

Forum

U.S. Foreign Policy, Not Islamic Teachings, Account for al-Qaeda's Draw

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Recently Michael Scheuer, a former twenty-two-year CIA analyst and head of the agency's Bin Laden Unit, gave an interview with John Barry of *Newsweek*. Scheuer observes that a new generation of middle-class, well-educated Muslims are taking up arms to fight for al-Qaeda. Furthermore, he points out that the main reason why bin Laden remains at large is because Washington refuses to acknowledge – and tell Americans – that its longstanding policies toward the Muslim world are the root of the problem. The main quote is:

Our leaders say he [bin Laden] and his followers hate us because of who we are, because we have early primaries in Iowa every four years and allow women in the workplace. That's nonsense. I don't think he would have those things in his country. But that's not why he opposes us. I read bin Laden's writings and I take him at his word. He and his followers hate us because of specific aspects of U.S. foreign policy. Bin Laden lays them out for anyone to read. Six elements: *our unqualified support for Israel; our presence on the Arabian peninsula, which is land they deem holy; our military presence in other Islamic countries; our support of foreign states that oppress Muslims, especially Russia, China and India; our long-term policy of keeping oil prices artificially low to the benefit of Western consumers but the detriment of the Arab people; and our support for Arab tyrannies who will do that.*¹ (emphasis added)

Scheuer's analysis is supported by opinion polls of the Muslim public. A survey by the Project on International Public Attitudes (PIPA) in April

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2007 shows large majorities of Muslims polled throughout the world now believe the United States seeks to “weaken and divide the Islamic world.” Consequently, in the same poll corresponding majorities also want American troops to withdraw from Muslim lands.

Scheuer also observes that a new generation of well-educated and middle-class Muslims is providing a fresh batch of recruits for al-Qaeda. Terrorism researchers like Marc Sageman and Randall Collins find that middle-class individuals, not poor and uneducated people, fit the ideal psychological and intellectual profiles for terrorists who can easily move within societies and attack targets without drawing much attention. Furthermore, a recent Gallup World poll found middle-class Muslims were more likely to support radical organizations like al-Qaeda than poorer individuals.

Finally, we turn to the issue of policies. Neo-conservative analyses ranging from academics like Samuel Huntington, Fouad Ajami, and (now ex-neo con) Francis Fukuyama to the blogger pundits at JihadWatch et al., tend to blame Islamic religious principles for violence and the lack of democracy. In other words, Islam is a violent and backward religion that opposes democracy and modernity.

Leaving aside the fact that Islam is not the only religion that has been abused by extremist ideologues for violent political purposes, or that Muslim leaders have been extremely vocal in denouncing terrorist attacks, let’s begin by looking at what ordinary Muslims themselves say. In the PIPA poll, while Muslims believe that the United States is engaged in some effort to weaken and divide Muslim countries, a majority of responses show they also reject bin Laden, and react positively to democracy. Similarly, in the Gallup World poll, both radical and moderate respondents had equally positive views of democracy and free speech. The difference is that the radicals are more skeptical that western countries will allow the Muslim world to have democracy, blaming them for keeping dictators in power. The bottom line: Muslims are opposed to American foreign policy, but not necessarily American political values and economic prosperity. Similar polling conducted by the World Values Survey and Terror Free Tomorrow also draw very similar conclusions.

Furthermore, empirical research testing so-called “culturalist” assumptions debunked notions that Islam, rather than politics and policies, is to blame for the lack of democracy and violence in Muslim countries. Culture and religion are *not* statistically significant factors in the violence and lack of democracy affecting Muslim nations. In fact, another empirical study finds that even when looking at culture as a separate variable, Catholic Latin American countries, *not Muslim countries*, are more prone to violence. However, that study identified oil, economic well-being, and the lack of democracy as

the main culprits. Culture remained an insignificant variable. Perhaps this is why Graham Fuller, a former CIA analyst, recently wrote in *Foreign Affairs* that even if Islam did not exist, the same bloody geopolitics of natural resources, ethnicity, nationalism, and colonialism in the Middle East would exist. Anti-Americanism and anti-Europeanism would remain.

Opinion polling of Muslims, empirical testing, and thought experiments can give us very good indicators of where the truth really lies, but there is one other important source: Osama bin Laden himself. In doing research for this article, we decided to get information straight from the horse's mouth. We compiled a list of ten easily accessible statements from 7 October 2001 to 19 January 2006, transcribed in English translations available on the Internet.² We then performed a quantitative content analysis of the accessible texts.³ Our results for the ten statements analyzed to date are as follows:

Date	Total Words ⁴	Religious Justifications ⁵	Policy Grievances ⁶	Ambiguous ⁷
10/7/01	573 (100%)	60 (10.5%)	410 (71.6%)	0 (0%)
11/3/01	2,282 (100%)	573 (25.1%)	1,296 (56.8%)	83 (3.6%)
12/13/01	925 (100%)	277 (29.9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
11/12/02	597 (100%)	108 (18.1%)	421 (70.5%)	0 (0%)
11/24/02	3,800 (100%)	198 (5.2%)	1,472 (38.7%)	17 (.4%)
2/12/03	1,986 (100%)	280 (14.1%)	319 (16.1%)	36 (1.8%)
10/18/03	864 (100%)	0 (0%)	726 (84%)	0 (0%)
1/6/04	768 (100%)	27 (3.5%)	734 (95.6%)	0 (0%)
11/4/04	2,302 (100%)	0 (0%)	1,287 (55.9%)	29 (0%)
1/19/06	1,500 (100%)	27 (1.8%)	419 (27.9%)	0 (0%)
Total	15,597 (100%)	1,550 (9.9%)	7,084 (45.4%)	165 (1%)

Our preliminary analysis shows that bin Laden spends a preponderant amount – close to half – of the time railing against western countries about their policies, and much less time talking about religion. Some religious self-justification is used, but it is not the main content of his statements. Based on the above findings, Scheuer, it seems, has good reason to take bin Laden at his word.

The one exception to this pattern appears to be the translation of a video on 13 December 2001. However, that was not a public statement, but more of a “home video” made in Kandahar and confiscated at a private residence in Jalalabad during the invasion of Afghanistan. Therefore, it was probably not meant for recruiting purposes, but seems to reflect casual conversation among the subjects. It is also interesting that some have questioned the comprehensibility of the soundtrack and the accuracy of the translations.

Straight from bin Laden's mouth and the mouths of tens of thousands of other Muslims polled, policies matter more than differing social values with western non-Muslims. And Scheuer is right: most of our presidential candidates *do not* seem to get this. McCain paints "radical Islamic extremism" as "the greatest evil, probably, that this nation has ever faced" (as in worse than Hitler or the Soviet Union); Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, from their place in the Senate, fund the war in Iraq in blatant disregard of their rhetoric against the Bush administration's policies; and Mike Huckabee continued to promote the occupation of Iraq as part of the "war on terror" to the end of his campaign. The only candidate to consistently acknowledge the role of foreign policy in generating the current climate, Ron Paul, is ignored by that segment of the press that does not vilify him.

Given that a correct understanding of the roots of violence directed against the United States is in this country's interests, how can we account for the evasion of an honest discussion of the issue by politicians, policymakers, and the media? For a clue, consider the evaluation of how the presidential candidates rate in terms of whether they are good for Israel in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz*. The omission of Ron Paul and the defense for such an omission are remarkable, given that the rankings include dropouts like Fred Thompson and never-rans like Michael Bloomberg and Condoleezza Rice. You cannot account for the omission by speculating that Paul would be bad for Israel, since the whole point of the article is to rank candidates on that score. The implication is that warning supporters to avoid a candidate considered bad for Israel is less important to Israelis than making sure that certain questions are never discussed: for example, when are Israeli and American interests at odds?

The pretense that there is a war between civilizations is a distraction from the real war that is going on within civilizations. For example, George Weigel has defined *jihadism* as "the religiously inspired ideology which teaches that it is every Muslim's duty to use any means necessary to compel the world's submission to Islam." This is like defining *neoconservatism* as "the philosophically inspired ideology that teaches that it is the duty of the West to use any means necessary to compel the world's submission to American hegemony." Polemics aside, the two groups mirror one another insofar as they espouse an extremist ideology that runs on fear and divides the world between "us" and "them." In addition, they argue that they are always justified in resorting to violence no matter what the cost in human lives.⁸ Put this way, such a perspective shows where the real fault line lies: not between an imaginary monolithic Islam and an imaginary monolithic West, but between so-called *jihadis* and *neocons* on one side and the rest of us on the other.

Endnotes

1. John Barry, ““Our Country is in Trouble.”” *Newsweek* (13 Feb. 2008), www.newsweek.com/id/110937. Last accessed 10 Mar. 2008.
2. “Text: Bin Laden’s Statement.” *Associated Press* (7 Oct. 2001), www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/oct/07/afghanistan.terrorism15. Last accessed 10 Mar. 2008; “Bin Laden Rails Against Crusaders and UN.” *BBC Monitoring* (3 Nov. 2001), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/world/monitoring/media_reports/1636782.stm. Last accessed 10 Mar. 2008; “Transcript of Osama Bin Laden Videotape.” *United States Department of Defense* (13 Dec. 2001), <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/12/13/tape.transcript/>. Last accessed 10 Mar. 2008; “Full Text: ‘Bin Laden’s Message.’” *BBC Monitoring* (12 Nov. 2002), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2455845.stm. Last accessed 10 Mar. 2008; “Full Text: Bin Laden’s ‘Letter to America.’” *The Guardian* (24 Nov. 2002), www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/nov/24/theobserver. Last accessed 10 Mar. 2008; “Bin Laden Tape: Text.” *BBC Monitoring* (12 Feb. 2003), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2751019.stm. Last accessed 10 Mar. 2008; “Message to US.” *Al-Jazeera International* (18 Oct. 2003), http://nisleerskov.com/Bin_Laden/Bin_Laden_2003a.pdf. Last accessed 23 Jun. 2008; “Resist the New Rome.” *The Guardian* (5 Jan. 2004), www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/jan/06/terrorism. comment. Last accessed 10 Mar. 2008; “Full Transcript of Bin Laden’s Speech.” *Al-Jazeera International* (1 Nov. 2004), <http://english.aljazeera.net/archive/2004/11/200849163336457223.html>. Last accessed 10 Mar. 2008; “Text: ‘Bin Laden Tape.’” *BBC Monitoring* (19 Jan. 2006), http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4628932.stm. Last accessed 10 Mar. 2008.
3. Alejandro Beutel and Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad, “Religious or Policy Justification for Violence? A Quantative Content Analysis of Bin Ladin’s Statements” (forthcoming).
4. Full category title is “Number of Total Words in the Text.” In compiling the total number of words in each transcribed statement, explanatory words in parentheses “()” and/or brackets “[]” were removed and stuck to a more “literal” English translation of bin Laden’s words. Otherwise ambiguous statements are classified according to the context of the sentiment of the paragraph in which they appear, when that sentiment is unambiguous.
5. Full category title is “Number of Words Giving Religious Justification for Militant Activity.”
6. Full category title is “Number of Words Stating Policy Grievance Reasons for Militant Activity.”
7. Full category title is “Number of Ambiguous Words that can be Classified as Giving Religious Justification or Stating Policy Grievance Reasons for Militant Activity.”
8. The parallels are the subject of a BBC documentary “The Power of Nightmares,” www.daanspeak.com/TranscriptPowerOfNightmares1.html, originally aired in three parts 20 Oct., 24 Oct., and 3 Nov. 2004.