



A Defeat for the Forces of Fear

By David Frum

Radical Islamic terrorists across the Middle East have thus far claimed to represent a global Islamic nation, yet millions of Iraqis risked their lives on January 30 to reject that claim with their ballots.

After the initial euphoric response to Iraq's elections, caveats have inevitably followed. We hear it said that elections are not the same as democracy, that many troubles lie ahead, that the insurgency remains alive and deadly. And all this is, of course, true.

But it is also true that the Iraq election is a transforming event, not just for Iraq but for the whole Muslim Middle East—an event so transforming that we have not yet absorbed its full importance.

Terrorist Claims

All over the Islamic world, the leaders of the terrorist jihad—not only Osama bin Laden, but also his allies and competitors in Kashmir, in the Palestinian territories, in Algeria, in Indonesia, in Western Europe, and now in Iraq—have claimed to be the authentic representatives of a global Islamic nation. They have dismissed existing governments as puppets of the infidel West and presented themselves as the only effective alternative.

These claims are lies of course, but they are lies with enough truth mixed in to sway a generation of Middle Eastern young men. Some naive apologists for terror have suggested that terrorism is an act of desperation by the poor and downtrodden. The truth about the terrorists is actually more disturbing: Many of them, and most of

their leaders, come from elite backgrounds. They are well educated, often with medicine or engineering degrees—young men with many choices in life. They are motivated, as were many of their Communist and Nazi antecedents, by a perverted sense of idealism.

Against that perverted idealism, what has the Middle Eastern status quo to offer? Other authoritarian regimes, China's for example, can offer their people prosperity in exchange for political quiet. But the economies of the Arab Middle East have been failing for almost twenty years. They can offer nothing but unemployment and repression.

Michael Scheuer, who ran the CIA's bin Laden unit under Bill Clinton and has since found a second career as an unsettlingly sympathetic analyst of bin Ladenism in books such as *Imperial Hubris*, gives this explanation of the Islamic terrorist's appeal: "In a world where Muslim leaders are mostly effete kings and princes who preach austere Islam but live in luxuriant debauchery; or murderous family dictatorships, like Iraq's Husseins, Egypt's Mubaraks, Libya's Qadahfis, and Syria's Assads; or coup-installed generals holding countries together after politicians have emptied the till," bin Laden and his fellow extremists have won the aura of Robin Hood. "With no competition for the Muslim world's leadership, and with their battles now seen globally in real-time by proliferating Arab satellite television and radio channels, the mujahideen hold the respect, gratitude, and love of many Muslims."

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True Electoral Legitimacy

Who could challenge these pretensions? The voters of Iraq just did.

We do not yet know definitively what percentage of the eligible population voted (as of this writing on February 3, the figure appears to be around 60 percent).

But we do know that millions of Iraqis defied fear and risked their lives to join a democratic political process. With those brave actions, they cut the heart out of the pretensions of the jihad terrorists. Those terrorists claim that Allah has appointed them to rule the Muslim world and that their willingness to kill and die is all the authority they need. A majority of Iraqis have just put their lives on the line to reject that claim.

The leaders produced by the January 30 elections will no doubt have many defects and weaknesses. But they will, as elected leaders always do, boast one supreme strength: the legitimacy that comes from the most direct and obvious possible connection to the wishes of the people. The jihadis have responded to elections with murder, and that too has been seen globally and in real time on Arab media.

The terrorists have responded to the threat of political competition with hysterical denunciation. A week

before the vote, the Jordanian-born terrorist leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi issued an amazing statement denouncing the “evil principle” of democracy and declaring something close to religious war, not only against the American infidels, but against Iraq’s majority Shiite population. This is not a winning political strategy, to put it mildly.

Zarqawi’s response to the election has now put him, his car-bombers, and his assassins on the wrong side of three great moral divides. Politically, what was once a war against an occupation government has been redefined as a war against democracy. Religiously, what was once a Muslim campaign against foreign Christians has been redefined as an extremist Sunni war against Iraq’s Shiites. And nationalistically, what was once a war against the Americans has been redefined as a war against the government and the armed forces of an emerging democratic Iraq.

None of this means that America’s problems in Iraq have come to any kind of end or even that the end is close at hand. What it does mean though is that George Bush’s definition of the conflict has just been endorsed by a large majority of the people of Iraq. This is freedom at war with fear. And fear has just lost a hugely important battle.

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