Al-Qaeda Versus Democracy

James S. Robbins

This spring, practically unnoticed by the mainstream media, the battle lines were formally drawn in the "war of ideas." President George W. Bush used his January 2005 inaugural address to deliver an unapologetic tribute to freedom and the premises that undergird Western liberalism: liberty, the individual, and self-government. The policy of the United States, Bush proclaimed, is to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture.

In response, Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Osama Bin Laden's chief lieutenant in Iraq, released an audiotape of his own. In it, he denounced the very principles President Bush has pledged to promote. "We have declared a bitter war against the principle of democracy and all those who seek to enact it," Zarqawi announced. According to him, elections, representative government and popular sovereignty are "the essence of infidelity and deviation from the true path," and any who seek to promote this "malicious ideology," whether in Iraq or elsewhere, will be treated as infidels and put to death.[1]

This frank exchange should serve as a useful primer for all of those who believe that the War on Terror is at its core a struggle against global privation, or a cross-cultural misunderstanding that can be settled by a search for common ground. Quite the opposite is true. We are engaged in an ideological conflict that resists compromise.

JAMES S. ROBBINS is Professor of International Relations at the National Defense University's School for National Security Executive Education and Senior Fellow in National Security Affairs at the American Foreign Policy Council, both in Washington, DC. The views expressed herein are the author's alone, and do not reflect official positions of the National Defense University, the U.S. Department of Defense, or any other government agency.

This can be difficult for people who live in liberal societies to appreciate; after all, compromise is at the core of democracy. But the radical Islamists are pursuing a universalist vision of the *Sharia* (Islamic law), or at least their interpretation of it, and utopians seldom seek the middle way. The voice of the people has no place in a political system that follows rules ordained by God. The public mood is variable, but the law is eternal. For Zarqawi and others of his kind, law was created to rule man, not vice-versa. And those who disagree have no place in their world.

The war on liberalism that is now being waged by al-Qaeda and its affiliates is the political manifestation of this mindset, and of their resistance to globalization and Westernization. In an October 2001 interview, Osama Bin Laden was asked whether a "clash of civilizations" of the type described by the famed political theorist Samuel Huntington was inevitable. His answer was unequivocal: "I say there is no doubt about that."[2]

Other al-Qaeda ideologues have been even more explicit. Bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, effectively summarized al-Qaeda's litany of complaints about American culture and its impact on the region in his message to the Iraqi people on the eve of the January 2005 Iraqi elections. Muslims, Zawahiri said, should "confront America in the sphere of principles" in order to "expose its polytheism, immorality, and hypocrisy."[3]

Iraq has emerged as the central battlefield of these two competing worldviews. The majority of Iraqis are eager to build a democratic state. They see their country's successful elections as a milestone—a victory over their totalitarian past, and over the terrorists' plans for their future. They have also made their vision of the future known, and most desire to live in a society that allows them the freedoms and opportunities that citizens in established liberal democracies take for granted.

But the Islamists, particularly the foreign fighters in Iraq, do not share these views. Rather, the notion of legitimate government propounded by al-Qaeda and its ilk is rooted in a very different premise—that "[t]he Almighty is more eligible to rule since He is the Creator. This is a self-evident truth that does not accept uncertainty."[4]

The ideological divide

Such thinking is certainly not new. In his day, Sayyid Qutb, the intellectual godfather of the modern Islamist movement executed by Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1966, had argued that "obedience to the *Sharia* becomes a necessity for human beings so that their lives may become harmonious and in tune with the rest of the universe."[5] Today's radicals, however, have refined this formula still further. In obedience, Ayman al-Zawahiri argues, there can be no middle ground. One either accepts God and his law, or does not:

> *Sharia* is the course we should follow, since it is sent from God Almighty. No rational human being can adopt an unsteady or wavering position vis-à-vis *sharia*… Either you believe in God and abide by His judgment, or you have no faith in God, and then there is no point of arguing with you regarding the details of *sharia*.[6]

For al-Qaeda, *Sharia* represents a perfect system for ordering human affairs. Since man has been given God's law, there is no need for any other. In fact, because of man's innate corruption, it is a sacrilege to elevate human law above that of God.

In his day, James Madison started with a similar premise ("If men were

angels no government would be nec-
essary"), and concluded that govern-
ment must take into account human
frailties, and ideally use them to
check the growth of governmental
power. But to the radical Islamists,
Madisonian government means the
institutionalization of a flawed system
that produces imperfect laws. By con-
trast, God's law is faultless; human
contributions to it are not only unnec-
essary, but harmful. Thus, for man to
assume the power to alter what God
has wrought is a form of apostasy, an
intolerable act of hubris. As Qutb put
it in his day,

> Man cannot understand all the laws
> of the universe, nor can he com-
> prehend the unity of this system;
> he cannot even understand the
> laws which govern his own person,
> from which he cannot deviate by a
> hair's breadth. Thus he is incapa-
> ble of making laws for a system of
> life which can be in complete har-
> mony with the universe or which
> can even harmonize his physical
> needs with his external behavior.[7]

Legislators who assume this
responsibility are attempting to take
the place of God, and those who obey
them are worshipping false idols. Zar-
qawi has therefore warned that "this
contravenes the foundations of reli-
gion and monotheism… When you
worship [legislators], in the sense that
you obey them after they permit what
God forbids and prohibits what God
permits, it means that you worship
them and not God."[8]

All this made the Iraqi provisional
constitution doubly corrupt—represent-
ing both a human instrument, and one
created by infidels. It was "man-made
and pagan," according to Bin Laden,
and could be neither a legitimate basis
for choosing leaders, nor a framework
for legislation. The proper means of

establishing a government is under
Sharia alone.[9]

Naturally, the notion of separating
church from state or minimizing the
influence of religion in political life is
anathema to these elements. After all,
there is no history of such a separation
in the region, and no central institution
akin to the church to govern Islam.
While some form of secular author-
ity has traditionally wielded power,
its legitimacy was based on its role as
the defender of the faith and upholder
of the law. Thus those who disconnect
religion from politics cannot be true
believers. Indeed, Zarqawi has mocked
the "secularist democrat who sepa-
rates religion from state, politics, and
life even though he claims a thousand
times, in his own tongue, that he is a
faithful Muslim."[10]

> Iraq has emerged as the central
> battlefield for the competing
> worldviews of the United States
> and al-Qaeda.

Likewise, the radical ideology
of al-Qaeda blurs the public-private
distinction that is one of the foun-
dations of liberal democracy. The
Islamist view of law encompasses all
aspects of life. Qutb wrote that "it is
necessary that we clarify the point
that legislation is not limited only to
legal matters, as some people assign
this narrow meaning to the *Sharia*.
The fact is that attitudes, the way
of living, the values, criteria, habits
and traditions, are all legislated and
affect people."[11] Al-qaeda defines this
subjugation to God in all areas of life
as a higher form of freedom—"the
freedom of monotheism, ethics, and
virtue."[12]

Through this prism, voting is seen
as an insufficient and even counterpro-
ductive means of choosing leaders. The

democratic insistence on "one person, one vote" imposes an implicit equality that does not in fact exist. Under democracy "the most agnostic and the most ignorant people are equal to the most virtuous or most knowledgeable people," Zarqawi has scoffed. "In the opinion of democracy and democrats, right is what the majority agrees on even if it opts for wrong or flagrant atheism."[13] This is true whether in predominantly Muslim countries or elsewhere.

Notably, the views held by al-Qaeda are decidedly unpopular among most Muslims. Osama Bin Laden may be admired in some quarters for his willingness to stand up to the United States, but few fully endorse his ideological beliefs.

To be sure, not all Islamist movements have taken such a doctrinaire approach to democracy. The Islamic Republic of Iran holds elections, though with candidates chosen by the clergy and under unfree and unfair conditions.[14] Furthermore, some radicals have made it a point to participate in electoral politics either to frustrate the designs of social equality, or to overthrow the democratic system itself. A recent example of the first variety occurred in Kuwait, where extreme Islamic elements stood in parliamentary elections as a way of subsequently blocking expanding suffrage to women. The most noteworthy example of the latter is Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). A coalition of radical and moderate Islamic factions founded in 1989, the FIS took a more sophisticated, Leninist approach to elections, seeing them as a vehicle for the assumption of power, following which the Islamiciza-

tion of the country could commence.[15] The FIS won 54.3 percent of the vote in Algeria's June 12, 1990 local elections and 47.3 percent in the first round of subsequent parliamentary elections held on December 26, 1991, prompting the Algerian military to intervene, postpone the second round of elections and ban the group outright.

But for al-Qaeda, such approaches are far too piecemeal. Bin Laden and his cohorts see democracy as so repugnant to Islam and its norms that those who believe in it or endorse it have made a fundamental break with the tenets of the religion, and must be considered apostates. (In Bin Laden's view, FIS' dalliance with democracy's trappings was itself proof positive that the belief Islamists could work within the system was deeply misguided.[16])

That charge plays a significant role in al-Qaeda's strategy, because it sanctifies the killing of Muslims. It also legitimizes the use of the term *jihad*, which by definition cannot be fought between observers of the faith. By redefining its victims as those who have rejected Islam, the organization creates the theological basis to act against them. Zarqawi has concluded that his fighters "are thereby allowed to resort to all possible means to take away the souls of the nonbelievers, cleanse the earth from their filth, and alleviate the harm they would cause to Muslims." This is true even if the violence extends to taking the lives of innocent believers, even women and children.

In the case of the Iraq elections, violence was not only sanctified but a mandatory form of resistance. Zarqawi decreed that "in accordance with the religion of God Almighty, democracy is unrestrained atheism that is clear to everyone except for those who are blind in sight or mental vision. Everyone who believes in democracy, calls for it, endorses it, or embellishes it will

be viewed as an infidel and apostate even though he calls himself Muslim."[17] Attacks were therefore mounted against political candidates, elected officials, polling places and voters.

This was not a national resistance movement. Most members of al-Qaeda in Iraq are not Iraqis. Nor was it a protest against the manner in which the election was being conducted. Rather, it was a physical manifestation of the view that democracy *per se* is a direct assault on Islam itself, and it is the duty of all Muslims to threaten it by any means possible. The Iraqi election, a concrete manifestation of democracy, became a useful target for both practical and symbolic reasons.

As it turned out, al-Qaeda proved unable to make good on its threats. The net effect was to make the election into a durable symbol of civic bravery in the face of terrorist aggression.

An unpopular agenda

The views held by al-Qaeda, it should be noted, are decidedly unpopular among most Muslims. Osama Bin Laden may be admired in some quarters for his willingness to stand up to the United States, but few fully endorse his ideological beliefs. Widespread political participation in Afghanistan and the Palestinian Authority, high voter turnout in Iraq, and the eruption of the "Cedar Revolution" in Lebanon are just some of the more noticeable manifestations of support for popular government that has begun to emerge in the Muslim world.

Opinion polling in Iraq has revealed the extent of the rejection of the radical program among ordinary Muslims. In the National Voter Attitudes and Awareness poll, conducted jointly by the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the Independent Institute for Administrative and Civil Society Studies between August 10th and 20th, 2004,

only 7.27 percent of Iraqis identified the need for Islam and the *Sharia* to form the basis of all laws and legislation as the overriding priority in their country. A slightly smaller percentage (6.46%) called for a firm separation between religion and government. The plurality response, 44.44 percent, backed a more fluid dynamic—one in which "all religions and sects can practice freely."[18]

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Other studies have yielded similar results. In the Oxford Research International National Survey of Iraq of June 2004, only 24 percent of those polled "agreed strongly" that Iraq should have a government made up of religious leaders, but 70 percent supported having a democracy. And when asked what country could serve as a model for Iraq, just 3 percent listed Iran, and an equal number listed Saudi Arabia, either of which might be seen as an example of some form of *Sharia*-based government. Yet 5 percent chose the United States as a model, and more than 25 percent chose the political system of the comparatively liberal United Arab Emirates.[19]

These popular views are irrelevant to al-Qaeda, however. It does not matter that the people would not choose the form of government that they espouse. Al-Qaeda has no interest in social preference; they want to give people the government they need for their own good, whether a majority selects it or

not. Even a democratic polity with laws based on *Sharia* is illegitimate. The entire radical program must be implemented as a whole. Even if "90 percent of the laws and regulations are derived from the Islamic *Sharia* and 10 percent are derived from man-made legislation, then this constitution, according to Islam, is a constitution of infidelity," according to Bin Laden.[20]

Just as tellingly, the radicals are not under the illusion that their Islamic utopia can be built by consensus. Rather, it will be arrived at by coercion. "There is no doubt," Zarqawi has confirmed, "that the Imamate [universal authority in all religious and secular affairs] is established by means of fealty from the proponents of valor—in other words, force."[21]

Clarifying the debate

The rhetoric of freedom's opponents has seldom been so literal. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and its satellites attempted to mask the authoritarian consequences of socialist rule behind the term "people's democracy." They obscured the lines of cleavage between east and west by claiming to represent the same human aspirations to freedom, dignity, and equality, but to do so more effectively.

The terrorists make no such claims. They do not promise to give people the liberties they want, but rather supply them with the guidance they believe they need. They do not seek to allow people to live freely, but rather to force them to live justly. No free people would voluntarily choose to live in the society Zarqawi advocates. This is why the terrorists resort to violence. They are seeking to compel people for their own good. Their acts are sanctified by their beliefs.

Al-Qaeda's opposition to liberal democracy has important implications for U.S. strategy in the Middle East, particularly its articulated objective of "countering the ideological support for terrorism."[22] That term, however, is something of a misnomer. It implies that al-Qaeda's ideology boasts some level of support. In fact, al-Qaeda's ideas are wildly unpopular, and even among Islamic radicals are considered extremist. The group promotes a distinct vision of social and political order that is irreconcilable with democracy. The points of disagreement are at such a fundamental level as to make compromise between the two systems impossible. And there is no way to negotiate a settlement, primarily because al-Qaeda seeks conquest, not conciliation. Furthermore, because al-Qaeda is pursuing a universal vision and sanctifies violence, peaceful coexistence is impossible. The group will resist violently the establishment of democracy anywhere in the region for as long as it is able to do so.

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Given these facts, it is important for the United States to engage in, and to clarify, the terms of the ideological debate that is now raging throughout the Middle East. Liberals and reformers speak to human aspirations for freedom in a way that Islamist radicals reject on principle. They have a powerful weapon in their ideological arsenal; freedom has a much greater appeal than submission to the views of a self-appointed enlightened few. Al-Qaeda will never be able to build a mass base of support so long as it stands objectively against popular sovereignty.

In time, this alienation will spell the end of the insurgency in Iraq, and markedly improve the prospects for peace in the region. In the interim, the United States can and should engage the "undecided voters" of the Muslim world and explain to them that it stands for freedom, its opponents for theocratic tyranny.

1. Statement by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, posted to http://www.alezah.com/vb/, January 22, 2005.
2. Interview with Osama Bin Laden conducted on October 21, 2001, posted to http://www.jehadonline.org, January 21, 2003.
3. "The Emancipation of Mankind and Nations under the Banner of the Koran," Statement by Ayman al-Zawahiri, posted to http://www.almjlah.net/vb, January 30, 2005.
4. Ibid.
5. See Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (Indianapolis: American Trust, 1990), especially Chapter 6.
6. Zawahiri, "The Emancipation of Mankind and Nations under the Banner of the Koran."
7. Qutb, *Milestones*, Chapter 6.
8. "Legal [Islamic] Judgment Regarding Democracy, its Proponents," Statement issued by the Legal Committee of Al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda of Jihad in the Land of the Two Rivers, posted to http://www.almjlah.net/vb, January 27, 2005.
9. The form of government envisioned by the radical Islamists is laid out in Sheikh Omar Bakri Muhammad's *The First 24 Hours After the Establishment of the Islamic State* (London: Al-Muhajiroun Publications, nd).
10. "Legal [Islamic] Judgment Regarding Democracy, its Proponents."
11. Qutb, *Milestones*, Chapter 7.
12. "The Emancipation of Mankind and Nations under the Banner of the Koran."
13. "Legal [Islamic] Judgment Regarding Democracy, its Proponents."
14. See, for example, Homa Omid, "Theocracy of Democracy? The Critics of 'Westoxification' and the Politics of Fundamentalism in Iran," *Third World Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1992), 675-91.
15. See Yahia H. Zoubir, "Algerian Islamists' Conception of Democracy," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1996).
16. Osama Bin Laden, "Letter to the American People," posted to http://www.waaqiah.com, October 26, 2002.
17. "Legal [Islamic] Judgment Regarding Democracy, its Proponents."
18. International Republican Institute, Iraq National Voter Attitudes and Awareness Poll, July 24-August 2, 2004, http://www.iri.org.
19. Oxford Research International, National Survey of Iraq, June 2004, news.bbc.co.uk/nol/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/15_03_04_iraqsurvey.pdf.
20. Osama Bin Laden, "To Muslims in Iraq," posted on the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA) discussion forum, December 28, 2004, http://www.yaislah.org/.
21. "Legal [Islamic] Judgment Regarding Democracy, its Proponents"; For a discussion of the Imamate, see Sayyid Sa'eed Akhtar Rizvi, *Imamate: The Vicegerency of the Prophet[s]* (Tehran: World Organization for Islamic Services, 1985), 1.
22. This approach was described in Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas J. Feith, "U.S. Strategy for the War on Terrorism," Remarks to the Political Union, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, April 14, 2004.