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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, R.I.**

**MUSLIM CULTURE: CENTER OF GRAVITY
FOR GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR**

by

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**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of
the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily
endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

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Abstract

This paper contends that the Muslim culture is the center of gravity in the Global War on Terror. Defining the concept of center of gravity and looking at the globalization of terrorists organizations, it is the culture of the Muslim world that enables radicals to deface a proud history and religion. It is this culture that the radical ideologists maintain in a state of poverty, oppression, and aggression and to use this as a motivator for their recruiting cause. The war cannot be won militarily alone. It will be necessary for interagency and non-governmental organizations to take the lead to work with Muslim leaders to change a culture that refuses to modernize and globalize. It will also take moderate Muslim leaders to speak out and to teach young Muslim men that the radical ideology being utilized to justify terror is not their proud religion. Can one change a culture? We must if we want to win the Global War on Terror.

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On September 11, 2001, America came to realize that there was a new enemy and we were not prepared. The sole Superpower in the world was brought to a sudden halt as television broadcasts covered the impact of three airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and a fourth with a destination not officially known due to the heroics of the passengers that prevented it from successfully reaching its target. As the world watched in horror as the twin towers collapsed, the whole world immediately started asking who was responsible and why?

Neither part of this question is easily answered. Who, exactly, is responsible? An individual? An organization? A religion? It did not take long to determine that a radical movement had attacked our way of life and had made itself visible to us and the entire world. This radical ideology that is being taught enables one to kill innocent civilians with no qualms or remorse. The harder question, and one that is still being argued, is the latter...why? Why would someone want to attack and kill thousands of innocent civilians? What is their desired objective or end state? And still another question needing an answer is who exactly is the enemy?

The National Security Strategy defines the new enemy as determined by the President of the United States and his National Security Advisors. It also states the President's vision and direction for the protection of the United States and its citizens: "America is at War. This is a wartime national security strategy required by the grave challenge we face-the rise of

terrorism fueled by an aggressive ideology of hatred and murder, fully revealed to the American people on September 11, 2001. This strategy reflects our most solemn obligation: to protect the security of the American people”.ⁱ The National Strategy for Combating Terrorism states its two-pronged strategic vision for its effort to “defeat the violent extremism as a threat to our way of life as a free and open society” and in “the creation of a global environment inhospitable to violent extremists and all who support them.”ⁱⁱ This vision will take multi-national efforts and cooperation and time to accomplish and once completed, it will need to be continuously monitored and maintained.

Given the strategic and operational objectives, stated in the National Security Strategy and the National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, Joint Publication 3-0 (JP 3-0), Doctrine for Joint Operations, directs the determination of a center of gravity for planning a campaign against the enemy. JP 3-0 defines Center of Gravity (COG) as “the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act”.ⁱⁱⁱ The determination of the COG is the heart in which the process of operational art comes alive to plan for the achievement of the military objective and desired end state. It is one of the most important tasks that the Joint Force Commander’s staff is confronted with during the operational design process and it can change over time and must be continuously analyzed and refined.^{iv}

The National Strategy for Combating Terrorism recognizes the globalization of the threat: “Today, we face a global terrorist movement and must confront the radical ideology that justifies the use of violence against innocents...”^v This globalization has been made evident through the numerous terrorist attacks prior to and after 9/11. The railway in Spain, the subway in the United Kingdom, the schoolhouse full of children in Beslan, and the almost daily suicide and car bombs in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrate the global determination and capability of today’s enemy. The victims are Muslim and non-Muslim, soldiers and innocent civilians. When interviewed and asked whether he approved of terrorism on civilians, Usama bin Laden answered: “We do not have to differentiate between military or civilian. As far as we are concerned, they are all targets.”^{vi} David Forte of the Ashbrook Center states: “Islamic radicals hijacked airplanes...they also mean to hijack Islam itself and destroy 13 centuries of Islamic civilization. We are fighting an enemy of two civilizations.”^{vii} With a globalized enemy, and one that seems to attack the very religion and culture that it professes as its authority to attack, what or who is the center of gravity?

There have been many COGs discussed for the Global War on Terror (GWOT). From Usama bin Laden to a radical religious ideology to state sponsorship. When one looks at the enemy in the GWOT, it is essential to identify all participants (al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas, etc.) and the type of warfare being waged and to scrutinize all the similarities. Then a central

center of gravity, if possible, can be determined. This paper contends that the culture of the Muslim community is the COG for the GWOT.

Defining Center of Gravity

The center of gravity concept was first defined and discussed by the great Prussian military theorist, Carl von Clausewitz, in his work *On War*. Clausewitz defined center of gravity as “the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends”.^{viii} LTC Antulio Echevarria argues that Clausewitz’s COG is a focal point, which if disturbed, can lose its balance and fall.^{ix} Echevarria goes on to point out that before we can accurately plan, we must determine whether we can assume, or not, if the enemy will “act as a single entity” and whether the “enemy’s forces are connected sufficiently so that action against him in one area will still have a decisive effect on him in other areas.”^x Joint Publication 5-0, Joint Operational Planning, states that the “identification of COGs requires one to know the adversary’s physical and psychological strengths and weaknesses and how he organizes, fights, and makes decisions. Moreover, the JFC and staff must understand strengths and weaknesses in other environmental systems (political, social, economic, infrastructure, informational, etc.) and their interaction with the military system.”^{xi}

Usama bin Laden has been a major focus for the U.S. military and the world since September 11th, 2001. His charisma, vision, wealth, and leadership has created and brilliantly conceptualized al Qaeda as a global jihadist umbrella and has led to many theorizing that his death would bring an end to the al Qaeda organization and thus the level of terrorism that is threatened today. This philosophy has led many to state him as the COG for the GWOT. Nothing can be further from the truth. This global movement is not monolithic. Al Qaeda, due to bin Laden's vision and organization, has become a self-sustaining organism. Even as recent as the bombings in Algeria (April 2007), former head of the Armed Islamic Group in Algeria, Madani Mezrag, stated: "Al Qaeda today is an umbrella. Everyone works and al Qaeda signs for it, it's easy".^{xii} Usama bin Laden's removal, whether captured or killed, would only cause a hiccup, due to the money that he provides to the organization, and would subsequently make him a martyr for their cause.

The radical ideology of militant Islamist's has also been stated as the COG for the GWOT. Militant Islam is an aggressive movement that seeks global domination through terror and oppression. It is one of the common denominators between most of the terror groups that are guided and funded under the jihadist umbrella of al Qaeda. These radical Muslims change the teachings of Islam from the Qu'ran and distort these ideas even further with man-made ideology from hadiths and sunna (sayings and traditions falsely

attributed to prophet Muhammad) to allow further oppression, aggression, and terrorism.^{xiii} Hatred that is fed through this radical philosophy is “the most accessible and comprehensive of all unifying agents.”^{xiv} Echevarria argues that this “hatred of apostasy” is the COG. He continues to say that it is this hatred that “draws raw power, recruits, money, and the support of other states, and serves to motivate al Qaeda’s members to wage their particular style of asymmetric warfare.”^{xv} Although this “hatred of apostasy” is a viable option, it is not the COG.

State sponsorship has also been suggested as a COG for the GWOT. The National Security Strategy makes it clear that the United States makes “no distinction between those who commit acts of terror and those who support and harbor them.”^{xvi} State sponsorship is a very important resource for the terrorists. Since today’s terrorist network is widely decentralized, the safe harbor and financial assistance from certain states is a critical factor in their operations and survivability. While eliminating sponsorship would have an effect on terrorist operations, they would be able to re-organize with their other sponsors in order to continue. If we continue to look at Echevarria’s discussion on whether the enemy is sufficiently connected so that an attack on one area will have a decisive effect, state sponsorship can be ruled out as the COG.^{xvii} Usama bin Laden, radical Islamist ideology, and state sponsorship are all essential targets for the war on terror, but they are not the center of gravity.

Historical Discussion

“If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.”^{xviii}

-Sun Tzu

First one must understand the history and culture of the enemy and the relationship between these two. Only then can you successfully plan a campaign that is directed towards the ultimate defeat of an enemy that pronounces their actions in the name of a culture that is centuries old and a religion that is practiced by over 1.2 billion people in the world.

The religion of Islam was founded by Muhammad when, at the age of 40, had gone in search for enlightenment and the angel Gabriel appeared and whispered the “revelation from Allah (God)” to him. This “revelation” is the basis for the Qu’ran.^{xix} After Muhammad died, his successor, or caliph, was both the political and religious leader of the umma, or the Muslim community. Unlike the United States that is firm in the political principle of separation of church and state, Muslims believe that the religion of Islam and the state are one and the same. Bernard Lewis writes that “Muslims tend to see not a nation subdivided into religious groups but a religion subdivided into nations.”^{xx}

The expansion of Muslim prosperity in its first several centuries gave them an internal confidence that enabled them to become a powerful empire. The Middle East was the center of education, technology, the highest

standard of living, powerful armies and the best health. As would any other religious person, the Muslims believed that their success and prosperous lives were a blessing from God and that they were favored, “spiritually and in this world.”^{xxi} This feeling is still strong today and is a major underlying motivator for the militant Islamists. But this fame did not last long and with the collapse came questions of why God abandoned them and how they could reverse this tragedy.

One of the major events in recent history that escalated militant Islam was the throw of the Shah of Iran and his replacement by the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979. With the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran “never before had Islam provided a government with an ideological outlook; nor had a regime come to power in modern times so determined to impose its militant Islamic vision in its own domain and to spread it throughout the Muslim world.”^{xxii} Khomeini had success to some degree, but through intimidation, which is still practiced today in Muslim countries throughout. This intimidation and fear, as well as the history of poverty and despair, has major effects on the culture. These effects cause feelings of resentment and hopelessness and this creates a recruiting haven for the radical Islamists and their cause.

Muslim Culture as Center of Gravity

On February 23, 1998, a London published Arabic newspaper, Al-Quds al-‘Arabi, published the “Declaration of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders.”^{xxiii} The text reviews the facts that, according to the authors^{xxiv}, are the cause for the poverty and despair of the Muslim race: (1) The United States’ presence in Saudi Arabia, (2) The aggression against Iraq, and (3) America’s support of Israel.^{xxv} These crimes and sins are a “clear declaration of war on God, his messenger, and the Muslims.”^{xxvi} Based on these grievances, a fatwa to all Muslims was issued: “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 and the holy mosque from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim.”^{xxvii} There is no one enemy. This fatwa called upon all Muslims. The radical Islamic ideology is spread throughout the world, including the United States.

The history, culture, and body of beliefs from which radical Islamists shape and spread their message seizes on symbols of Islam’s past greatness and they promise to restore pride to people who consider themselves victims of successive foreign masters. They use cultural and religious allusions to the holy Qu’ran and some of its interpreters. They appeal to people disoriented

by cyclonic change as they confront modernity and globalization.^{xxviii} Nonie Darwish, who is the daughter of a Shahid (martyr) from Egypt, stated that: “In the Middle East, Islam is our identity, it is our political life, it is our social life, it’s our life.”^{xxix}

Religion and culture are the two most important ideologies and the two are intricately entwined with one another. Mr. Amir Frayman from the Institute for Counter-terrorism states that the two are “practically inseparable”.^{xxx} He also states that the “Islamic terrorist organizations use this relation in order to operate in two realms. The first one is the religious realm, in which the violence first and foremost is portrayed as a sacramental act or divine duty, executed in the direct response to some theological demand or imperative. The other realm is the cultural one, in which culture provides the social cohesion required for legitimizing religious-motivated terrorism”.^{xxxi} Although most Muslim communities do not engage in or approve of terrorism, the radical ideology of militant Islam, in addition to its cultural history and current and long-lasting poverty and despair, provides fertile grounds for al Qaeda, and other such radical groups, to cultivate their religious motivated terrorism.

Islam, as a religion, is the second most practiced form of religion behind Christianity. Militant Islam is a political ideology. Although terrorism does not represent the true Islamic religion, the fact that Usama bin Laden and the present day terrorist proclaim their actions in the name of

Islam must be seen in their own cultural, religious, and historical context.^{xxxii}

But how does someone be led to believe that a religion and culture, steep in history and diversity, promote the justification of killing thousands of innocent civilians as well as taking your own life? Walid Shoebat, a former PLO terrorist, stated that: “Secular dogma, like Nazism, is less dangerous than this Islamic fascism we see today...because Islamic fascism has a religious twist to it. It says “God the almighty told you to do this, not the fuehrer.”^{xxxiii} Young followers are promised treasures in the afterlife and, if one sacrifices his/her own life, a sure path to Allah.

This promise of treasures that fuel the tactic of suicide bombings and the idea of Shahadah, or martyrdom, for the sake of Allah is another concept that is motivated by radical Islam, history, and culture. Since the act of taking one’s own life is against the religion of Islam, it took religious scholars, Sheikh Yusaf al-Qaradawi and Sheikh Muhammad Fadlallah, albeit radical Islamic scholars, to justify these acts:

The operations carried out by the Muslim youth that defend the lands of Islam and the religion and dignity of Islam are the greatest forms of Jihad for the sake of Allah. They fall under the definition of legitimate terrorization...I maintain that it is wrong to consider these acts as ‘suicidal,’ because these are heroic acts of martyrdom, which are in fact very different from suicide. There is no difference between dying with a gun in your hand or exploding yourself. In a situation of struggle or holy war you have to find the best means to achieve your goals.^{xxxiv}

The practice and theory of assassination in the Islamic world arose at a very early date, with disputes over the political headship of the Muslim

community. Three of the first four caliphs were murdered, two of which were by Muslims who saw themselves as carrying out God's will.^{xxxv} The word assassin actually is derived from the Arabic word Hashishiyya. During the eleventh to the thirteenth century, a Muslim group called the Assassins developed the act of assassination into an ideology. Their labors were actually against Muslim rulers, vice Crusaders, that were believed to be immoral tyrants. These assassins were not expected, nor desired, to return from their mission as it was seen as honorable and Godly to die for the cause.^{xxxvi} This is the precursor to the suicide bombers and killings going on in the GWOT today. They too are persuaded that the act of holy suicide is the utmost honorable act for Allah.

Recommendations

Defining the culture as the center of gravity, we need to assess its critical factors. All COGs have inherent critical factors: critical capabilities, critical requirements, and critical vulnerabilities. Critical capabilities are what the enemy possesses that empowers them in their cause and enable their COG to strengthen and function. These capabilities rely on certain critical requirements in order to work, and these requirements have certain critical vulnerabilities that, if exploited, would create decisive or considerable effects.^{xxxvii}

First, looking at the critical capabilities, the Islamists have centuries of history (both prosperous and destitute), a religion, and a culture that refuses to develop into the modern and global world. Their critical requirements is maintaining the culture as is; preventing the teaching of modern sciences or vocations therefore enabling the feeding of the fire of Jihad to maintain their plethora of recruits. The critical vulnerability is education, other than the radical religious ideology taught in the madrasas. This would make the population marketable in the workforce therefore giving them a sense of worth and minimizing the desirability of involvement in the jihadist movement.

There are three ways that we must approach in the attack on culture as the center of gravity. First, and foremost, we must get the moderate Muslims involved. Since only 15% of the Muslim population is radical, the 85% left are crucial and required to counter the ideology that has hijacked their proud religion. In the eyes of Muslims, the United States does not have the authority to talk about the religion of Islam. It is up to moderate Islam to become vocal and provide the leadership to the young Muslim communities that right now is being feed by Usama bin Laden and the like.^{xxxviii} This will consist of an extensive Information Operations campaign by both moderate Muslims and the United States. Televising moderate imams on Arabic networks such as al-Jazeera, radio commentaries and printing articles in local newspapers are necessary for the success of any campaign against

militant Islam. New Muslim governments and the religious leadership, with the assistance of the State Department and non-government organizations, will have to take the lead on this.

Second, the radical teachings of hatred in the madrasas have to be addressed and changed. Eric Hoffer states that: “Passionate hatred can give meaning and purpose to an empty life.”^{xxxix} One problem here is who sponsors and finances the schools. Most of the madrasas are run by Iranian and Saudi Arabian Islamic leaders. Regardless, the radical religion being taught is raising the future suicide bombers and leaders of terror.

Finally, the secular education of Muslims needs to be addressed. The lack of higher education, except for the teachings of the Madrasas, or a vocation, that will enable a skill set, cause young males that, once out in the workforce, have no marketable skills. Islamists target these young individuals that possess a volatile combination of boredom, anger, and lack of purpose. Hoffer goes on to say that: “A rising mass movement attracts and holds a following not by its doctrine and promises but by the refuge it offers from the anxieties, barrenness, and meaninglessness of an individual existence.”^{xl} Given a higher education or a vocation will make them marketable in the workforce. This, coupled with the change to teaching the true religion of Islam in the Madrasas, will enable them to feel essential and to see that there is a world of opportunity, other than the hatred inspired by the radical ideology of the Islamist.

Interagency involvement is vital. Daniel Pipes states that “Militant Islam is too popular and widespread to be destroyed militarily.”^{xli} Information Operations are essential to properly deal with cultural sensitivities. Knowledge is power. You also need the right people: “The task must be shared with Muslim intellectuals who do have the credibility to critique extremist ideology yet need the technical assistance in information warfare America can offer.”^{xlii} The military will have to continue to provide and maintain the security for new governments to become established, but this will become easier and less needed as the above recommendations are implemented and executed.

Conclusion

Defeating a culture, that idly allows the teaching and promotion of hatred and terror against innocent civilians, will depend on employment of diplomatic and informational elements as well as military. The influence of new tactics and information will manifest quickly in some areas but take long periods of time in others. It is a campaign that will essentially require the support of moderate branches of Islam. Some moderates have stepped up to voice their concern and anger of the radical violence that is claiming their proud religion as the cause and motivation, but it is few because of the fear of retaliation from the Islamists.

Mr. Frayman concludes: “Religion serves as an instrument in the hands of Muslim terrorists in order to justify their actions, and to provide moral explanations to their inhumane actions. Culture on the other hand, provides the collective identity and the social behavior that legitimizes and supports terrorism as well as creates the necessary environment to recruit activists and to raise funds.”^{xliii} Can one change a culture? This paper discusses three avenues of approach to do just that. The culture that nurtures the Islamist ideology has to change and it has to target the growing generations that are targeted by organizations such as al Qaeda. The victory in the global war on terror will not be a quick one, as already shown. But, if we can change and influence a culture deep in history and pride, we can not only defeat the current threat, but minimize the same threat from reoccurring.

Notes

(All notes appear in shorten form. For full details, see the appropriate entry in the bibliography.)

ⁱ The National Security Strategy of the United States of America. Quoted from opening letter from President Bush to American people.

ⁱⁱ National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, p. 7.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joint Publication 3-0, p. GL-8.

^{iv} Joint Publication 5-0, p. IV-8.

^v National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, p. 1.

^{vi} The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 47.

^{vii} David Forte. “Radical Islam vs. Islam.”

^{viii} Clausewitz, *On War*. 595.

^{ix} Echevarria “Reining in’ the Center of Gravity Concept.”

^x Ibid.

^{xi} Joint Publication 5-0, p. IV-9.

^{xii} Lewis, “Al-Qaida winning recruits in Algeria.”

^{xiii} Nader, “Radical Islam or Radical Muslim, A truthful look at Islam.”

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- xiv Hoffer, *The True Believer*, p. 91.
- xv Echevarria, "Reining in' the Center of Gravity Concept."
- xvi The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, p. 12.
- xvii Echevarria, "Reining in' the Center of Gravity Concept."
- xviii Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*. p.17.
- xix Davis, *The Middle East for Dummies*, p. 59.
- xx Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, p. XX.
- xxi Pipes, *Militant Islam Reaches America*, p. 4.
- xxii Ibid., p. 28.
- xxiii Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, p. xxiv.
- xxiv The statement that was published was signed by Usama bin Laden; Ayman al-Zawahiri, leader of Jihad Group in Egypt; Abu-Yasir Rifa'I Ahmad Taha, a leader of the Islamic Group; Mir Hamzah, secretary of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Pakistan; and Fazlul Rahman, leader of the Jihad Movement in Bangladesh.
- xxv Osama Bin Laden. NWC 6023. "Declaration of the War Against The Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places."
- xxvi Ibid.
- xxvii Ibid.
- xxviii The 9/11 Commission Report, p. 48.
- xxix *Obsession: Radical Islam's War Against the West*. DVD. 2006
- xxx Frayman, "Religion and Culture as Motivations for Terrorism."
- xxxi Ibid.
- xxxii Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, p. 138.
- xxxiii *Obsession: Radical Islam's War Against the West*. DVD. 2006
- xxxiv Frayman, "Religion and Culture as Motivations for Terrorism."
- xxxv Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, p. 143.
- xxxvi Ibid., p. 144.
- xxxvii Joint Publication 3-0, p. IV-10.
- xxxviii Pipes, *Militant Islam Reaches America*, p. 254.
- xxxix Hoffer, *The True Believer*, p. 98.
- xl Hoffer, *The True Believer*, p. 41.
- xli Pipes, *Militant Islam Reaches America*, p. 254.
- xlii Jandora, "Center of Gravity and Asymmetric Conflict."
- xliii Frayman, "Religion and Culture as Motivations for Terrorism."

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