihadist* movements does not necessarily make them any less dangerous. This is especially so as long as the critical needs of the region remain to be fulfilled:

- for broader, more transparent political participation
- greater economic inclusion and social mobility
- peaceful, effective evolution beyond the simple choice of autocracy vs theocracy

As long as these issues are unresolved, the middle east will contain the potential for violent unrest.

---

**Source URL:**

[http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-middle\\_east\\_politics/jordan\\_3031.jsp](http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-middle_east_politics/jordan_3031.jsp)

**Links:**

[1] [http://www.aljazeera.com/News%20archives/2005%20News%20Archives/November/13%20n/Iraqi%20Anbar%20Woman,%20Sajida%20al-](http://www.aljazeera.com/News%20archives/2005%20News%20Archives/November/13%20n/Iraqi%20Anbar%20Woman,%20Sajida%20al-Rishawi,%20Confesses%20on%20Jordan%20TV%20About%20Hotel%20Bombings.htm)

[Rishawi,%20Confesses%20on%20Jordan%20TV%20About%20Hotel%20Bombings.htm](http://www.aljazeera.com/News%20archives/2005%20News%20Archives/November/13%20n/Iraqi%20Anbar%20Woman,%20Sajida%20al-Rishawi,%20Confesses%20on%20Jordan%20TV%20About%20Hotel%20Bombings.htm)  
target=\_blank

[2] <http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/11/13/news/jordan.php> target=\_blank

[3] <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L16204575.htm> target=\_blank

[4] [http://www.versobooks.com/books/klm/l-titles/lawrence\\_ed\\_messages\\_osama.shtml](http://www.versobooks.com/books/klm/l-titles/lawrence_ed_messages_osama.shtml)  
target=\_blank

[5] [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/3483089.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3483089.stm) target=\_blank

[6] <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=248> target=\_blank

[7] [http://www.islamuswest.org/about\\_HassanPrince.html](http://www.islamuswest.org/about_HassanPrince.html) target=\_blank

[8] <http://www.pwhce.org/qutb.html> target=\_blank

- [9] <http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?groupid=275&HistoryID=aa28> target=\_blank
- [10] <http://www.arches.uga.edu/~godlas/Sufism.html> target=\_blank
- [11] <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/zawahiri.htm> target=\_blank
- [12] <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/ArticleNews/TPStory/LAC/20051112/ZARQAWI12/TPInternational/Africa> target=\_blank
- [13] <http://www.pwhce.org/evolutionofalqaeda.html> target=\_blank
- [14] <http://www.humansecuritygateway.info/data/item660624182/view> target=\_blank
- [15] <http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=0521791405&ss=exc> target=\_blank
- [16] [http://www.adnki.com/index\\_2Level.php?cat=Terrorism&loid=8.0.228322690&par=0](http://www.adnki.com/index_2Level.php?cat=Terrorism&loid=8.0.228322690&par=0) target=\_blank
- [17] <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/hamas.htm> target=\_blank
- [18] <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/para/hizballah.htm> target=\_blank
- [19] [http://www.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2005/11/13/in\\_jordanian\\_town\\_radical\\_islam\\_thrives/](http://www.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2005/11/13/in_jordanian_town_radical_islam_thrives/) target=\_blank
- [20] [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/country\\_profiles/828763.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/country_profiles/828763.stm) target=\_blank
- [21] [http://www.versobooks.com/books/klm/l-titles/lawrence\\_ed\\_messages\\_osama.shtml](http://www.versobooks.com/books/klm/l-titles/lawrence_ed_messages_osama.shtml) target=\_blank
- [22] <http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/07/19/opinion/edpearl.php> target=\_blank



This article is published by James Howarth, , and openDemocracy.net under a Creative Commons licence. You may republish it free of charge with attribution for non-commercial purposes following these guidelines. If you teach at a university we ask that your department make a donation. Commercial media must contact us for permission and fees. Some articles on this site are published under different terms.