



Israeli soldier faces confrontation while imposing curfew in Palestinian sector of Hebron

AP/Wide World Photo (Nasser Shiyoukh)

Confronting an Army Whose Men Love Death

Osama, Iraq, and U.S. Foreign Policy

By JERRY M. LONG

COMMITMENTARY

In an article in *Foreign Affairs*, Lee Feinstein and Anne-Marie Slaughter assess the work of the Evans-Sahnoun Commission, appointed by the Canadian government and inspired by an appeal from United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan. In responding to the threat of Osama bin Laden and global terrorism, the commission has urged nations to adopt a new doctrine: “the duty to protect.” Feinstein and Slaughter propose a corollary: “the duty to prevent.” Along with others, the authors claim that “the biggest problem with the Bush preemption strategy may be that it does not go far enough.”¹

No one denies the threat of an aberrant form of Islam or the danger of weapons of mass destruction falling into the hands of

rogue regimes or nonstate actors. Moreover, there is no moral equivalence between the violence of militants and U.S. actions taken against al Qaeda and other terrorists; the United States is fully justified in defending itself. The concern is that the Bush administration’s doctrine of preemption, especially as implemented in Iraq, 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.

This article contends that the elaboration and execution of current national security policy, and the specific rhetoric used to articulate that policy, have had an unintended result: they have served to validate radical ideology and sharpen its fervor, enlarge the number of volunteers to Osama’s cause,

alienate many in the Arab and Islamic publics, and extend the battlefield on which America and its narrowing scope of allies must fight.

Background

In 634 CE, before the critical battle with the Persians at Mada’in, Khalid ibn al-Walid, commander of the outnumbered Arab army, sent his foe this summons: “In the name of God, the All-Compassionate, the Merciful . . . enter into our faith [lest we come with] a people who love death just as you love life.”² Almost 14 centuries later, an al Qaeda statement appeared just after the 9/11 attacks: “The Americans should know that . . . there are thousands of the Islamic nation’s youths who are eager to die just as the Americans are eager to live.”³ Such is the unconventional army that the United States now confronts—an army whose men love death.

Jerry M. Long is a Professor in the Honors College and Director of Middle East Studies at Baylor University.

lands. It is little surprise, then, that in February 1998, Osama declared in a joint fatwa:

*The Arabian Peninsula has never . . . been stormed by any forces like the crusader armies spreading in it like locusts . . . for over 7 years the United States has been occupying the lands of Islam in the holiest of places, the Arabian Peninsula . . . we issue the following fatwa to all Muslims: the ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the al-Aqsa Mosque [of Jerusalem] and the holy mosque [in Mecca] from their grip and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam.*¹²

On September 11, 2001, 19 men responded to that fatwa and struck a blow at

people of Pakistan, reminding them that Afghanistan had been the first line of defense for Islam against Russia 20 years previously. Now, Pakistan had that honor. More importantly, Osama used classical doctrine to reply to President Bush. This was one of the perennial (*khalidah*) battles of Islam, an explicit classical notion. And the battle of this age was against the “crusader-Jewish operation, led by the chief crusader Bush under the banner of the cross.”¹⁴

The expected assault on Afghanistan began 2 weeks later. The immediate al Qaeda response was again couched

the continued large, visible presence of U.S. troops on the peninsula was a juggernaut of the house of war into the house of peace

the civilization they hated. While morally reprehensible, the attack made perfect sense within their narration of the 20th century. The house of war had attacked the house of Islam, which responded in an unprecedented way, adding another chapter to the chronicle of perennial battles between faith and unbelief.

A Clash of Ideologies

Hours after the September 11 attacks, President George W. Bush addressed a stunned Nation.¹³ In language intended to console and reassure, he promised that the Nation would remain on course, with the government functioning and the “economy open for business.” But he also put those responsible for the attack on notice that there would be war and that enemy combatants would include both those immediately responsible and those who harbored them, the first public indication of coming action against both state and nonstate actors.

Five days later, the President made a remark to reporters that caused alarm: “This is a new kind of evil and we understand, and the American people are beginning to understand, *this crusade*, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while.” Osama’s response, which matched the President’s categorical language, came a week after Bush’s crusade speech. On September 24, Osama sent an open letter to the

in classical Islamic terms.¹⁵

This was an “all-out crusader war” that pitted the forces of “infidelity and faith” against each other. As with the February 1998 fatwa that called for killing Americans everywhere possible, this also called for jihad, making it an individual duty.¹⁶ After the United States lobbied for some resolution that would grant it international legitimacy, the next al Qaeda statement broadened its attack to include the United Nations.¹⁷ But Osama’s real vituperation focused on Arab leaders who, by cooperating with the coalition, had become unbelievers. This was an important technical point,¹⁸ for it legitimized any future attacks on such leaders. Moreover, those Arabs who looked to solve regional tragedies through the international body were hypocrites who had double-crossed (*khaada’a*) God and His messenger.

Iraq and the War on Terror

With respect to an American rhetoric that dichotomized the two camps, President Bush’s January 2002 State of the Union address is arguably the most important statement. There, the President reflected on U.S. action in Afghanistan during the preceding 4 months, calling it a success that had “rallied a great coalition . . . [and] saved a people.”



Marines disembark in Saudi Arabia, Operation Desert Shield

U.S. Marine Corps (U01 Lancaster)

But he staked a strong position beyond the mountains of Afghanistan, saying the United States must carry the war to nation-states, not just the Taliban, because the terrorists “view the entire world as a battlefield.” America now had the opportunity to take the lead in the “history of liberty,” waging war that pitted freedom and dignity against tyranny and death.

But war against whom? Calling repeatedly for preemptive action, the President adduced the administration’s best known metaphor: he called for decisive action against an “axis of evil.” Most importantly, that meant Iraq.

To strike Iraq was to strike a blow against Osama, and terrorism more broadly. In a word, 9/11 and the continued threat of terrorism furnished a just cause for war against Iraq. President Bush made the link explicit in September 2002 in his address to the United Nations General Assembly.¹⁹ To take action in Iraq would be both a “moral cause” and “strategic goal.” It would also battle the terrorists in their “war against civilization.” Furthermore, U.S. actions in

Iraq could help foster democratic regimes in Afghanistan and Palestine that would “inspire reforms throughout the Muslim world.”

Al Qaeda responded in an audio statement several weeks after President Bush’s September address.²⁰ Ayman al-Zawahiri warned of U.S. plans for attacking Iraq and that U.S. objectives went “far beyond Iraq to reach the Arab and Islamic world [to support] its aims to destroy any effective military power next to Israel.” At the same time, al Jazeera carried a message purporting to be from Osama.²¹ The message addressed the American public and contained the Islamic *da’wa*, an appeal to convert to Islam. Osama reminded his audience of the “lesson” of the Washington and New York attacks and warned of the administration’s plan to “attack and partition the Islamic world.”

Once again, one should note the sensibilities of regional elites in the midst of the rhetorical and physical war between al Qaeda and Washington. Arab leaders were less than confident in light of potential action against Iraq. In an Arab League summit meeting in March 2002 in Beirut,²² leaders reached some rapprochement with Iraq, declaring that an attack on that country would be an attack on all. Not surprisingly, Iraq, sitting under the American sword of Damocles, made concessions to gain the support. But more significant than Iraq’s malleability was the implicit issue for participants: American intervention could

prove more dangerous to the existing Arab order than a contained Saddam. Where the visit of Vice President Richard Cheney several weeks earlier had failed to win support

for U.S. action, at this meeting, Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Abdullah publicly embraced Izzat Ibrahim, a senior member of Iraq’s Revolutionary Command Council. The post-conference comment of George Hawatmeh, editor of Jordan’s daily *al-Rai*, is pertinent: “The Saudis are basically sending a message to the Americans to solve the Palestinian question. . . . Take care of the Palestinian problem, the mother of all problems, and we will solve the rest in our way. We will take care of Iraq.”

The Arab League took the same position again a year later. Meeting in Cairo in March 2003 when the U.S.-led “coalition of the willing” began its attack on Iraq, the League condemned the “aggression.”²³ With the exception of Kuwait, it unanimously adopted a resolution calling on Arab states to take no action “damaging to the unity and territorial integrity of Iraq.” Saudi Arabia was more explicit. Crown Prince Abdullah declared, “The Kingdom will not participate in any way in the war on brotherly Iraq. . . . We strongly reject any blow to Iraq’s unity, independence, and its security and the country’s military occupation.”

Nevertheless, the war was executed. Al-Nidaa’, the al Qaeda Web site, posted a message immediately following the collapse of the Saddam regime.²⁴ Guerrilla warfare, it stated, would be “the most effective method for the materially weak against the strong.” It had proven workable against French “crusader colonialism” in Algeria, as well as against the Soviets in Afghanistan and the Americans in Vietnam. Now retaliation could directly attack either Americans or those regarded as their “agents.”

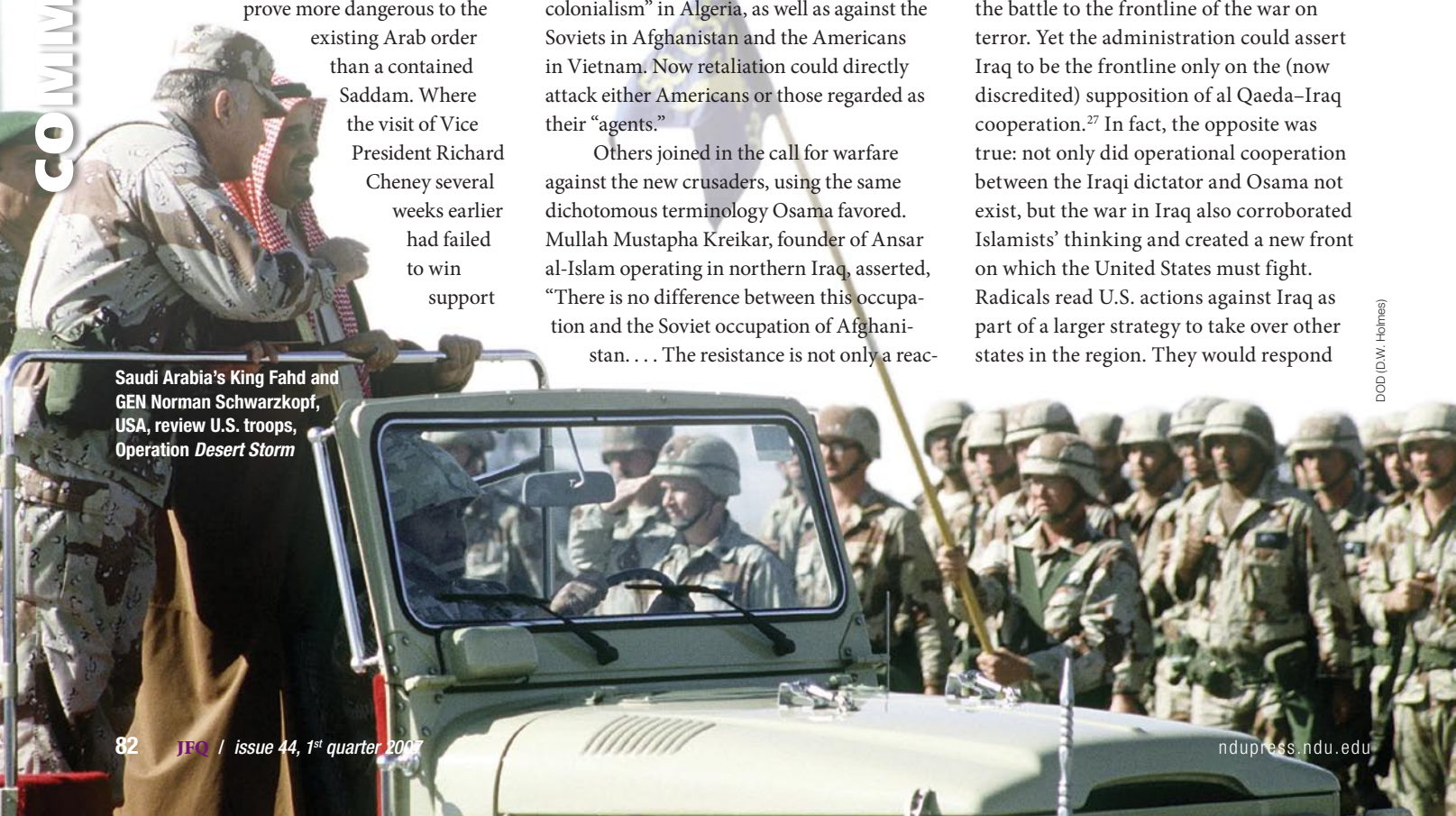
Others joined in the call for warfare against the new crusaders, using the same dichotomous terminology Osama favored. Mullah Mustapha Kreikar, founder of Ansar al-Islam operating in northern Iraq, asserted, “There is no difference between this occupation and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. . . . The resistance is not only a reac-

tion to the American invasion, it is part of the *continuous Islamic struggle* since the collapse of the caliphate.” And Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar called for jihad, joined by 600 other Muslim clerics. “There are *only two camps* left in the world today. One is Islam, which is a religion of peace, and the other symbol is Bush, who is a symbol of terror and hatred.”²⁵

While the comments of Kreikar and Omar may be regarded as opportunistic, those of al-Zawahiri days after the Riyadh and Casablanca attacks in May are of more concern.²⁶ Addressing Muslims, al-Zawahiri warned that dividing Iraq was but America’s first step. Next would come Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. In response, Muslims should attack both embassies and companies of Western countries and not allow Westerners to live in their states. Al-Zawahiri then addressed those in Iraq: “O Iraqi people, we defeated those crusaders several times before and expelled them. . . . Your mujahid brothers are tracking your enemies and lying in wait for them.”

What was unfolding was the thorough validation of radical ideology, the idea of inveterate conflict between the *dar al-Islam* and the *dar al-harb*. The Bush administration had maintained that, apart from toppling Saddam and ridding the country of weapons of mass destruction, the campaign was part of the larger strategy of carrying the battle to the frontline of the war on terror. Yet the administration could assert Iraq to be the frontline only on the (now discredited) supposition of al Qaeda–Iraq cooperation.²⁷ In fact, the opposite was true: not only did operational cooperation between the Iraqi dictator and Osama not exist, but the war in Iraq also corroborated Islamists’ thinking and created a new front on which the United States must fight. Radicals read U.S. actions against Iraq as part of a larger strategy to take over other states in the region. They would respond

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Saudi Arabia’s King Fahd and GEN Norman Schwarzkopf, USA, review U.S. troops, Operation Desert Storm

DOD (D.W. Holmes)

by enlarging their scope of attacks against the United States, its allies, and those Arab leaders whom al Qaeda accused of being agents of the West. Put another way, the United States did not carry the battle to the frontline of terrorism when it waged war on Iraq. Rather, it created new battlelines on which its already attenuated forces would have to fight.

The al Qaeda audiotape that surfaced in October 2003 underscored that Islamists would respond to the war in Iraq by expanding the battle area even further.²⁸ Osama declared that America had become stuck in the quagmire (*mustanqa*) of Iraq. Then he warned that those who participated in the tyrannical war—Australia, Britain, Italy, Japan, Poland, and Spain—would face retaliation. The coming months saw validation of the threats. In November, al Qaeda again struck Western compounds (“crusader settlements”) in Riyadh, killing 17 and wounding over 100. The Madrid commuter train bombings in March 2004 fulfilled threats to attack Spain, killing over 200 and wounding 7 times that number.

Where Next in the War on Terror?

For the last several years, the United States has engaged in three types of war. Victory is clear in only one. The conventional war against Iraq falls in the win column. The unconventional war against insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan may still be won, but only over time and at great expense. The war against al Qaeda and its franchises is far more uncertain, and the results thus far—pronouncements from the administration notwithstanding—are not encouraging. The examples in the preceding sections show two critical findings. First, al Qaeda pronouncements and praxis respond directly to U.S. pronouncements and actions. Second, from the perspective of al Qaeda, the ideology of inveterate struggle with the house of war has been validated. Thus, the war on terror, while enjoying some physical victories, has exacerbated the threat by authenticating al Qaeda ideology.

What should the United States do? Many others have advocated the obvious: taking a more even-handed approach to

ameliorating the Israel-Palestinian conflict. But what other pragmatic steps, in light of al Qaeda ideology, might be implemented? Five suggestions follow.

Recognize Deep History at Work. During the Cairo Conference in 1921, Winston Churchill and T.E. Lawrence toured Palestine. Caught in an anti-Zionist demonstration, the future British Prime Minister was wary: “I say, Lawrence, are these people dangerous? They don’t seem too pleased to see us.”²⁹ Many in the region still are not pleased 85 years later. Arabs are making neither a disingenuous nor an empty charge when they complain of Western interference over the last century. One need look no further than Iraq’s unnatural borders. Sir Anthony Parsons, a long-time British diplomat in the Middle East, observed, “Woodrow Wilson had disappeared . . . and there wasn’t much rubbish about self-determination. We, the British, cobbled Iraq together. It was always an artificial state; it had nothing to do with the people who lived there.”³⁰

When Osama stated that the region had experienced “humiliation and disgrace” for over 80 years, he appealed to a broadly shared history in which the West was complicit. It behooves the United States to recognize that what we say and do in the region will always be interpreted against that history. Washington cannot altogether avoid a negative reading of its intentions and actions, but it must develop policies that take full account of Arab sensibilities about Middle East history. To speak, for instance, of a “crusade” against the Islamists is a serious misstep.

No New Contracts. Writing in late 1990, Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett described Arab reaction to America’s sudden discovery of human rights abuses in Iraq.³¹ The United States had ignored those abuses as it supported Iraq in its war with Iran. But when oil was at stake, it took the high moral ground of defending Kuwait against the brutalities of the Saddam regime. This about-face, the Slugletts wrote, struck the Arab public as an “almost indecently narrow self-interest.” The same still holds. The current practice of awarding contracts to American and British firms as a kind of war booty sends the worst signal to Arabs and others. It vitiates our claim that our action in Iraq proceeds simply from a disinterested desire to spread democracy.

Moreover, in the larger war on terror, it validates the al Qaeda claim, in the minds of many, that our presence in the region is tantamount to economic colonialism.

Adopt a More Subtle Approach through Coalition Building. Robert McNamara made an observation pertinent to our war in Iraq: “We are the strongest nation in the world today. I do not believe we should ever apply that economic, political, or military power unilaterally. . . . If we can’t persuade nations with comparable values of the merit of our cause—we better reexamine our reasoning.”³² Forming coalitions is difficult, but with the threat of al Qaeda it is essential. In the present instance, a broad coalition is not simply a means of cost-sharing. It serves as a tool of delegitimation by complicating the otherwise neat categories of *dar al-Islam/dar al-harb* and the trifecta of enemies headed by the United States. A broad coalition would lower an American profile, certainly a more subtle approach. Instead, we established the “coalition of the willing,” which was quite different, for it lacked many important allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and virtually all the Arab countries. The coalition of the willing raised the American profile and validated al Qaeda claims of U.S. hegemony.

Recognize the Attitude Continuum. Classic revolutionary cell doctrine recognizes an inner core of membership, the true believers who will sacrifice all for the party or cause. Around it are concentric circles of sympathizers with varying levels of commitment. Beyond the sympathizers are the neutral or undecided. Finally, there are those who are opposed to the doctrine of the revolutionary core. A pragmatic U.S. policy would recognize that we have no way of changing the minds of the true believers in al Qaeda’s revolutionary core. Similarly, there are those who unequivocally reject al Qaeda’s doctrine and actions, and there is no need to persuade them. The challenge for U.S. policy is to persuade the many who fall between the ends of the continuum, and force will avail little in that task.

The United States is losing in the struggle for those in the middle. A policy shift that emphasizes a just and lasting accord between Israel and Palestine, promotes development of human capital in the Arab world, and alleviates suffering in poorer countries will do far more for long-term American interests than conducting military incursions in axis of evil countries or bombing Tora Bora.

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We can attack al Qaeda directly when warranted and feasible, but the critical answer to al Qaeda and its franchises is to enfeeble them by delegitimizing them. This is the appropriate adaptation of George Kennan's call over 50 years ago for the "adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points." If, in concert with Arab and Islamic governments, we win the middle, we can reduce al Qaeda's recruitment pool and funding sources while at the same time robbing it of legitimacy. A prudential policy should aim at building an ever-enlarging circle of Arabs and Muslims who have fewer reasons to distrust us and greater cause to repudiate Osama as perverting Islam.

Adopt Less Categorical Language. A Senator from Ohio offered this ebullient view of U.S.-effected regime change overseas:

*God has not been preparing the English speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation. . . . No! He has made us the master organizers of the world to establish a system where chaos reigns. . . . He has marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world.*³³

These remarks are not current, for they were spoken by Albert Beveridge addressing the question of the Philippines a century ago; but they are perennial. From John Winthrop's "city on a hill" speech to President Bush's State of the Union addresses, Americans have drawn themselves in larger than life images, often with categorical language. Seldom has political language been as important as it is now.

While the United States must act to ameliorate threats of terrorism, it must also develop a foreign policy at once more nuanced

and more balanced. It is crucial that in the self-portrait we present the international community, we forswear categorical, dichotomous language. Although such language may reassure Americans, it legitimates the claims of our opponents. The habit will be hard to break, but break it we must, for the army whose men love death will be deterred neither by the threat of cruise missiles nor political rhetoric. And in this war of words, Arab and Islamic publics are listening intently. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Lee Feinstein and Anne-Marie Slaughter, "A Duty to Prevent," *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 1 (January–February 2004), 136–150.

² Ehsan Yar-Shater, ed., *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. 11, *The Challenge to Empires* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 44.

³ British Broadcasting Corporation, October 10, 2001.

⁴ A useful exposition of the doctrine remains Majid Khadduri, *War and Peace in the Law of Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1955).

⁵ Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (Indianapolis: American Trust, 1990).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 66–69.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸ The statement appeared in *The Jordan Times* online, October 8, 2001.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Yossef Bodansky, *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (New York: Random House, 2001), 28–31.

¹¹ *The Jordan Times*, November 8, 2001, carried the remarks.

¹² The fatwa is available at <www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/wif.htm>.

¹³ *The New York Times*, September 12, 2001.

¹⁴ In Arabic, the terms *crusade* and *crusader* are taken directly from the word for *cross*: *saleeb*. Crusaders were so named because the cross was emblazoned on mail, shield, and banner. *Cross, crusade, and Christian* are thus linked, and Islamists make much of this in their two-camp rhetoric.

¹⁵ British Broadcasting Corporation, October 10, 2001.

¹⁶ In classical doctrine, this was a *fardh 'ayn*, meaning everyone without exception must respond.

¹⁷ "Bin Laden: Al-umam al-mutahidah waraa' maasee al-Arab," Al-Jazeera.Net, November 3, 2001.

¹⁸ This jurisprudential move is called *takfeer*: to declare someone guilty of unbelief. Many Islamists have resorted to it.

¹⁹ Available at <www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020912-1.html>.

²⁰ See Walter Pincus, "Tape, Assaults Stir Worry about Resurgent Al-Qaeda," *The Washington Post*, October 10, 2002.

²¹ British Broadcasting Corporation, October 6, 2002.

²² Neil MacFarquhar, "Mid East Turmoil," *The New York Times*, March 29, 2002.

²³ British Broadcasting Corporation, March 24, 2003, and Reuters, "Saudi Arabia Vows," March 18, 2003.

²⁴ Middle East Media Research Institute, *Jihad and Terrorism Studies Project*, no. 493, April 11, 2003.

²⁵ Mullah Mustapha Kreikar, quoted in Neil MacFarquhar, "Rising Tide," *The New York Times*, August 13, 2003. Mullah Mohammed Omar, quoted in Kathy Gannon, "Iraq War," Associated Press, April 1, 2003.

²⁶ British Broadcasting Corporation, May 21, 2003. Broadcast on al Jazeera days after the attacks, the text itself does not indicate when it was made. Al-Zawahiri references the war in Iraq but not the May attacks in Riyadh and Casablanca.

²⁷ A key finding of the 9/11 Commission is that there was no operational link between al Qaeda and Iraq.

²⁸ "Wujiha risalitayn lilsha'bayn al'iraqee wal-amerkee," al Jazeera, October 18, 2003.

²⁹ See Phillip Knightley, "Imperial Legacy," in *The Gulf War Reader*, ed. Micah Sifry and Christopher Cerf (New York: Random House, 1991), 15.

³⁰ Cited in Glenn Frankel, "Lines in the Sand," *The Gulf War Reader*, 18.

³¹ See "Iraq Since 1986," *Middle East Report* (November 1990), 19.

³² Errol Morris, documentary, *The Fog of War*.

³³ Albert J. Beveridge, "America's Destiny," *A More Perfect Union: Documents in U.S. History*, vol. 2, ed. Paul F. Boller and Ronald Story (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 88–92.

Afghan, Canadian, and U.S. forces search Tora Bora to gather intelligence during Operation Torii

U.S. Air Force (Jeremy T. Lock)