

# *Jihad with some soul*

*'Remember, a few guys with box-cutters wrought 9/11.'*

◆ SANA'A, Yemen

Trying to galvanize sagging troops, one of Saddam Hussein's last public pronouncements was recently to formally call for Muslims everywhere to join his ranks and fight Islamic jihad, or holy war. Should we care?

No, we shouldn't. Yes, we should. Compelling arguments go both ways.

Starting with no we shouldn't care, consider Saddam is a secularist not recognized by Muslims as an authority on jihad. If some Muslims are running in the fields of holy war, it's because others opened the door for them.

Six months ago, for example, 450 Iraqi and Sunni and Shiite religious leaders met in Baghdad and proclaimed that if "this century's pharaoh" -- that's U.S. President George Bush -- attacked Iraq, jihad would become the "duty" of all Muslims.

Leading clerics in Pakistan also recently called for jihad, noting that the war actually started years ago, that it simply intensified after Bush's declaration of a "crusade" in the wake of 9/11.

Note also that jihad can mean various things. It literally means "holy struggle." That's either one's struggle for self-improvement through humility and self-control, or the "lesser" jihad of military action, to be waged only if first attacked.

But any call for jihad is not a government conscription of troops. In Yemen, for example, religious scholars also recently formally condoned "jihad." But with a moderate government here, jihad doesn't mean military service.

Moderate Muslims make practices of jihad broad enough that everyone feels they're taking part. For example, something as benign as donating blood to the Red Crescent Society can be an acceptable way of fulfilling jihad.

So no, Saddam's call shouldn't keep us from going out for groceries today. With that said, by attacking Iraq, Uncle Sam may have opened a Pandora's box of ugly things we may not yet fully understand. Rightly or not, the perception among many Muslims is that Gulf War II is part of a new Christian-Jewish crusade.

Iraq today. Yemen or another Muslim country tomorrow. If the war is protracted, that thinking will become even more mainstream and jihad may take more threatening forms in the broader region here. Yemen Times publisher Walid al-Saqqaf puts it plainly: "The Yemeni are very emotional people."

In protests in Yemen, continuing here regularly but peacefully these days, even women have demanded Yemen's government open its borders to let them fight.

"I am prepared to go and perform martyrdom and defend my brothers in Iraq. I am prepared for death," one woman told *The Yemen Times*.

Yemen's government won't open its borders. Still, it's believed hundreds of Yemeni men, those with means and money, have managed to join their Iraqi brothers by crossing through countries with less stringent travel rules.

For them jihad is a powerful concept. Holding the belief that your enemies can take your body but they can't touch your soul makes one fight with uncommon fierceness.

Muslim tradition also says martyrs get extra rewards in heaven, such as eternally youthful wives. It's said nobody in Allah's heaven wants to leave, except a martyr who, seeing his prize, wants to return to Earth and get killed again in Allah's cause.

So even if these fighters don't win militarily, Saddam's call for jihad may only bolster the longer-term breeding of a Muslim coalition of the willing: fighters using things other than military might. Remember, a few guys with box cutters wrought 9/11.

Their type of jihad could become a terrible psychological nightmare. Even after Saddam is gone, there may be no closing it, nor keeping it from creeping to your own quiet neighbourhood. To beat this type of jihad, we need to recognize that desperate people do desperate things.

Some Muslims in this region do seem desperate. Millions of youth in particular feel lost. Their system of schooling doesn't prepare them for the world's new marketplace.

And in my observation, their system of religion, especially when controlled by radicals, doesn't satisfy all the deeper longings of their spirits.

The longer these core issues burn, the more a certain jihad of the soul will fester. Nobody needs to call for it.

It arrived here long ago.