

Cheers to the great

The leaders must rise to collective higher self. There must be harmonic convergence of leaders to navigate, revive and help the nation thrive -- a nation that is still far short of a destination that promises peace and development.

Z.A. KHAN

WHEN Alexander the Great was about to die his aides asked him who should inherit his position after his death. Alexander said something feebly, which none among his aides could hear clearly, except for the word *kratisto* (meaning great). None was sure whether he meant a great general or a great politician or a great man.

In my understanding, what he meant was that the aides should decide who among them was the most capable of ruling his empire spread over Asia Minor, parts of Europe and Africa, as he probably thought none among them was committed to the cause of his subjects' welfare and good governance.

So the aides fought, and three generals managed to capture three provinces. So muscle power decided who should rule, regardless of the hopes and aspirations of the subjects.

Bangladesh, too, was ruled by muscle power (in civilian attire or in military uniform) for more than half its life since it won independence in December 1971. Who is not aware that the major motivating factors for our people to join voluntarily in the war of liberation were emancipation from Pakistani subjugation, introduction of true democracy and economic empowerment. Today, when we do stocktaking, we find that the balance is tipped in favour of liabilities.

How did this happen? A journey down

memory lane showcases the commitment of towering personalities like Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who inspired us, and also the tens of thousands who sacrificed their lives at the altar of our motherland, to seek independence.

Why then did such a turnaround take place immediately after independence? The nation received unprecedented economic support from the world community to help invigorate our war-ravaged economy.

The people showed enormous support for the plans and schemes for reconstruction of infrastructures and development of institutions that would stimulate good governance but, unfortunately, they have not yet been able to enjoy the fruits of either development or democracy. A great percentage of our people are still languishing under absolute poverty, and democracy has been taken hostage by the people having goons, guns and gold.

Our brief national history is scarred by the remarks like "bottomless basket case" or "most corrupt country in the world." It is not that we did not see a silver lining between the clouds of despair but we could not take advantage of that. How long do we have to carry the stigma that we are yet to ensure good governance? Are we short of the skills needed to plan and manage economic development, or do we lack commitment to grease the wheels of development? To my mind, we are well

poised institutionally to fuel development, but those that occupy the driving seat lack self motivation towards working for the welfare of the people.

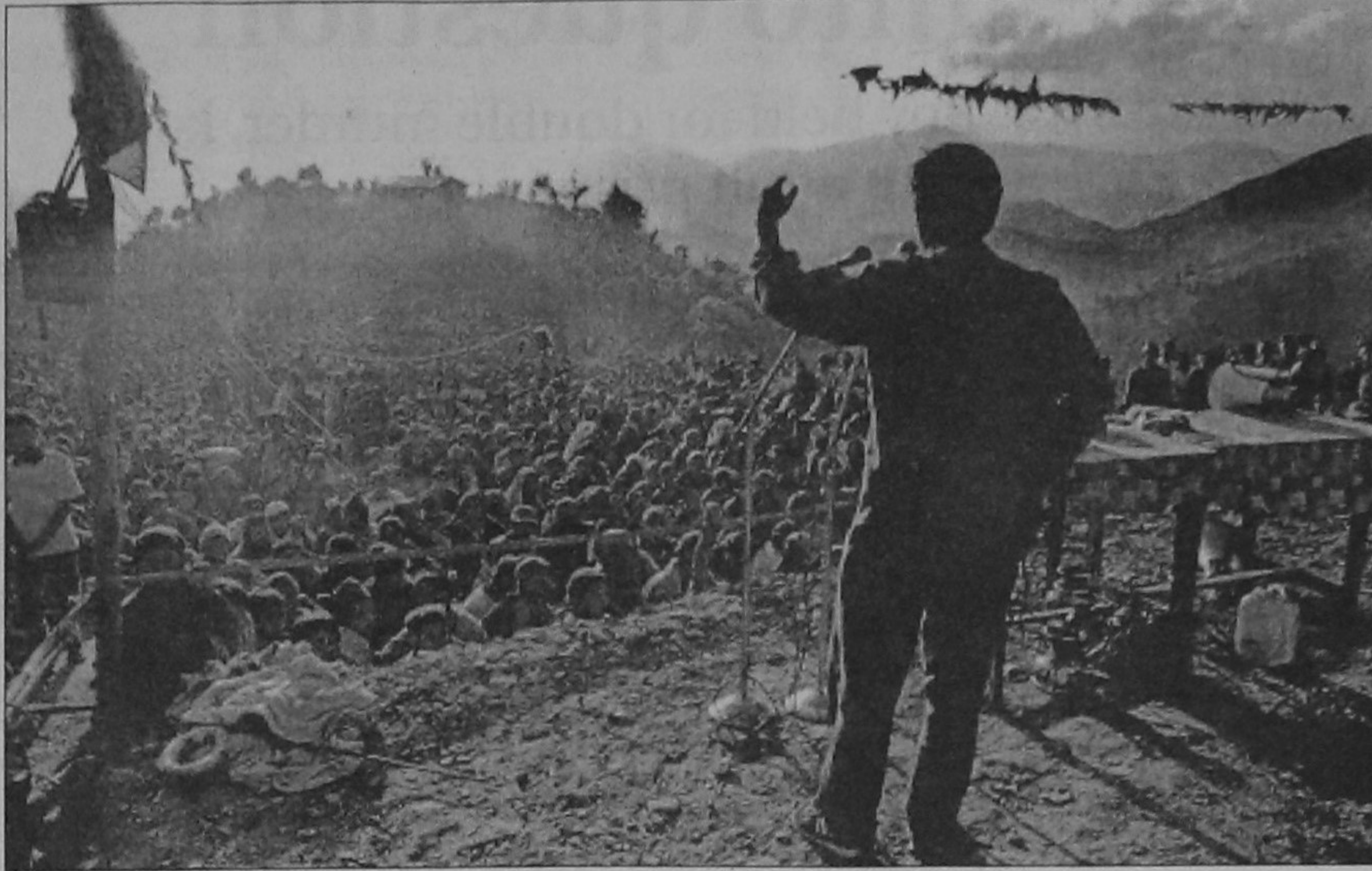
For years our people have mandated leaders to work for their development with lofty hopes, but every time those leaders had drifted to their personal domain populated by their kith and kin. Over the last three decades, a microscopic minority have moved from rags to riches while a vast majority of our poor people (voters) have become poorer.

Today, we are threatened by a possible community disintegration, which may not augur well for our future. Therefore, emergence of true leaders has become a must or else the people's welfare will be immensely hampered. Unfortunately, most of the leaders that have come into prominence since independence are either products of muscle power or inheritors of family legacy.

It has not gone unnoticed that these leaders do not allow anyone, even from the periphery of their constituency, to rise by resorting to muscle power or manipulation. They, like Michelevi, believe: "Who should rule: I, the wise or they, the crowd." The meteoric rise of these tin-pot politicians is due mainly to the sponsorship of their leaders, whom they served with un-remitted zeal and "loyalty."

When they saw that they could scale the ladder of power by only serving the leader, they merrily abandoned their people but raised some goons to subdue anybody that dared challenge their leadership and continued their effort to curry the favour of the top leader.

These leaders hardly have moral scruples and are by and large devoid of commitment to their people or to the country. These leaders' arrogance has discouraged many good and committed people from joining in our utterly fractured politics.



Rising above the self.

Our brief political history is marred by many upheavals. The unfortunate killings of Bangabandhu, shaheed president Ziaur Rahman and four national leaders in jail are manifestations of our checkered past. It is still not officially known as to who plotted their killings. Let us not forget, "those who live by the sword die by the sword."

Many decades have passed since our independence but we still have not achieved our long desired goals; emancipation, empowerment and democracy. This, in my opinion, is the reason for

rising despondency and desperateness of the people and insularity in the society.

Unless politicians protect the lives and liberty of our people, we may not be able to pave a way for our people's welfare, which may lead them to resort to rebellion. Who does not fear an all-devouring rebellion?

Therefore, the time has come to introspect and find ways to arrest the trend that has been set by most of the crafty politicians of today. The leaders must rise to collective higher self. There must be harmonic convergence of leaders to

navigate, revive and help the nation thrive -- a nation that is still far short of a destination that promises peace and development.

The nation at the same time should be prepared to digest the noise and chaos of democracy. This will make the way for emergence of great politicians and people will feel obliged to show resilience to help develop our fragile democracy and will be delighted to acknowledge our leaders as *kratisto*.

Z.A. Khan is a former Director General of BISS, Dhaka.

End-game in Sri Lanka?

There is rationale behind government rejection of the ceasefire call when viewed from its success in the war, but is the war over for all practical purposes? This may not be the case as desperation and last-ditch efforts by the rebels may delay the final denouement.

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

IT is a fast developing situation in Sri Lanka, as the more than three-decade-old civil war appears to be heading for a final settlement. The gov-

ernment says that the Tamil rebels are on the brink of total defeat and it is only a matter of time that they are completely decimated.

The claim of the government is not baseless since it is clear that the militants

are now cornered in a small stretch of land and are desperately trying to resist the advancing government troops. Many civilians are trapped in the combat region, raising international calls for safety, which are falling on deaf ears.

Many fled or were evacuated while several thousands have died, and the woes of many others know no bounds. This has brought Sri Lanka into the focus of international attention, with most keeping their fingers crossed about the shape of things to come.

Is the Lankan civil war over, and has the long-running insurgency been crushed? Will the once dreaded rebels known as the "Tigers," who created a sensation by raising a conventional naval unit and also a semblance of air power, now disappear from the scene altogether?

The government says that the militants have three options -- "surrendering, committing suicide or jumping into the sea" -- to avoid being captured. But knowing the background, objectives and even the ruthlessness of the Tamil Tigers, it is only plausible to think that they are unlikely to give up totally.

There is no iota of doubt that the rebels can hardly stage a comeback, but it is also not certain that they will have to embrace any of the three options in next few days as claimed by the government.

True, the setbacks suffered by the militants have not come as a bolt from the blue as they had been losing control since mid last year, and the Colombo govern-

ment announced that the war was taking an irreversible turn towards defeat for the "separatists."

When the Saarc leaders met in the Sri Lankan capital last year, the host nation's President Mahinda Rajapakse boasted that his troops would wipe out the last bastion of the rebels by the year-end. It did not happen even though the militants were on the defensive and ceding ground to the government troops.

At present, they are confined in a few square miles areas and are calling for a ceasefire -- ostensibly for the safety of the trapped civilians. The government described the call for truce a "joke," and asserted that it was on the verge of complete victory.

There is rationale behind government rejection of the ceasefire call when viewed from its success in the war, but is the war over for all practical purposes? This may not be the case as desperation and last-ditch efforts by the rebels may delay the final denouement.

Several factors are responsible for the growing setbacks for the rebels, who once gave the impression of being very formidable and difficult to crack. Their supremacy, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, showed adroit military strategy earlier through a number of startling victories, including occupying Jafna and strategic Tiger pass.

But he made several mistakes in the battlefield during the first six months of last year, and the trend continues. The parting of ways with a key commander

and confidant, "Karuna" along with his men, was one of the major factors for the military setbacks of the militants.

Besides, Prabhakaran demonstrated lack of political wisdom when he squandered chances of gaining mileage during the talks held between the government and the rebels when a more liberal government was in power. Prime Minister Ranil Wickramasinghe wanted a political settlement with the militants, but intransigence by the hawkish militant leaders defied a solution despite some progress in the talks.

President Mahinda Rajapakse's government is following the policy of former president Chandra Kumaratunga, which has a military solution as its first priority.

India has a definite role to play, and the assassination of former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi by the Tamil militants has also gone against the militants. New Delhi once supported overtly or covertly the Tamil movement in Sri Lanka but reversed its position for a variety of reasons. Finally, Rajiv Gandhi's government sent Indian troops in favour of the Colombo government.

This infuriated the militants, who later avenged this by killing Rajiv Gandhi. Now a Congress-led government is in power in India, and it has no love lost for the rebels although a constituent of the coalition UPA government -- DMK of the Tamil Nadu -- is favourably disposed towards the Tamil militants because of cultural and religious proximities.

Indian Foreign Secretary Shiv Shanker Menon recently held talks with President Mahinda Rajapakse in Colombo, and it appears that New Delhi stopped short of demanding cessation of hostilities against the militants although it called for ceasefire for the sake of the trapped civilians. The rebels confessed to the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, which has certainly gone against the interest of the militants.

However, India is also mindful of some sympathy that exists in India for the Tamil militants, and is maintaining a distance with the Colombo government. China, on the contrary, is supporting the Sri Lankan government.

Beijing has sold plenty of arms to Lanka, which have been used in the war. Now, despite calls for truce by many influential countries including the G-8, the Colombo government is turning a deaf ear to the pleas for truce.

However, despite all the indications that the rebels may be wiped out in the coming days, it can also be concluded that the Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka may not be fully lost because it is associated with certain causes. While the form in which these causes will persist remains to be seen, it seems that things are inexorably moving towards a final settlement, which may not be as simple as the Colombo government considers.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is a senior journalist and analyst of international affairs.



The final shots?

Tactics in a cosmic war

The new administration must strive to address the very real grievances that fuel the global jihadist movement -- the suffering of the Palestinians, American support for Arab dictators, and the overwhelming sense in the Muslim world of feeling under attack.

REZA ASLAN

DURING his address to the Turkish Parliament, President Barack Obama reached out to the Muslim world by stating that "the United States is not -- and will never be -- at war with Islam."

I watched the speech with a group of young Muslim journalists and activists gathered in Istanbul for the second annual Alliance of Civilizations conference. A spontaneous cheer erupted in the room. A college student from Syria, with emotion in her voice, said: "With those words Obama just wiped away the stain of the last eight years."

George W. Bush often made similar statements aimed at mending ties between the US and the Muslim world. "The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends," Bush liked to say. But Bush could never overcome the anger and

mistrust he engendered across the Muslim world. Even in Turkey, arguably America's most vital ally in the Muslim world, perceptions of the US among Turks had reached record lows during the Bush years.

In fact, recent polls showed that nearly 90% of the population held unfavourable views of the US. This is an astounding figure, considering that Turkey is a modern, moderate, Muslim majority state with close ties to Israel and Europe and a sophisticated and urbane population that has absorbed all things western.

And yet, the overwhelming sentiment in Turkey seems to be that the United States is, to borrow a phrase from Osama bin Laden, "a crusading" nation at war with the Muslim world. In this opinion, the Turks are not alone. A poll by WorldPublicOpinion.Org found that nearly two-thirds of Muslims believe that the purpose of the war on terror is to

"spread Christianity in the region."

From the beginning, the Bush administration consciously conceived of the ideological conflict with Al Qaeda and the global jihadist movement as a cosmic contest between good and evil. Indeed, the first time that Bush used the phrase "war on terrorism" he equated it in no uncertain terms with a "crusade." He declared that the purpose of the war was to "rid the world of evil."

In both word and deed, Bush not only provided an apocalyptic lens through which to view the military conflict with Al Qaeda, he also framed the ideological conflict with radical forces in the Muslim world in the same cosmic dualism used by those who carried out the attacks of 9/11.

As I argue in my book *How To Win A Cosmic War*, by adopting the same religiously charged rhetoric and cosmic worldview as the jihadists, by viewing Al Qaeda militants as a demonic force bent on destroying civilisation instead of an international criminal conspiracy to be brought to justice, Bush played right into the jihadists' hands by setting the groundwork for a terrifying age of religious war.

Thanks to the forces of globalisation, which have radically altered the way people define themselves both individually and as a collective, religion is becoming

a stronger, more global force in the world. At the dawn of the twentieth century, half of the world's population identified itself as Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, or Hindu. Today, that number stands at nearly two-thirds.

In an increasingly globalised world, where the old demarcations of nation-states are slowly starting to give way and nationalism no longer has the grip it used to have on our collective identities, religion is once again becoming the primary marker of identity in the world.

That is why it is so important for the new administration to strip the conflicts, particularly the War on Terror, of religious connotations. Thankfully, President Obama seems to understand this. Hence, a few days before Obama arrived in Turkey, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made it clear that the new administration would join the rest of America's European allies and cease using the phrase War on Terror. "The administration has stopped using the phrase and I think that speaks for itself," Clinton said.

This is a good start. But it is not enough just to change the rhetoric of the War on Terror. The new administration must strive to address the very real grievances that fuel the global jihadist movement -- the suffering of the Palestinians, American support for Arab dictators, and the overwhelming sense in the Muslim

world of feeling under attack.

It must reverse course from the Bush administration and stop looking the other way as America's dictatorial allies in Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia suppress democratic movements in their countries. And it must actively engage the democratically elected Islamist leaders in Lebanon and Palestine, because it is inconceivable that political reform can take place in the Middle East without the participation of groups like Hizbullah and Hamas.

There are obviously risks in pushing for democracy in such a volatile region, and no one thinks such a policy would be easy to implement. There are enormous domestic hurdles in the way of promoting political participation among groups who maintain anti-American and anti-Israel sentiments. Undoubtedly, some of the governments that will arise from truly democratic elections in the Middle East may hold views that are contrary to our interests in the region.

But whatever risks there may be in promoting democracy in the Middle East, they pale in comparison to the risks involved in continuing to stifle political reform in the hope of achieving stability in the region. Terrorism, as everyone knows, thrives in societies where there is no public space for people to vent their grievances, and where no political mech-

anism exists for those grievances to be addressed.

Addressing these grievances may not satisfy Osama bin Laden and his fellow cosmic warriors, whose sights are set beyond this world, and whose goals (for example, the recreation of the Caliphate) are too absurd to be taken seriously. But it will take away the appeal of the jihadist movement and loosen the ties that have bound so many young, disaffected Muslims together under a master narrative of oppression and injustice. Most of all, it will deny jihadist ideologues their principal argument that the War on Terror is a war against Islam.

On the first day of the Alliance of Civilizations conference, Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan compared Obama to the city of Istanbul -- a bridge between the east and the west. Thus far, Obama seems to have accepted the role of bridge builder. It may take some time for his actions to catch up with his words, but in in any ideological contest our words can sometimes be our most effective weapons.

Reza Aslan is assistant professor of creative writing at UC Riverside and the author of *How To Win A Cosmic War: God, Globalization, and the End of the War on Terror*.

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