



The Long, Hard Slog

By Reuel Marc Gerecht

Real progress has been made in the war on terror—al Qaeda no longer enjoys state-sponsorship, and Iraq is moving toward democracy. But because neither the rogue regimes nor the “holy warriors” in the region can afford to allow the United States to successfully introduce democracy into Iraq, we must expect them to ratchet up the level of violence to prevent that from happening.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s memo on the “Global War on Terrorism” has elicited derision and glee from many in the press and the Democratic Party. The publicly upbeat, brusque secretary appears in the in-house memorandum far more pensive and tentative in his judgments about America’s—specifically the Pentagon’s—success in its battle against Islamic holy-warriorism.

“We are having mixed results with [Osama bin Laden’s] al Qaeda,” Rumsfeld confesses. “Today, we lack metrics to know if we are winning or losing the global war on terror. . . . Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training, and deploying against us? . . . Does DoD need to think through new ways to organize, train, equip, and focus to deal with the global war on terror?”

The Evolution of al Qaeda

Though it is always difficult to tell whether the “private” queries of a senior official are intended to reveal serious intellectual agitation and curiosity, or rhetorical self-aggrandizement, or both, it is not that difficult to answer Rumsfeld’s principal questions about al Qaeda and its jihad

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against America. The Bush administration—specifically the Pentagon—has been enormously successful in its efforts to gut Osama bin Laden’s organization. It is, of course, possible that al Qaeda, a transnational union of suicidal believers, will be able to regroup with time and again strike the United States with the same lethality as it did on 9/11. The dream of al Qaeda—the conviction that Muslims armed with a violent faith can restore the glory, pride, and power of Islam—obviously remains a potent elixir for many young men who live on a diet of Saudi-financed Wahhabism.

Nonetheless, the Bush administration has shattered al Qaeda’s structure and, possibly, its triumphalist ideology built on bombing successes through the Clinton years. Al Qaeda was founded on the premise that a worldwide cadre of Muslim holy warriors could be recruited, indoctrinated, and militarily trained.

Look at its early operational bible, *The Encyclopedia of the Afghan Jihad*, which was a multi-volume guide to paramilitary and terrorist activity compiled by the Maktab al-Khadamat, the Pakistan-based jihadist organization from which al Qaeda evolved. The *Encyclopedia* and its many derivatives clearly aim to democratize terrorism, to make it possible for small holy-warrior cells to sustain themselves in the West far from a Middle Eastern home-base. In other words, to create a viable equivalent of the Communist International without having Moscow

at its center to provide aid, encouragement, and training in the black arts.

It was never clear that al Qaeda's geographical aspirations could be realized. The group could not have been born without state sponsorship—first in Pakistan, during the Soviet-Afghan war, and then later in fundamentalist Sudan and Afghanistan. Virtually all of al Qaeda's front-line holy warriors, particularly its lieutenants, required training time in Afghanistan. Young militant Muslim men may be found the world over. But the fine-tuning required to turn these men into effective death-wish believers demanded a pipeline back to Afghanistan, a secure domain where bin Laden and company could intellectually and operationally work through their ever-evolving, ever-more complex terrorist conspiracy.

The destruction of the Taliban state in Afghanistan has put to the test the foundation myth of al Qaeda, that a transnational body of Muslim militants can effectively wage holy war against the United States without having a Muslim state grant it safe harbor. It is certainly possible that al Qaeda will be able to think its way through its current stateless conundrum. It may be able to marry with other Muslim militant/terrorist organizations that can protect it, giving it a home where it can have sufficient leisure to plot, plan, and train. Kashmir, the Gaza Strip, the islands of Indonesia and the feudal lands of Yemen are all possibilities. But they are far from ideal. Secretary Rumsfeld's Pentagon can strike ruthlessly anywhere. Assuming the Bush administration retains the will to let loose hell against any land or group that gives comfort to al Qaeda, the odds of its being able to congeal as effectively as it once did are poor.

And al Qaeda is, by definition, westward oriented. The organization exists to strike the United States. It is now a victim of its own success. For al Qaeda to fulfill that mission post-9/11, it must locate, recruit, and train young Muslim men who have access to western passports, or Middle Eastern men who can reliably obtain European or, ideally, American visas. The consular service of the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security are now making life enormously difficult and frustrating for thousands of innocent Middle Eastern Muslim men who would like to visit or study in the United States. The same is no doubt true for those who are not innocent. And the cells of al Qaeda and its allied militant organizations in the West have come under significant pressure since 9/11.

It is certainly true that the Arab-Muslim communities in Europe have for two decades been producing violent

young men who have embraced holy war. Europe's imperfectly integrated Muslims have developed an enormous pool of ill will toward their non-Muslim European brethren. To a lesser, probably much lesser, extent, the same can be said of some young Muslim males in the United States.

Indeed, if al Qaeda has a future as a transnational holy-warrior society, it will probably be found in the militant, highly westernized and highly Wahhabized Muslim communities in the United States and especially Western Europe. (The two tradition-pulverizing forces of westernization and Wahhabi Islam actually complement each other.)

In the past, Egypt and Saudi Arabia were the great intellectual engines of anti-Americanism, anti-Semitism, and bin Ladenism in the Muslim world. Though the religious and lay intellectuals of both countries remain by and large virulently anti-American, it is likely that the militant Muslims of Europe will give them stiff competition in spreading hatred of the United States. The marriage of hard-core European leftism and Islamic radicalism is already far advanced in Western Europe. The process, of course, started decades ago in the Middle East—the "red" mullahs of Tehran were aptly named—but the virulent convergence of the two ideologies in many Muslims in the West is frightening.

Whether al Qaeda and its allied holy-warrior groups will be able to continue to harvest the morally dysfunctional young men of Western Europe is a different matter, however. These would-be jihadists need to be spotted, assessed, developed, recruited, and most important, trained. These things take time, much more time if done furtively and nervously.

Western European security and intelligence services are well aware of the home-grown Muslim problems within their borders, even if many European politicians would prefer to blame the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation and the Bush administration's Axis of Evil doctrine for the radicalization of their Muslim denizens. For al Qaeda, finding sanctuary to breed its young in a post-9/11 Europe will be very difficult.

It is also something that Rumsfeld, as secretary of Defense, really need not worry about. The transnationalism of al Qaeda is more often than not simply beyond the range of the Pentagon, which won't be bombing France or Pakistani madrassas. (Secretary of State Colin Powell and director of central intelligence George Tenet should, of course, be more concerned.) Indeed, the recurring Democratic charge—presidential candidate General Wesley

Clark seems most fond of this criticism—that the Bush administration’s war against Saddam Hussein has detracted from its efforts against al Qaeda is belied by the very nature of Osama bin Laden’s organization.

Operationally, the war against al Qaeda does not now require much military or paramilitary manpower. Indeed, it is very likely that the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon have created al Qaeda-focused internal bureaucracies that are too large for their own good. The American bureaucratic ethic is rarely a nimble one, and the White House and Congress have poured money into the fight against Islamic terrorism. From the Homeland Security Department to the Counterterrorism Center at Langley, the truer critique of the Bush administration’s post-9/11 efforts would underscore excessive bureaucratic zeal, not a lack thereof.

The Democrats could, of course, more fairly charge the Bush administration with failing to appreciate the evolving nature of Middle Eastern terrorism. They could even criticize it for timidity in executing central tenets of the Bush counterterrorist doctrine. And as the Clinton administration demonstrated repeatedly, timidity in dealing with terrorism is a red flag for the acolytes of Osama bin Laden and other practitioners of power politics in the Middle East.

Soldiers and Ballots

Crucial point: the war in Iraq and the possible spread of democracy in the region have put state sponsorship back into Middle Eastern terrorism. To whatever extent al Qaeda is operating inside post-Saddam Iraq, be it through Ansar al Islam or other jihadists crossing the Syrian and Iranian borders, it has become functionally indistinguishable from other terrorists, be they holy warriors or secularists, who are also crossing the Syrian and Iranian borders. Both Syria and Iran are police states that can, when they choose, make unauthorized border crossings very challenging. If the Iranians and Syrians were on our side, we should be hearing stories about terrorists killed on their side of the borders.

The war that is being waged against the United States and its allies in Iraq isn’t primarily a jihad fought by Holy War, Inc., which is the leitmotif of al Qaeda. What we are seeing in Iraq now is operationally what we saw in Lebanon in the early 1980s. Then, Iran and Syria aided and abetted others in hammering us. The terrorism worked and set in motion, among moderate and radical Sunnis and Shiites alike, the belief that the

United States could not hold its ground against determined men of faith.

There is no new CIA finding—to borrow from Secretary Rumsfeld’s memorandum—that can grant us and the Iraqis relief from this kind of violence. You can’t beat state-sponsored terrorism with “better intelligence on the ground.” Armies defeat states; good intelligence lends a helping hand.

The Bush administration can certainly hope that a faster Iraqification of security and internal politics in Iraq will diminish the effectiveness and zeal of the bombers from abroad. Terrorist networks are, however, usually close-knit enterprises, especially if operating on terrain where the terrorists don’t believe the local population is reliably on their side (which is probably the case in the dangerous areas of the Sunni triangle). An Iraqi security and intelligence force no doubt could penetrate the Sunni triangle more effectively than non-Arabic-speaking Americans who don’t yet know the terrain. But as the Egyptians learned in the 1980s, well-organized extremist groups can long hold their ground even when a vast majority of the local population loses sympathy with their tactics and objectives.

It is possible that politics could alter this equation. Iraq’s Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani has called for national elections to determine the composition of a constitutional assembly. If such elections were held, and the body politic expressed itself in great numbers, there would probably be a beneficial effect on the Middle East’s amorphous public opinion. Iran and Syria’s rulers might even feel forced to refrain from abetting terrorism against the United States and the Iraqi people.

Such elections would certainly energize Iraqi society. The officially sanctioned constitutional exploratory committee has been traveling the country discussing the idea of a new basic law, and it has been drawing large crowds even in small towns. If the Arab Sunni Iraqis participate en masse in elections, this could conceivably galvanize popular support for the unpleasant, Sunni-versus-Sunni security tasks that are essential for successful Iraqification.

The administration would certainly be wise to play the card by embracing the grand ayatollah’s call. In all probability, accelerating political development offers a better chance of thwarting the terrorism and guerrilla activity than the counterinsurgency scenarios the Pentagon has so far deployed. The possibility of a political trump over the security situation is certainly the least painful and least costly exit strategy for the United States in Iraq.

But, again, we should not get our hopes up. The Baathist regime in Damascus and the clerical regime in Tehran are mortally threatened by the growth of democracy in Iraq. National elections surely will accentuate their discomfort and probably increase their aid to terrorists crossing their borders. One can fully understand the administration's desire not to confront militarily any more Middle Eastern states. Handling Iraq alone is a consuming task. The French and the Germans, on whom many Democrats and Republicans appear to believe America's international credibility depends, might fall into paroxysms of righteous indignation with an attack on Syria or Iran.

And it is certainly possible that the U.S. military, after a decade of decline, does not have the manpower to overthrow one Middle Eastern dictatorship and then intimidate the dictatorships next door. Air power, the favorite tool of Rumsfeld's transformed military, probably isn't enough to convince Damascus and Tehran that terrorism no longer pays. The United States must be prepared to threaten a land invasion—what the Turks did to the Syrians in 1998 to force the ejection from Syria of Abdullah Ocalan, the head of the terrorist Kurdish Workers' party. It is most unlikely, of course, that the Bush administration is politically or militarily prepared now to expand the conflict even if doing so would enormously increase the odds of success in Iraq.

In destroying Saddam Hussein's regime, the Bush administration has loosed the democratic genie into the Middle East. Contrary to what one often hears on the Arab satellite TV service al Jazeera, there is widespread foreboding and hope in the Muslim world that the United States is actually serious about midwifing Iraqi democracy.

The enemies of the United States in the region know—even if few domestic critics of the Bush administration do—that the Muslim Middle East is in spiritual meltdown, where regimes in place rule but do not legitimately govern. Bin Ladenism is one byproduct of this political and moral collapse.

The region's rogue regimes, the dictators whom we have often called friends, and the holy warriors all share an imperative to see us fail. The Bush administration will be lucky if the forces of darkness in and around Iraq do not markedly ratchet up the violence before November 2004.

To better its odds, the administration should recognize that Ali Sistani may know something about the soul of his country. If the grand ayatollah is right, Iraqi ballots, not U.S. foot soldiers, will be the engine of change throughout the Middle East—and in due course Donald Rumsfeld will be able to go back to transforming his forces to meet the military challenges of the twenty-first century.