

Letter to the Editor

To the Editor: Two articles in the last issue of *Joint Force Quarterly* (Issue 44, 1st quarter 2007), Philip Wasielewski's "Defining the War on Terror" and Jerry Long's "Confronting an Army Whose Men Love Death: Osama, Iraq, and U.S. Foreign Policy," are a help in understanding the essence of the war on terror, and such an understanding is crucial to winning. But there are some points made by both authors that need further clarification.

For instance, Professor Long states, "The concern is that the Bush administration's doctrine of preemption . . . and its larger war on terror proceed from a serious misreading of Islamic ideology and that U.S. actions may not ameliorate the threat but exacerbate it." Unfortunately, it is Professor Long who has somewhat misread Islamic ideology. His key contention, based on a comment by Osama bin Laden of 80 years of "humiliation and disgrace," is that "the context for 9/11 is modern Middle East history, beginning with World War I" and that, to many Muslims, Western (particularly U.S.) actions in that region in the last 80 years primarily caused this humiliation.

A more nuanced reading of bin Laden's comment traces the "80 years" reference back to the abolition of the Sunni Islamic caliphate by the Republic of Turkey in the early 1920s. This point is confirmed by Professor Long's own quotation from Mullah Mustapha Kreikar: "There is no difference between this [Iraqi] occupation and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. . . . The resistance is not only a reaction to the American invasion, it is part of the continuous Islamic struggle since the collapse of the caliphate." Professor Long omitted the next sentence that clarifies what is meant: "All Islamic struggles since then are part of one organised effort to bring back the caliphate." Bin Laden has also commented repeatedly on the caliphate.

More importantly, a significant number of statements from bin Laden make clear that the timeline he is focused on is not modern history but a much longer period—1,500 years back to the foundation of Islam. For example, bin Laden has stated, "The struggle between us and them [the West], the confrontation and clashing began centuries ago and will continue until judgement day." The conclusion is clear: the underlying issue for bin Laden is the caliphate, not modern events in Palestine,

Iraq, Afghanistan, East Timor, and Bosnia. The question is *why*.

Professor Long comments that "there is an inherent clash of ideologies and not simply national interests," but he does not go on to develop this point fully. Part of this ideological clash comes from the concept he identifies as *Jahiliyya*, the state of ignorance that prevailed before Islam was established, but he does not attribute this concept, as Colonel Wasielewski does, to the Muslim scholar Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328).

Based on this concept, Professor Long points out that bin Laden considers all Muslim governments illegitimate. He fails, however, to clarify two important points here: first, al Qaeda views all current Muslim governments—democratic, authoritarian, or highly religious—as totally illegitimate; second, Ibn Taymiyya in the 13th century and then Sayyid Qutb in the 20th century both believed that any state that did not put God wholly at its center was illegitimate. Qutb, probably the most important ideologist for al Qaeda, believed that the separation of religion and state was "hideous schizophrenia" and that this secularism of the Republic of Turkey was an attempt to "exterminate" Islam.

Secularism, therefore, is a crucial factor that makes all current Muslim governments, and all other governments in the world today, illegitimate (*Jahili* as Professor Long puts it) in the eyes of al Qaeda. It is important to understand this idea because it shows what al Qaeda hates most is what the West *is*, not what it *does*. The numbers of Muslims who fully adhere to this ideology are tiny. The vast majority of Muslims, as evidenced by numerous opinion polls and by Pew Global Attitude Surveys, oppose what the Vice President of Indonesia, Yusef Kalla, has described as these "fringe ideological views."

An accurate analysis of the source of al Qaeda is vital to ensuring that the proposed methods of dealing with it are effective. Most scholars would agree that a key reason for Muslim discontent and a foundational explanation for the rise of al Qaeda is their perception of the failure of Islam, relative to its illustrious past and relative to other societies currently. Al Qaeda focuses on the reestablishment of the caliphate because it believes only with such a development will Islam recover its past glories. Muslim scholars who have studied this situation agree that the decline commenced in the 12th century due to internal reasons and not, as is frequently

thought, due to the Crusades, Western imperialism, or globalisation.

Many experts, however, would accept that globalisation is an explanatory factor for the rise of al Qaeda itself. Professor Michael Mousseau argues that in the movement from a nonmarket to a market economy, globalisation produced significant disruption in European and now in Islamic and other societies commencing in the mid 19th century. Such can and does lead to a support for terror. Professor Long correctly attributes the impact of the war in Afghanistan as a factor leading to the rise of al Qaeda. My own research would indicate that the Sunni/Shia conflict is the fourth and final part of the explanation for its rise.

Based on this more detailed analysis, it is clear that the solution to this problem is, as with the Cold War, primarily the use of soft power to reverse the relative failure of Islam and to minimise the impact of globalisation on Islamic societies.

Colonel Wasielewski's article does look at the historic sources of al Qaeda's ideology, while surprisingly ignoring the impact of Saudi Wahhabism. While he correctly identifies the need to challenge their ideology, I would disagree with some of his suggested actions. Accepting that al Qaeda's ideology is based on fringe views, Muslims clearly are the only ones who can confront this ideology successfully. This part of the war on terror must be led by Muslim states—particularly the democratic states of Indonesia and Turkey. (It is important to remember here that the majority of Muslims live in Asia, not the Middle East and Persian Gulf.) Some success in this effort is evident already in Indonesia where the majority of activists in the al Qaeda-related movement *Jemaah Islamiyah* have apparently decided to achieve their aims by nonviolent means.

Fully understanding the source of Muslim grievances, the ideology that al Qaeda espouses, and the extent to which it is a virulent form of Sunni extremism helps to clarify the approach to winning the war on terror and the crucial importance of Muslim states leading that effort, particularly on the key ideological front.

—Richard F. Whelan
Dublin, Ireland

Richard F. Whelan is the author of *Al-Qaedaism: The Threat to Islam, The Threat to the World* (Ashfield Press, 2005).