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COMBATING IDEOLOGICAL SUPPORT FOR TERRORISM

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Abstract

For nearly eight years, the United States has struggled with the important task of sending a clear message that will resonate with the worldwide Muslim population and gain their support in combating the ideological support for terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda. In order to improve the execution of this vital information campaign, the United States should leverage its inherent diversity in formulating the message, making the sender more appealing to the target audience by emphasizing similarities and improving the chances to discredit the ideology and message of Al Qaeda in the eyes of the worldwide Muslim population. To accomplish this difficult task, the United States government must first make significant improvements in the construction of the message. Next, the U.S. should seek opportunities to use Muslim intermediaries in the message delivery. Finally, the United States must make sure any military action it takes does not compromise the information campaign. Improving the information campaign is critical to combating ideological support for terrorism and ultimately winning the war against Al Qaeda and other extremist organizations.

In response to Al Qaeda's terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, the United States launched an unprecedented global war on terrorism that would end up utilizing all the country's instruments of power. While addressing a joint session of Congress shortly after the attacks, President George Bush stressed how Al Qaeda perverted the noble religion of Islam. With those conciliatory words, the United States initiated the information portion of the campaign designed to win the hearts and minds of the Muslim world.¹ Nearly eight years later, President Barack Obama gave a speech in Cairo, Egypt heralding a new beginning in the relationship between the United States and the Islamic world. In the speech, President Obama highlighted several events such as the recent swearing in of the first Muslim-American congressman using Thomas Jefferson's personal copy of the Koran and his own background of Kenyan heritage with Muslim family members.² This speech was widely viewed as an attempt to win the hearts and minds; however, the fact that it was labeled a "new beginning" highlights a troubling issue for the United States. Over eight years later, the United States is still struggling with the important task of sending a clear message that will resonate with the worldwide Muslim population and gain their support in combating the ideological support for terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda. The ongoing struggle makes it clear the United States must improve its information campaign. The United States should leverage its inherent diversity in formulating the message, making the sender more appealing to the target audience by emphasizing similarities and improving the chances to discredit the ideology and message of Al Qaeda in the eyes of the worldwide Muslim population. To do this, the United States government must first ensure the information it hopes to deliver is not lost on the target audience due to a faulty or poorly developed message that inadvertently accentuates our differences. What is lacking and must be developed is a consistent approach addressing the underlying support for terrorist organizations without excessively

highlighting religious differences. Next, the United States needs to take advantage of available opportunities to use Muslim intermediaries to help deliver the message. The current information campaign has not taken advantage of opportunities to have the message delivered by individuals or organizations who the target audience would find more credible. Finally, the United States should place less emphasis on the military instrument of power in order to make the informational instrument of power more effective. While some military action is absolutely necessary, an overreliance on military force beyond simply defeating Al Qaeda and their Taliban sponsors handicapped the information campaign and limited its effectiveness.

In any effective information campaign, the vital first step is ensuring the message is sound and on target for the desired effect. The United States has officially defined the war as both a battle of arms and a battle of ideas emphasizing the promotion freedom and human dignity.³ While this general definition is sound, it is important to remember that the content of the message and the words conveying it play an important role in its acceptance by the desired audience. Unfortunately, the United States has made several key mistakes lessening the effectiveness of the message and inadvertently allowing extremist organizations to capitalize on the perception of a religious war. Perhaps most notably, President Bush referred to the ensuing struggle in the global war on terrorism as a crusade.⁴ The emotional term is evocative of a religious war between Christianity and Islam and the statement damaged American efforts to ensure the war was not perceived as a war against Islam. Unfortunately this was not a single isolated misstep; in his first speech to a joint session of Congress shortly after the attacks, President Bush again proclaimed this was not a war against Islam. However, the speech included stark language, defining the conflict in clear black and white terms: “Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists.”⁵ The speech concluded with a litany of descriptive terms

for both sides and the final judgment that “God will not be neutral” in this conflict.⁶ Despite official proclamations otherwise, the cumulative effect framed the struggle in religious terms leading to a focus on religious elements and provided significant ammunition to terrorist recruiters trumpeting a conflict between Islam and Christianity. It is easy to dismiss this as the cowboy rhetoric of the former President and simply wait for the situation to improve with the new administration. President Barrack Obama took important first steps in this direction by eliminating highly charged religious terms such as “jihadist” and “global war” from official White House discourse to help eliminate the perception of a war on Islam.⁷ However, official government documents still contain divisive language that undermines these efforts. The current National Strategy for Combating Terrorism mentions the words “Muslim” or “Islam/Islamic” a total of 26 times in a 23 page document. As a comparison, there is not a single mention of any variation of Christian or Jewish/Judaism in the entire document.⁸ Just like past rhetoric, current government communication still feeds the perception in the Muslim’s world mind this is a war on Islam. Islam is the only religion mentioned in the official document defining the war on terrorism strategy, so it is not hard to see how cynics can make the logical jump. Ideally, the word Muslim or Islam would not continuously be mentioned and instead there would be a simple acknowledge of terrorist organizations claim to be Muslim. This would provide the starting point to refute these organizations perversion of the religion but would eliminate any other linkage between these organizations and Islam. It is desirable to take these steps to disassociate Islam from Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations to ensure there is no association with Islam in the war against Al Qaeda.

After ensuring the message itself does not antagonize the intended audience with a poorly worded message, the next step in a successful information campaign is finding the right

spokesperson. The strategy must consider how the message will be delivered. Al Qaeda has determined the strategy for delivering its message. It will ingratiate itself with the Muslim population, becoming the predominant social service organization in the area and winning the people's confidence and trust.⁹ As a predominantly Christian nation, it would be extremely difficult for the United States to ever hope to develop trust on that level with foreign Muslim populations, especially if messages from the information campaign seem to emphasize Christian, western values and ideals of the community and nation. Of course, if trust is not developed, the audience will not listen to or believe any message from that source. Therefore, the United States must leverage its inherent diversity and use Muslim voices to help deliver its message. The United States is the home to 2.5 million Muslims.¹⁰ This provides a great opportunity to use voices and faces more familiar to Muslims overseas who we hope to influence. Simply put, the sender will be more credible and the audience much more receptive to the message. The recent case of Army Major Nidal Hassan and the shootings at Fort Hood provides a contemporary case on a missed opportunity to use native Muslim voices to validate the United States message. Whether this was a terrorist act has been debated, but it fits as terrorism if you consider the definition as "the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change."¹¹ Hoffman further distinguishes between a terrorist and a lunatic assassin, but his distinguishing characteristic, lack of a political goal on the part of the lunatic, does not apply in this case considering the correspondence and possible inspiration from Al Qaeda. Also, the military targets were not engaged in combat similar to the victims in the Khobar Towers terrorist attacks. Because it had the earmarks of a terrorist attack, the one of the most well known Islamic civil rights group in the United States, the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), issued a statement the same day as the shootings condemning the

killings and stating no religion justified these types of cowardly acts.¹² While it is important to avoid rushing to judgment before all the facts are known, President Obama could have invited the CAIR president to speak at his press conference with him to offer this same denunciation of the violent acts. This would have provided a much greater platform for the CAIR message, ensuring it was not just a footnote on the news that day. The denunciation would have been more widely heard and the fact that the sender shared similarities to the intended world-wide audience would ensure it resonated with the audience. In addition to unique, one-time opportunities, the United States needs to maintain a more permanent familiar face with the region of the world where information campaign is attempting to win hearts and minds. Richard Holbrooke was appointed special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan earlier this year.¹³ While he is skilled diplomat, he does not share the ethnic or religious characteristics of the region he represents. As mentioned earlier, the United States recently elected the first Muslim-American to Congress, but still does not have a prominent Muslim at the executive level. The United States is known as a melting pot because of its diversity and this would have been a great opportunity to use that diversity to put a face on the U.S. government more familiar to the people of that region and in turn made them more comfortable. If the talent is not available, the United States needs to develop the personnel from the 2.5 million strong native Muslim population to fill these types of roles.

While using a domestic Muslim intermediary is an important improvement, it may not always be the most effective alternative. The spokesperson can still be dismissed as “American” by those who wish to recruit terrorists to attack the United States and the West. The United States should attempt to use foreign Muslim voices in the information campaign by endorsing messages of tolerance. A good example is the Amman Declaration on Terrorism, which was

endorsed by over 500 eminent scholars and world leaders, including the presidents of Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹⁴ Included among the endorsements are twelve individual American scholars and theologians, but no representatives of the United States government. It would send a strong message if the United States government endorsed the convention along with our regional allies in the central battleground of the war on terror. A future revision of the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism or the National Security Strategy could use the Amman declaration as a framework for the promotion of tolerance, a concept that would undoubtedly be included in these documents anyway. This could be a powerful step in shining a spotlight on moderate Muslim voices and in turn expand the audience this message may reach.

The final step requires minimizing the use of the military instrument of power. While the concern is improving the information campaign, none of the nation's instruments of power can be used in a vacuum and it is important to consider the negative impacts from other IOPs. As David Kilcullen noted, the existential threat posed by Al Qaeda is not from the terrorist organization itself, but from our reaction to Al Qaeda.¹⁵ It is imperative our military action is not seen as an overreaction that inadvertently tips the battle for the hearts and minds for potential recruits in Al Qaeda's favor. Any direct action by the United States military runs the risk of being used by Al Qaeda as a propaganda tool to confirm the perception of a western crusade in the minds of potential recruits. Using regional allies may alleviate some of this problem, but irregular nature of the enemy presents another challenge. Military action is also generally ineffective due to the dispersed nature of the terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda, again intensifying resentment against the United States and making recruitment easier for terrorist organizations.¹⁶ The end result is that negative consequences from other actions can obscure and cause the message to be lost on the intended audience. In addition, military action in Operation

Iraqi Freedom has had the effect of contradicting the U.S. message in the eyes of many Muslims. Because OIF was grouped into the war on terror despite tenuous ties to Al Qaeda, it helped perpetuate a perception among some of a war on Islam. It is important to ensure military action under GWOT umbrella is conducted against countries supporting organizations that directly facilitated attacks on U.S. interests. While some military action will be inevitable, the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan illustrates necessary limits in a war on terror. Early in the conflict, Al Qaeda was essentially disintegrated and Taliban supporters were driven from official power. That should have been the objective and provided an opportunity to declare victory.¹⁷ This would help reinforce the perception that this is a war against Al Qaeda and not Islamic citizens.

As a corollary, the United States must consider how its relationship with Israel impacts the ability to convey its message to the Muslim world. Much like military action, this diplomatic relationship can have significant detrimental impact causing the message we hope to convey in the information campaign to be lost because of the distraction. While many aspects of U.S. foreign policy can be debated as contributing to Muslim resentment, one area that clearly must be addressed is the U.S. relationship with Israel. It is clear the United States will not abandon its relationship with Israel and will always provide support. Israel's many military successes have contributed to a sense of humiliation in Muslim populations which are exploited by terrorist organizations for recruitment purposes.¹⁸ The United States must not remain silent when Israel violates international law to ensure it is not seen as complicit in Muslim eyes.¹⁹ Remaining silent on Israeli transgressions can be seen as a double standard and fuel this Muslim resentment which has lingered for decades, in turn providing an even stronger recruitment tool. The United States close relationship with Israel helps define it as the other in the eyes of Muslim and will help recruitment for terrorist organizations with a world view beyond Israel. The fact that it is

being used as a recruiting tool and part of the information campaign by Al Qaeda cannot be denied as Osama Bin Laden has used that in his own communications. He states the attacks on the towers were a direct result of the American-Israeli alliance against Palestine.²⁰ As part of examining the impact of the other instruments of power on our information campaign, the polarizing effects of the Israeli relationship cannot be ignored.

In conclusion, the United States must improve the delivery and execution of its information campaign if it hopes to defeat Al Qaeda and other extremist organizations engaged in an Islamic Jihad against the West. The success of Al Qaeda and its ilk depends on selling its ideology to enough recruits to ensure it remains operationally effective and in the news. To win the global war on terrorism, the ideology must be discredited to the point where they cannot win enough recruits to keep their level of threat above a mere nuisance. Discrediting the extremist ideology will require an effective information campaign that is well crafted and well delivered. The first important step to achieving this goal is ensuring it has developed a sound message and strategy for the execution of the information campaign. Second, the United States government should seek Muslim intermediaries as spokesmen for the U.S. message at every opportunity to ensure a more receptive audience. Finally, the United States must consider the impact an overreliance on the military instrument of power has had on the information campaign, obscuring and overpowering the message we hope to deliver to the Muslim world at large. There can be little doubt the majority of the Muslim world would be receptive to and embrace an anti-extremist message of peace and tolerance, even from the United States if delivered with sincerity. If the U.S. eliminates the clutter drowning out the message and delivers it through sources that catch the average Muslim's attention, the nation will take aggressive steps towards winning this war.

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- ¹ President Bush, “Address to Joint Session of Congress,” 20 Sep 2001.
- ² President Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Beginning,” 4 Jun 2009.
- ³ *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, Sep 2006, p.1
- ⁴ President Bush, “Address to White House Press Corps,” 16 Sep 2001
- ⁵ President Bush, “Address to Joint Session of Congress,” 20 Sep 2001.
- ⁶ Ibid
- ⁷ Brennan, “A New Approach to Safeguarding Americans,” 6 Aug 2009.
- ⁸ *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, Sep 2006.
- ⁹ Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its own Words*, p. 196.
- ¹⁰ Mapping the Global Muslim Population, p. 24.
- ¹¹ Hoffman, *Defining Terrorism*, p. 23.
- ¹² CAIR Press release, “U.S. Muslims condemn Fort Hood Shootings,” 5 Nov 2009.
- ¹³ Richard Holbrooke Biography,
- ¹⁴ Amman Conference, “Grand List of Endorsements”.
- ¹⁵ Fallows, “Declaring Victory”, p. 470.
- ¹⁶ Stern, *Terror in the Name of God*, p. 289-290.
- ¹⁷ Fallows, “Declaring Victory”, p. 479.
- ¹⁸ Stern, *Terror in the Name of God*, p. 32.
- ¹⁹ Stern, *Terror in the Name of God*, p. 294.
- ²⁰ Kepel and Milelli, *Al Qaeda in its own Words*, p. 72.

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