



The New Bolsheviks: Understanding Al Qaeda

By Frederick W. Kagan

Victory in war, and particularly in counterinsurgency wars, requires knowing one's enemy. This simple truth, first stated by Sun Tsu more than two millennia ago, is no less important in the war on terrorism today. It has become almost common wisdom, however, that America today faces an enemy of a new kind, using unprecedented techniques and pursuing incomprehensible goals. But this enemy is not novel. Once the peculiar rhetoric is stripped away, the enemy America faces is a familiar one indeed. The revolutionary vision that undergirds al Qaeda's ideology, the strategy it is pursuing, and the strategic debates occurring within that organization are similar to those of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism at various periods. What's more, the methods that led to the defeat of that ideology can be adapted and successfully used against this religious revival of it.

Certain strands of Islamist ideology are so similar in structure to basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism that the comparison is unavoidable. The similarities are most apparent in the writings of Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian Islamist and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood executed in 1966. Qutb, who produced a pamphlet called *Milestones* that summarized much of his work, has powerfully influenced the modern jihadist movement, especially Ayman al-Zawahiri—Osama bin Laden's deputy and the ideologue of al Qaeda—and Abdul Musab al-Zarqawi, "emir" of the al Qaeda organization in Iraq.

The Influence of Marx and Lenin

Milestones—like Vladimir Lenin's famous pamphlet *What Is to Be Done?*—sums up not merely the ideological foundations of the movement, but also the strategy and tactics that must be pursued to achieve success. Before considering Qutb's program, however, it is worthwhile to recall the essential tenets of Marxism-Leninism

to which Qutb's jihadism bears such noteworthy resemblance.

Briefly put, Karl Marx argued that the world of his day was corrupt, riddled with oppression, and spawning endless violence and war because of fundamental flaws in the human structures and within human beings themselves. One manifestation of this oppression was the nation-state, which the exploitative capitalist classes had falsely erected in order to suppress proletarians and lower orders. Marx claimed to have applied scientific principles to the study of history and to have discovered its secrets: all history consisted of class struggle, and that struggle moved inevitably to the ultimate triumph of the proletariat.

That triumph once achieved, Marx argued, a period of "socialism" would begin in which human nature would be transformed. People would live in harmony according to the principle "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs." All of the false encrustations of oppressive capitalist society, such as money, mass production, police, religion, private property, would vanish. The state would "wither away," whereupon the period of true communism would begin, stateless and utterly and eternally peaceful.

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Marx's disciples accepted his vision with little argument. The best strategy for achieving it, however, became a serious source of discord within the socialist movement, persisting even to the final collapse of the Bolshevik experiment in 1991. Marx argued for different approaches at different times. The early Marx argued that the proletariat could come to power only through a violent revolution, while he wrote in *Das Kapital* that the process might be more peaceful and gradual. Revolutionaries like Lenin and Mao sought violent confrontation and the cataclysmic revolution that the early Marx had promised. Western European socialists tended to prefer the later Marx, eschewing violence and direct confrontation and relying on the engine of history. All of them generally agreed that the "contradictions" of capitalism would contribute to communism's triumph through capitalism's inevitable collapse.

Lenin's belief in the necessity of violent revolution emerged in part from the condition of his native land. In late-nineteenth-century Russia proletarians were a small minority and unable by themselves to take power, even had they wholeheartedly supported the Bolshevik movement, which they did not. Lenin therefore saw that his only hope of success in Russia was to entrap the peasant along with the worker in a revolutionary movement aimed first at seizing power on behalf of the socialist movement. There would then be plenty of time, he reasoned, to reeducate the peasants as necessary. The key to this movement, he believed, was a revolutionary party, what he came to call the "vanguard of the proletariat." This party, comprised largely of intellectuals, was alone capable of really understanding Marxism and developing and executing the strategies needed to bring about its triumph. Once the vanguard had seized power in the name of the proletariat, establishing what Lenin called the "dictatorship of the proletariat," it would then proceed to empower those elements of the proletariat, and other classes if there were any, that understood and supported the true principles of Marxism-Leninism. It was not necessary, therefore, that all or even a majority of proletarians supported the revolution or believed in Marxism. The only thing that mattered was that the revolutionary vanguard was capable of seizing and holding power. Education and transformation would then do the rest.

The Bolsheviks' seizure of power in Russia in 1917 raised yet another issue that promptly split the revolutionary movement into two camps. Should the new Bolshevik state seek at once to spread revolution around the world, or should it focus instead on perfecting what Joseph Stalin called "communism in one country" in order to

establish a beacon, a model, and a bastion of successful communism to sustain and inspire revolution elsewhere? Stalin favored the latter course, Leon Trotsky the former. Stalin's triumph enshrined this approach in Soviet grand strategy, although it is not clear that Trotsky would have acted very differently had he ever held supreme power. The ideological split was nevertheless bitter and central to the subsequent development of communist thought.

Qutb's Vision

Qutb also viewed the world of his day as decadent, violent, oppressive, and riddled with contradictions. Writing in the 1950s, he condemned Western capitalism, Western socialism, Eastern despotism, and Marxism itself as "unable to present any healthy values for the guidance of mankind."¹ Like Marx, Qutb was familiar with the society he was condemning, for he had spent two years in the United States and had been profoundly impressed by its godlessness and hedonism. It was not necessary, he argued, for Islam to vie with West or East in the matter of material prosperity and inventiveness, although he did not despise such capabilities. The role of Islam, rather, was to provide the moral and spiritual leadership the world so badly needed, to fulfill "the basic human needs on the same level of excellence as technology has fulfilled them in the sphere of material comfort."²

Qutb argued that the basic problem afflicting the human race was the subordination of human beings to one another. Only God, he wrote, could exercise just sovereignty, and only God's laws are truly laws. For many centuries, however, man had established his own laws and governments, with individuals usurping God's sovereignty and thereby elevating themselves as false idols and dictators. Even within the Muslim world, the *Umma*, he noted, state structures had been established and the leaders of those structures legislated and established laws of their own, distinct from the laws of *sharia*, which were of God.

This argument was central to Qutb's thought, for it justified his claim that the world of his day, including most of the so-called Muslim world of that time, existed in a state of *jahiliyya*, or ignorance of God. Traditionally, this term is applied to the period before Mohammed, but Qutb applied it to most of history following Mohammed's revelations on the ground that people to whom the words of the Prophet had been presented, but who had rejected those words and were living by their own codes, were no less ignorant than those who lived before the Prophet arrived on earth.

Worse still, by “worshipping” other human beings in the process of according them the honors due to the sovereignty they had usurped from God, these people were guilty of polytheism, just as the early Arabs were whom Mohammed chastened, defeated, and then converted.

Qutb was arguing that all human state structures are inherently evil and should be destroyed. He recognized that most of the non-Muslim world, and even most of the *Umma*, was not yet ready to live in accord with the only true and just laws, the *sharia*, and so he proposed a period of careful education and training to transform humanity so that it would reject the false teachings and turn toward the true. He described in great detail the manner in which the Koran was to be transmitted, verse by verse over thirteen years, according to Qutb, so that those who received it would be educated gradually and transformed. The clear implication was that once humanity has been reformed and reeducated as Qutb describes, state structures will collapse and vanish, and people will live in peace and harmony under the laws of God and not under their own, as he claimed the first generation of Muslims did.

Like Lenin, Qutb knew that his view was not shared by the majority of the people on whose behalf he proposed to operate. He was untroubled by this difficulty, since he adopted the same solution Lenin had proposed: “How is it possible to start the task of reviving Islam?” he asked. “It is necessary that there should be a vanguard which sets out with this determination and then keeps walking on the path.” *Milestones* would serve as the guide for the vanguard in this fight.³

Qutb also considered the problem aired during the Stalin-Trotsky dispute following the Bolshevik victory—should the vanguard aim to win throughout the world all at once or in one place first? He chose the Stalinist approach, arguing that the vanguard should work first to seize power in a single state: “The beauty of this new system cannot be appreciated unless it takes a concrete form. Hence it is essential that a community arrange its affairs according to it and show it to the world. In order to bring this about, we need to initiate the movement of Islamic revival in some Muslim country. Only such a revivalist movement will eventually attain to the status of world leadership.”⁴

Here, then, in a nutshell is the basic structure of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism reproduced in a religious context: the corruption and illegitimacy of current state structures; the inadmissibility of any state structures in a justly ordered world; the need to transform humanity before entering into that world; the need to begin by

seizing power in a single state, but with the aim of ultimately destroying all states; the error of having any human or group of humans holding sovereignty over any other; and the critical role of a vanguard revolutionary group in the process. Qutb was in no way a Marxist, but the basic structure of his argument certainly was akin to that of Marx and his disciples.

Ideologically, the emphasis on the illegitimacy and need for the destruction of all state structures is a peculiarly Marxist approach—non-Marxist revolutionaries generally argue that they will improve upon failed state structures, not that they aim at destroying them all. The assertion that human nature must be transformed in order to pave the way for a glorious this-worldly paradise is also peculiarly Marxist—it gives Marxism an air of pseudo-religiosity. Qutb’s religiosity is not false in any way, of course, but this philosophical premise fits at least as well with Marx as with Mohammed.

One important difference between Qutb and Marxism deserves to be noted, however. Whereas Marxists operated in a world in which few proletarians, let alone peasants or capitalists, had even read or understood the touchstone works of their movements, Qutb and his disciples can rely on more than a billion people to be intimately familiar with the Koran, the *sharia*, and the life of the Prophet. But this apparent difference is really another point of similarity. Marxists constantly worried about how to raise the “class consciousness” of the proletariat, by which they meant teaching the workers to understand the true oppressive meaning of their situation and the real power at their disposal. Qutb and his followers have the same problem. All Muslims are familiar with the Koran; relatively few know of Qutb’s writings. The Koran does not teach that a revolutionary vanguard should seize a decrepit Muslim state and establish a new order there, transforming human nature as it goes, to serve as a beacon for the global revolution. If the jihadists cannot persuade their fellow Muslims that this is the right course to follow, then the familiarity of those Muslims with the Koran is of no more significance than the fact that proletarians without adequate “class consciousness” continued to work in factories. In both cases, the raw material for supporting the revolution is, in theory, there—the question is whether or not the vanguard can mobilize it when the time comes.

Al Qaeda—The Vanguard of Today

One important difference between Marxism-Leninism and jihadism is that, whereas Lenin was a shrewder and

more talented theorist than Marx, the ideologues of the current struggle are far less eloquent and coherent than Qutb. Ayman al-Zawahiri is one of the most thoughtful of al Qaeda's ideologists, and he has published numerous books and tracts describing the intellectual basis of the program al Qaeda is pursuing. Of particular interest is a manuscript he completed in 2001, *Knights under the Banner of the Prophet*,⁵ which some have called his autobiography, others his "last will and testament," since it was apparently completed before the expected American attack on Afghanistan and in the expectation of his possible death in that struggle.

Zawahiri makes clear his intellectual debt to Qutb. He explains that Qutb "affirmed that the issue of unification in Islam is important and that the battle between Islam and its enemies is primarily an ideological one over the issue of unification. It is also a battle over to whom authority and power should belong—to God's course and *sharia*, to man-made laws and material principles, or to those who claim to be intermediaries between the Creator and mankind." He continues, "This affirmation greatly helped the Islamic movement to know and define its enemies. It also helped it to realize that the internal enemy was not less dangerous than the external enemy was and that the internal enemy was a tool used by the external enemy and a screen behind which it hid to launch its war on Islam."⁶ He identified Qutb's execution by Nasser as the spark that set alight the Islamic revolution and formed the nucleus of the revolutionary movement of which Zawahiri was a part. Although Zawahiri almost certainly intended no such reference, it is hard to resist noting that the name of Lenin's revolutionary paper was *Iskra*—"the spark."

In good Leninist fashion, the bulk of Zawahiri's writing in *Knights under the Banner of the Prophet* does not address the basic principles that underlie the movement, although numerous references and obvious assumptions make it clear that he accepted Qutb's arguments fully. Zawahiri focuses instead on arguing with other Islamists about strategies and tactics, in a manner eerily familiar to anyone who has ever perused Lenin's pre-revolutionary writings.

Like the Bolsheviks before them, the Islamists—from Zawahiri's perspective—are split into at least two major camps. There are those who believe in working non-violently toward improving the lot of Muslims within Muslim countries, hoping to establish the rule of *sharia* but unwilling to use violence to do so. He was particularly bitter toward the members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt who issued a unilateral declaration that they would

renounce violence in the hope of securing the release of thousands of their members then incarcerated in Egyptian jails and subjected, so they said, to extreme tortures. Zawahiri dismissed this approach contemptuously, noting that it had borne no fruit and would never bear any. The Egyptian regime, he declared, was bound hand and foot to the service of its American masters, who were working with desperate strength to eradicate Islamism throughout the world. The only way of reversing this situation, he declared, is through violent jihad—compromise would only play into the hands of the oppressors.

This sort of debate is common in revolutionary movements. The radicals who prefer violence and refuse to moderate their demands frequently resent those who would compromise, thereby reducing the grievances of the population the radicals hope to inflame. The Bolsheviks were among the first to denounce compromisers with such bitterness, and the vision of a corrupt Egyptian regime playing the cat's-paw to the international efforts of godless atheism to destroy Islamism are almost perfectly analogous to the Bolsheviks' descriptions of bumbling Russian capitalists and tsarist officials serving the cause of international capitalism.

The same tension between attacking the cat's-paw and attacking the master evident in the Stalin-Trotsky debate enlivens Zawahiri's thinking. He comes, however, to a middle position. He entirely agrees with Qutb that it is essential to seize a territorial base in the Muslim heartland, to take power in a Muslim country. But he also believes that the fight must be brought home to the Americans and their international allies. This belief is based on a calculation of relative forces. Zawahiri believes that al Qaeda might be able to defeat one or more of the Muslim states if those states were not supported. But his evaluation of the international situation suggests that the United States is throwing all of its weight behind those regimes in its determination to prevent jihadists from seizing power in any of them. The purpose of the attacks on the United States was, therefore, to divide it from its regional allies by showing them to be incapable of controlling the jihadists. The Americans would then, Zawahiri argues, either quarrel with those allies—presumably giving the jihadists the opportunity to strike them—or push the allies aside and intervene directly in the struggle within the Muslim world. In that case, he argues, the struggle will turn into "clear-cut jihad against infidels," which the Muslims, presumably, will win.

In yet another intriguing parallel to the Bolsheviks, Zawahiri found himself isolated and far from the main

theater of action following the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. While Zawahiri and bin Laden apparently ran from cave to cave along the Afghan-Pakistani border, other jihadist leaders came to the fore in Iraq, particularly Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian-born jihadist who had a complicated relationship with al Qaeda. Zarqawi had been present in Afghanistan under the Taliban, but had refused to acknowledge bin Laden's leadership. The Taliban unusually allowed him to set up and control his own bases near Herat. He was apparently in Iraq at the time of the U.S. attack, and began rapidly establishing his own network to resist the occupation.⁷

Zawahiri has therefore been playing the role of Lenin to Zarqawi's Stalin. When revolution destroyed the tsarist regime in March 1917, Lenin was in exile in Switzerland, and the Bolshevik machine within Russia was in ruins. Stalin and another famous revolutionary, Lev Kamenev, had been imprisoned by the tsarist regime but now escaped and took over the primitive Bolshevik organization that existed. Lenin watched from Zurich with dismay as Stalin and Kamenev undertook a series of initiatives with which Lenin disagreed. The matter might have remained in such tension—and the Bolshevik Revolution might never have followed in November 1917, had the German government not sent Lenin clandestinely from Switzerland back to Russia to take up the reins of power.

Al Qaeda similarly had but a small base in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, and Zawahiri and others were surprised and disturbed by the quick and complete American victory in April 2003. Zarqawi stepped quickly into the void and persuaded Osama bin Laden to recognize his group as the al Qaeda branch organization within Iraq. Since then, Zarqawi and Zawahiri have conducted a fitful correspondence about revolutionary strategy that bears careful examination.

Before turning to that examination, we must address one major difference between the present situation and that of the Bolsheviks. Before 1917, Lenin's most important role was as a revolutionary theorist and, secondarily, organizer. The Bolsheviks in that period carried out few operations of their own. Lenin focused his attention on developing the strategy for the vanguard of the proletariat, rather than on writing propaganda to be distributed to the masses.

Zarqawi, Zawahiri, bin Laden, and their followers face a different set of circumstances today. They have been conducting significant operations since the early 1990s and have been pursuing an offensive revolutionary strategy even as they have worked to establish safe havens

and to protect their organization from attacks and counterattacks. Zawahiri and bin Laden, are also far more concerned with the reception of their message by the Muslim population at large than Lenin ever was. The great bulk of their available writing, therefore, is aimed at the mass audience and designed to achieve purposes that the Bolsheviks would have regarded as simple agitation rather than revolutionary theory. It is very difficult to extract a meaningful view of the development of jihadist ideology from such documents.

The captured letters between Zarqawi and Zawahiri tell another story entirely, however, and are much more useful for this purpose. In this exchange, Zarqawi has revealed that, although he shares with Stalin a certain bloodthirstiness and brutality, he is superior to Stalin in his ability to develop an independent ideological vision. Like Stalin, Zarqawi focuses primarily on revolutionary success within a single state rather than on the success of the revolutionary movement globally. He nevertheless accepts the basic tenets of Qutb's teachings. "All that we hope," he writes, "is that we will be the spearhead, the enabling vanguard, and the bridge on which the [Islamic] nation crosses over to the victory that is promised and the tomorrow to which we aspire."⁸ The struggle for power in Iraq is to be accompanied by a large-scale media effort to "explain the rules of *sharia* through tapes, printed materials, study, and courses of learning [meant] to expand awareness, anchor the doctrine of the unity of God, prepare the infrastructure, and meet [our] obligation." The seizure of power in Iraq is, finally, merely the starting-point for Zarqawi, after which "the mujahidin will have assured themselves land from which to set forth in striking the Shia in their heartland, along with a clear media orientation and the creation of strategic depth and reach among the brothers outside [Iraq] and the mujahidin within."

The practical revolutionary program that Zarqawi laid out focused on attacking Iraq's Shiite population first and foremost. Zarqawi believed that the Shia were the worst foes of the revolution. They were, from his perspective, apostates, heretics, and historically collaborators with the enemies of Islam—by which Zarqawi always means Sunni Islam. In the current struggle, Zarqawi sees the Shiites as the most dangerous allies of the Americans, since they were eager to seize power, to crush the Arab Sunnis, and to destroy true Islam—and they could accomplish all of those goals while putting a pseudo-Islamic face on Iraq that might deceive the rest of the world.

Zarqawi also labored, at least in early 2004, with several other problems that Lenin would have found

familiar. The revolutionary groups within Iraq were scattered and ill-organized. They had few followers and even fewer experienced members. The influx of new recruits was both helpful and a burden, since the organization hardly had the capability to train them adequately and still accomplish its mission. Like the good Stalinist that he is, Zarqawi made it clear that he intended to use the first several months of 2004 to establish a solid organizational basis for the revolution in Iraq.

The goal of his attacks on the Shiites was not simply fomenting religious strife, however. It was also revolutionary strategy. Zarqawi was clearly disappointed with the apathy of the majority of the Sunni Arabs in Iraq and sought to raise their revolutionary consciousness by baiting the Shiites into attacking them. He was eager to accomplish this goal before the Sunnis fell into the trap of longing for material and even political advantages that might flow from the nascent democracy in Iraq and of deciding to abandon jihad.

Zawahiri, for his part, found Zarqawi's strategy and actions as disturbing as Lenin found Stalin's. Zawahiri has always been concerned with the way the Muslim masses perceived al Qaeda and its message. In *Knights under the Banner of the Prophet*, he wrote,

The jihad movement must dedicate one of its wings to work with the masses, preach, provide services for the Muslim people, and share their concerns through all available avenues for charity and educational work. We must not leave a single area unoccupied. We must win the people's confidence, respect, and affection. The people will not love us unless they felt that we love them, care about them, and are ready to defend them.⁹

His recent declaration that the jihadists and all other Muslims should offer such aid as they can to suffering Pakistanis despite the evil of Musharraf's government is another example of his determination to secure a positive image of his movement in the eyes of the masses.

Zawahiri made this point explicitly in his letter to Zarqawi:

If we are in agreement that the victory of Islam and the establishment of a caliphate in the manner of the Prophet will not be achieved except through jihad against the apostate rulers and their removal, then this goal will not be accomplished by the mujahed movement while it is cut off from

public support, even if the Jihadist movement pursues the method of sudden overthrow. This is because such an overthrow would not take place without some minimum of popular support and some condition of public discontent which offers the mujahed movement what it needs in terms of capabilities in the quickest fashion. . . . In the absence of this popular support, the Islamic mujahed movement would be crushed in the shadows.¹⁰

In accord with this desire to gain mass support within the *Umma*, Zawahiri has not proposed attacks against the Shia. His emphasis is always upon unifying against the common enemy, in which he regards *jahiliyya* as being more dangerous than apostasy. Zawahiri was, therefore, apparently deeply disturbed by Zarqawi's decision to turn on the Shia first, as a way of attacking the Americans and as a way of mobilizing the Sunni Arabs within Iraq. Zawahiri makes clear that he shares Zarqawi's opinion of the Shia: "People of discernment and knowledge among Muslims know the extent of danger to Islam of the Twelve'er school of Shiism. It is a religious school based on excess and falsehood." He continues, however, "We must repeat . . . that the majority of Muslims don't comprehend this and possibly could not even imagine it. For that reason, many of your Muslim admirers amongst the common folk are wondering about your attacks on the Shia." Zarqawi's attacks on Shiite mosques, he added, increase this unease. "My opinion is that this matter won't be acceptable to the Muslim populace however much you have tried to explain it, and aversion to this will continue." Speaking indirectly, but clearly for himself as well, Zawahiri muses, "Is the opening of another front now in addition to the front against the Americans and the government a wise decision?"

Zawahiri repeatedly acknowledges, with infinitely more apparent humility than Lenin ever showed Stalin and Kamenev (or anyone else, for that matter), that he is far from the theater of action and only Zarqawi has the true picture of events in Iraq. He adds, "however, monitoring from afar has the advantage of providing the total picture and observing the general line without getting submerged in the details . . . One of the most important factors of success is that you don't let your eyes lose sight of the target, and that it should stand before you always. Otherwise you deviate from the general line through a policy of reaction." These are the harsh words of the ideologue attempting to bring the overzealous local commander to heel. Stalin would certainly have

cringed on receiving such a missive from Lenin. It is unclear what Zarqawi's reaction was.

That is partly because the power relationship between Zarqawi and Zawahiri is quite different from that between Stalin and Lenin. Bin Laden is famous throughout the Muslim world, and Zawahiri is known as his loyal deputy and brilliant ideologue. But Zarqawi is developing a significant aura all his own from his ability to elude and hurt the Americans, if from nothing else. Should Zarqawi succeed in Iraq, it is quite likely that he would push bin Laden and Zawahiri aside in the leadership of al Qaeda and the jihadist movement. It is extremely unlikely, on the other hand, that Zawahiri will travel to Iraq, take control of the situation, impose his brilliant ideological vision, and achieve Lenin's victory.

This war on terror is an ideological struggle in which the heirs of Qutb are attempting to seize power so as to establish a forcible dictatorship that can impose their desired moral, political, economic, judicial, and social system upon a growing mass—and ultimately, the whole—of the human race.

What's at Stake in the War on Terror

For all the obvious and subtle differences between the current situation and that of the Bolsheviks, the analogy can nevertheless inform our thinking in important ways. It helps to strip away the confusion resulting from the jihadists' abuse of Islamic theology and cut through the tangle of arguments about 1,400-year old events and personalities to reveal the true stakes of the struggle. This is not a war of the West against Islam, of wealthy nations against the poor, of the agents of globalization against their victims. It is an ideological struggle in which the heirs of Qutb are attempting to seize power so as to establish a forcible dictatorship that can impose their desired moral, political, economic, judicial, and social system upon a growing mass—and ultimately, the whole—of the human race.

They are using the tried-and-true methods of the Bolsheviks, and the many revolutionaries who have

followed in their wake, as they attempt to accomplish this mission. A small group of professional revolutionaries works simultaneously to expand its reach in the populace and to perfect its own organization. At the right historical moment, it strikes a weak state and seizes power. It then uses that state for two purposes. First, it builds a model, a showpiece of the excellence of its ideological program to encourage other groups to imitate it, creating similar states which it can then absorb. Second, it develops the resources of that state to place them at the disposal of the revolutionary movement, dramatically increasing its reach and capabilities. It is essential to recall in this regard that, although the jihadists write like seventh-century poets and advocate a "return" to an idealized version of "traditional Islam," they have no quarrel with technology. Qutb made that explicit in *Milestones*, and the jihadists have made it clear with word and deed that they accept the premise that this idealized Islam is not at odds with advanced technology.

The movement is now quarreling in numerous fora about strategy: to attack the Shia or not, to attack the Saudi government or leave it alone, to strike the Americans or their regional allies—all arguments similar in nature to those that animated Bolshevik discussions before and after the Great October Socialist Revolution.

We must be attentive to how these quarrels are resolved. It is quite possible that the "central" al Qaeda organization, if we may so designate the group immediately responsive to bin Laden and Zawahiri, has not staged another September 11th-style attack on the United States not so much because they are incapable of it, but because they have concluded that it is counterproductive at the current moment. September 11th certainly did not produce the result they desired: the United States did not turn on its regional allies, nor did America's direct intervention in the Muslim world lead to a dramatic explosion of spontaneous jihad.

Judging from the increasingly desperate tone of the internal jihadist correspondence, in fact, it seems clear that they do not feel that they are winning this struggle. Zawahiri appears to be focusing on building an organization and a new base in the Muslim community, and to be quarrelling with Zarqawi about the latter's policies that are complicating that effort. Zarqawi has been throwing his might into igniting a Sunni-Shia civil war in Iraq. So far, that has not occurred, but Zawahiri's injunctions to abandon that line of effort offer little in the way of alternatives.

One of the greatest dangers facing the West today, therefore, is the danger of growing complacent. If the

terrorists are directing their attacks away from America's shores now for strategic reasons of their own, they may revise that decision at any moment. More importantly, the Bolshevik example provides cause for fear of another sort. In March 1917, as we have noted, the Bolsheviks were utterly irrelevant in the Russian political scene. The collapse of the tsarist government did not bring them to power, but it created a chaos in which they could reform and reorganize to strike. The failure of the Kerensky government, which resulted largely from its ill-advised determination to keep fighting an unpopular war, offered the revitalized Bolsheviks the opportunity to seize power. Even then, it required a vicious three-year civil war to consolidate the victory, a victory made possible largely because of the war-weariness and distraction of "international capitalism," meaning the United States, Britain, France, Japan, and their allies.

The struggle to establish stability in Iraq and Afghanistan is thus at the very heart of any war against jihadism. Zarqawi, bin Laden, Zawahiri, and many others repeat over and over again that this is their view. They are right. If they could ever take advantage of a significant period of chaos in either of those states, they could establish themselves anew and reverse the current disarray of their movement, probably very quickly. It took the Bolsheviks, after all, eight months to go from a position in which almost every Bolshevik leader was in jail or in exile to holding the seat of power in Russia with a mass following. Collapse and reorder can come very rapidly with a thoughtful, organized, and intellectually prepared revolutionary group.

And that is precisely what we face in al Qaeda. For too long, we have been transfixed with concerns about anti-Americanism within the Muslim community and the sense that this struggle is amorphous and difficult to comprehend. The truth is that anti-Americanism in any community is only dangerous if there is a group within that community that can organize and channel that sentiment into an intelligently conceived strategy. Destroying such groups is the highest priority, but it is extremely difficult. Preventing them from establishing themselves in power in a sovereign state comes next, and that is much more feasible, if still costly and difficult.

But Marxism did not fall, in the end, simply because of the collapse of Soviet power. It fell simultaneously with that collapse, as the majority of the "communist" world decided that it was intellectually bankrupt and offered a less attractive vision of the future than its

nemesis—democracy and capitalism. If we kill bin Laden, Zawahiri, or Zarqawi tomorrow, the doctrines of Qutb and his heirs will continue to offer the blueprint for similar revolutionary organizations in the future. We must recall that Zarqawi, Zawahiri, and bin Laden all developed their ideologies and even their movements independently of one another before merging. Real victory can only come by persuading the overwhelming majority of the Muslim people that this apocalyptic vision is unattractive.

Western insouciance and the incompetence of Russian liberals ensured that it took seven decades of horrible suffering and terrible danger to prove that point about Marxism. We are fortunate now to be able to contest this ideology much earlier in its developmental cycle. Establishing viable, peaceful, stable democracies in Iraq and Afghanistan should therefore be fully as central to our war on terror as the goal of establishing jihadist dictatorships in those countries is to the terrorists' war against us. The war in Iraq is not a distraction from the war on terror. It is, on the contrary, far and away the most important battle yet fought in that war, and a battle that the West dare not lose.

Notes

1. Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (Damascus: Dar al-Ilm, n.d.), 7. For a brief discussion of Qutb's ideology, see also Ahmad Moussalli, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Ideological and Political Discourse of Sayyid Qutb* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1992).
2. Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, 10.
3. *Ibid.*, 12.
4. *Ibid.*, 11–12.
5. Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Knights under the Prophet's Banner* (2001), serialized in *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, a London-based Saudi-owned daily newspaper.
6. *Ibid.*, part III.
7. Dr. Nimrod Raphaeli, "The Sheikh of the Slaughterers': Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi and the Al-Qa'ida Connection," Middle East Media Research Institute, *Inquiry and Analysis Series* 231 (July 1, 2005).
8. "Text from Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi Letter," released on February 12, 2004, available at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iraq/2004/02/040212-al-zarqawi.htm>.
9. Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Knights under the Prophet's Banner*, section 12.
10. Zawahiri to Zarqawi, July 9, 2005 (released on October 11, 2005), available at http://www.dni.gov/release_letter_101105.html.