Why do Americans think that Osama bin Laden was a Muslim leader? Because he styled himself as one and we took his word for it.

At a time when leadership in the Islamic world was largely defined by national or ethnic boundaries for both political and religious figures, bin Laden addressed himself to Muslims at large from a location that was both everywhere and nowhere. After 9/11, his organization, al-Qaeda, seemed able to appear at any place at anytime, while Osama himself could not be found. This provided him a trans-national stage no Muslim leader since Abdul Nasser had possessed. We thought people were listening.

Bin Laden considered his primary audience all Muslims, and in particular Muslims who found themselves living constrained lives. They were in economic straights, often jobless, and lived in countries where their freedoms were severely limited. They lacked freedom of expression and speech, and freedom of movement, and freedom to assemble -- to say nothing of freedom of the press. Their ability to carry out their lives was limited by fear of government reprisals if they (accidentally) stepped out of line. And of course, lack of jobs and opportunities led to widespread poverty.

The problem, according to bin Laden, was caused by Western imperial powers that had conquered most Muslim countries at some time during the past two centuries and then ruled them in a way that transferred the wealth of the vanquished to the conquerors. This characterization of the problem was not original; as the Muslim nations gained their independence during the 20th century, successive politicians in country-after-country used it to justify their policies and the exploitation of their own people.

But bin Laden's solution was original. He argued that if Muslims attacked and damaged Western powers at the heart of their economic strength, those powers would spend their economies dry trying to protect themselves. Muslims would then rise up en masse and throw off their chains. (American reaction to 9/11 has shown that the first part of Osama's assessment was surprisingly accurate. Since then our nation entered two wars that were paid for by increasing our debt and which helped lead to a world-wide recession).

Within the Islamic world itself, the response was much smaller. Most of the people motivated to join bin Laden's cause came from a single segment of society -- young unemployed men. Being unemployed, these men had the time to turn to religious education. This positioned them to hear Osama's message, which was delivered in religious terms. That was the only type of "free" speech allowed by the governments of these Muslim countries, since overtly political speech was suppressed. Because Osama's message was against the outside powers rather than national Muslim politicians, it was suppressed very little.

Across the world's 1.5 billion Muslims, bin Laden's religiously formulated message was accepted by surprisingly few. It may have resonated with long-standing frustrations in the Arab and Muslim world, but only a few thousand young men actually joined al-Qaeda.

Since the start of 2011, there have been uprisings in many Arab nations, from Tunisia and Egypt to Libya, Yemen and the Persian Gulf states. Millions of people, male and female, young and old, have protested against their governments and some cases overthrown them. But these protests have nothing to do bin Laden or al-Qaeda. They stem from the failure of each country's strong-man leadership to deliver what the people needed: Jobs, civil rights and freedoms, freedom from fear of their own government, etc.

Bin Laden's attempt to blame the United States failed. The Muslim people could see that the roots of their problems lay much closer to home. Indeed, the responsibility was within their own country, not some far-away power. In the end, it is concern over jobs, personal security and freedom that is bringing positive political change to the Muslim world.

So, bin Laden may have presented himself as a leader and a voice for the Islamic people, but few listened. The Western press paid more attention to him than the Muslim people did. The recent revolutions have come from within each country and community. They are spontaneous, rather than theorized and planned.

And most importantly, they result from the people attempting to win better conditions for themselves through peaceful means, rather than through violence and mass murder.