

War of Ideas

Combating Militant Islamist Ideology

Ariel Cohen

For the first time since the end of the Cold War, the United States finds itself in an intense competition for hearts and minds. This time, it is competing against radical Islamic fundamentalists for the support of the Muslim world. This is a struggle against those who seek the demise of the United States, its allies, and its core values.

The battle for hearts and minds is not a short-term campaign but a key dimension of a protracted conflict. To win this battle, the United States should formulate an integrated strategy of public diplomacy and political action. This campaign will not be fought against states, but against radical organizations and governments that support Islamist political violence. The United States should focus on the information and media battlefields, which are as important as the conventional military aspects of the conflict.

In cooperation with moderate Muslims, the United States can encourage the strengthening of Islam as a tolerant faith and counter the militant ideology that destroys lives and hinders economic development. Force of arms alone will not achieve this goal, for the challenge is philosophical, cultural, and political.

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Roots of Militant Islam. Militant Islamists want nothing less than the creation of a modern day Caliphate: a pan-Islamic, nuclear-armed state. To reach this goal, they seek to defeat the United States, its allies, and moderate regimes in the Muslim world.

Political violence is not part of mainstream Muslim theology, but its roots lie in radical interpretations of Islam found in the writings of Ibn Taymiyya, a thirteenth and fourteenth-century scholar in Syria and Egypt, and Ibn Wahhab, an eighteenth century scholar in the Arabian Peninsula. The strategy underlying modern militant Islam, which began with the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928 and Jama'at Islamiya in 1941, is to break the spirit of the "enemy" in order to compel political solutions and achieve definable strategic goals.

Radical interpretations of Islam have spawned political-military movements that justify the use of terrorism, defined as violence or threats of violence against civilians to achieve religious, political, or military goals. Radical Islamists incite Muslims to hatred and violence under the banner of *jihad* or holy war. Radicals interpret the fight against Israel and the U.S.-led coalitions in Afghanistan and Iraq as defensive *jihad*, a *fard 'ayn* or supreme religious obligation mandatory for every Muslim.¹ The word *jihad*, however, has two main connotations: personal self-improvement (the greater *jihad*) and armed warfare against infidels (the lesser *jihad*).²

Militant interpretations of Islam gave birth to al Qaeda and other Islamic terrorist organizations. According to the U.S. Department of State, these organizations include: Hizbollah, in Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, the West Bank, and Gaza; Islamic Jihad and Hamas in

Palestine; Islamic Jihad and Al Gama'a al Islamiyya of Egypt; Pakistan-based terrorist groups; the Chechen faction led by Shamil Basaev and Abu Walid; the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan; and the Taliban in Afghanistan.³

Militant Islamist movements have tens of thousands of active members and hundreds of thousands of supporters throughout the Middle East, South Asia, Europe, and beyond. Supporters include charitable foundations, clerics, intellectuals, journalists, and even secular regimes, such as those in Syria and Libya. To combat their influence, the United States must first identify audiences who could be potential allies and conduits of U.S. ideas. It must then define where and how to convince these allies to help fight militant Islam.

Target Audiences: Potential for Pluralism.

The Muslim world is socially and economically diverse. Designing strategies to communicate with diverse populations requires a basic understanding of how groups can have different and competing interests. It is in the United States's interest to promote debate and plurality of opinion. For the American message to be effective, it is necessary to appeal to those likely to be receptive to this message. Primary targets for U.S. public diplomacy and information efforts should be:

Business Community. The business community has little influence on policy-making in many Muslim countries, especially in authoritarian regimes where power resides in royal families and military rulers. Businessmen are subject to extortion, over-regulation, and corruption.

The United States can communicate the merits of economic freedom and

government responsiveness and transparency to business communities in the Muslim world. The U.S. government could target business leaders for exchange programs with U.S. businesses and encourage pro-Western businesspeople in the region to become involved in mass media that would emphasize liberal interpretations of Islam and cooperation with the West, and also highlight Western values.

Women. The role of women and the discrimination they face in Islamic countries is well known. Women have tremendous potential for fueling debate about key issues, including the role of Islamic law, reform, constitutional rights, and the underpinnings of the Islamic state. Given the opportunity, women could emerge as champions of freedom. As mothers, they influence future generations of Muslims. Information efforts should focus on women's rights and the history of

Morocco have struggled for more rights for decades. The Kurds have been brutally persecuted in Iraq and Iran. Over twenty million Shi'a Turkic Iranians, who are indistinguishable from their brethren in Azerbaijan, are denied linguistic and cultural autonomy. The same is true for Turkmen in Iran and Iraq.

The economies of many Persian Gulf states are dependent on guest workers who face discrimination and are denied basic rights. These minority groups deserve increased international attention and protection. They can be co-opted into the struggle to modernize Islamist regimes, and thus represent an important target audience for public affairs and international broadcasting efforts.

Youth. Individuals under twenty-five are a strategic group: they comprise over half the population in many Muslim countries. As the economies of these countries stagnate and populations grow, per capita

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women's movements in the West. Outreach to women should include issues such as: education, health and family planning, economic and human rights, and economic and political equality.

Ethnic Minorities and Workers. In many Middle Eastern countries, ethnic minorities are denied linguistic, cultural, and religious rights. For example, the Berbers in Algeria, Tunisia, and

GDP will fall and quality of life will deteriorate. Youth are often frustrated with corruption and lack of popular participation in government and politics. Islamist radicals understand the importance of winning over youth. Osama bin Laden, the leader of al Qaeda, and his associates actively seek students from *madrassas* to join their cadres. Instead, youth should be encouraged to learn tolerance and marketable skills. Islamic

youth should hear a message of hope for the future that contradicts the message of radical mullahs who glorify death and idealize the past.

Intelligentsia and Artistic Community. Religious and state censorship often drive artists and writers from the Islamic world to pursue their dreams and professional ambitions elsewhere. U.S. pressure against censorship and in favor of freedom of expression and media openness may assist intellectuals seeking to promote liberal values in Muslim societies. Such policies could also encourage dissent and provoke debate about modernization and the role of Islam in a modern state.

Ideological Terrain. In the battle for hearts and minds, the Bush Administration and its allies must reevaluate, revive, and upgrade the Cold War tool box. They must also develop new tools. Some approaches are time-tested, while others need fundamental restructuring to address issues like the long-term goal of separating religion from the state, hardly an issue during the Cold War.⁴

Broadcasting. The success of the Qatar-based al Jazeera satellite network demonstrates the popularity of satellite TV in the Middle East. In addition, other networks—in Arabic or Persian, owned by government or private companies—are broadcast to the region. Millions of satellite dishes adorn the roofs of Cairo, Riyadh, and Tehran, as well as those of smaller towns and villages, despite occasional bans and confiscations. Notwithstanding its much-touted openness, al Jazeera has remained biased toward fundamentalist views, including those of Osama bin Laden, and its

anchors have been reluctant to challenge anti-American speakers or bring in pro-Western experts.

International broadcasting was one of the most effective weapons of the Cold War, and the United States should apply appropriate lessons learned to the current conflict.⁵ The situation today is dramatically different: there is no Iron Curtain in the Muslim world. The U.S. government should launch a satellite TV network and encourage a credible Western media organization to create additional satellite networks aimed at Muslim audiences and capable of fostering debate and bringing an alternative point of view.

The United States can expand surrogate broadcasting and give a voice to moderate and liberal elements of the Muslim world. It should base news bureaus and transmitters in the region, despite security and credibility challenges. Western media organizations must overcome the resistance of Arab regimes—and U.S. embassies in some cases—and make access to American media by Muslim audiences a litmus test for local government cooperation in the war on terrorism.

While many U.S.-based international broadcasts are provided in World War II-era short wave bands, the United States should promote development of capabilities to offer programming in popular AM and FM bands in local dialects. This could be done by encouraging acquisition of local stations, buying time on local broadcasters, or locating government-owned transmitters in the region. Market segmentation must be country-specific and reach a broad cross-section of a country's population.

Currently, the United States does not have sufficient human resources to reach all Muslims in their native languages.

U.S. public diplomacy institutions and government-supported international broadcasters, such as Radio Farda in Persian and Radio Sawa in Arabic,

launch a study to identify areas where there is a lack of political literature promoting concepts of freedom and civil society. In addition to public efforts, the

Muslim youth should be encouraged to learn tolerance and marketable skills, and hear a message of hope for the future.

should recruit more native and fluent speakers of Arabic, Farsi, and other languages. For example, most American diplomats in the Arab world have a State Department-rated level three knowledge of Arabic, a level insufficient for TV and radio interviews. The U.S. Department of State needs to provide incentives for diplomats to improve their skills to grades four and five, and thereby be more accessible to the media.⁶ U.S. diplomats posted to Arab or Muslim countries should also be familiar with both North African and Middle Eastern dialects and trained in other languages of the Islamic world, including Farsi, Pashto, Hindi, Malay, Bengali, and Urdu. Individuals with knowledge of local languages can talk directly to the public, without the filter of translation. They can serve as spokespeople for both government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in these regions.

Publications. Political and policy debates in the Middle East are conducted predominantly through print media, as was the case in Europe when the United States supported a similar effort after World War II.⁷ The United States should revive the former U.S. Information Agency book translation program and

United States should engage a private democracy-promotion foundation to develop a reading list focusing on anti-totalitarianism. The U.S. government should support publishing houses that translate and distribute basic texts about democracy.

It is also important to promote books and journals that facilitate real debate about the role of Islam, religious tolerance, and relations between religion and the state. Exploring these questions could encourage planning on the future of Muslim societies, as well as their relationships with the West. Finally, publications could play a role in defeating the caricatured image of America as the exclusive source of immorality and materialism that fundamentalists inculcate in the masses and activists.

Cultural Exchanges. It is necessary to expose a larger number of Muslim leaders—current and future—to the United States. The United States should promote meetings and dialogue between American leaders and their Muslim counterparts. One recommendation is to increase the number and improve the quality of individually-programmed tours of the United States by media and policy elites from Muslim countries. In particular, exchanges should focus on

the long term by identifying and cultivating young, pro-American government officials, pre-selected military and security officers, media professionals, and scholars.

Furthermore, youth exchange programs and festivals with informal contact between young Muslims and Americans should be expanded. In the 1950s and 1960s, the United States organized youth festivals to counter such festivals first initiated by the Soviet Union to challenge the West in the ideological struggle.⁸ Events that reach out to the next generation of leadership in the Muslim world and deliver an anti-radical message can be conducted on neutral ground, such as Turkey, Morocco, and Cyprus, and include the participation of specially-prepared U.S. teams.

The U.S. government and NGOs should encourage and expand inter- and intra-faith dialogue between Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and Jewish leadership.

government and NGOs should also provide support to religious organizations, such as the Society of Jesus, which have a rich experience in handling political and spiritual affairs in non-Western environments.

Education. The U.S. government should insist on helping Muslim governments reform their educational systems and revise their secondary school and university curricula with an eye towards teaching tolerance, human rights, and international cooperation.⁹

The expansion of American studies, comparative religion and political systems, and the introduction of Holocaust studies—currently non-existent in the Arab world—into the curriculum may go a long way to promote tolerance.¹⁰ As Sheikh 'Abd al Hamid al Ansari, Dean of Law at Qatar University, wrote, "We must examine our curriculum and evaluate our educational methods. We must reex-

Radical mosques and *madrassas* teach the militant interpretation of the Koran and Sunna, thereby acting as virtual *jihad* factories.

They should give special attention and support to moderate Muslim spiritual leaders willing to act as conduits of Western views to their peers. The religious component of the current conflict is sensitive and must be handled with extreme care, in part because of legal concerns voiced by Department of State lawyers and civil liberties organizations regarding separation of religion and state. However, it is necessary to initiate and encourage debate among Muslims regarding the high cost of violence on foreign and domestic policy. The U.S.

amine our education and our media. This will be the right beginning for the fight against the culture of terrorism."¹¹

Muslim governments should stop tolerating radical mosques and *madrassas* that teach the militant interpretation of the Koran and Sunna. These *jihad* factories prepare millions of potential terrorists. The government of Pakistan has taken tentative steps to shut down some of the more fundamentalist *madrassas*, but progress has been limited. Such steps need to be transformed into a coherent policy that would turn *madrassas* into

founts of tolerance and learning—not war and violence. American officials must monitor headmasters and teachers and, if necessary, have them removed. This must be a priority for the U.S. Department of State and U.S. embassies in countries where problems with political Islam exists.

Intelligence. U.S. intelligence agencies need to revitalize and expand their Middle East operational capabilities. The United States should expand political covert action, not just against terrorist cells, but also against the Islamist movements that spawn them and the governments that support them or allow them to operate with impunity.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the intelligence community suffered from institutionalized risk-aversion, over-reliance on satellite imagery, technical reconnaissance, and limitations on covert action. In the 1970s, both the fall out from the investigative Senate commission headed by Senator Frank Church and the tenure of Admiral Stansfield Turner as Director of Central Intelligence hampered the Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) political action capabilities.¹² The CIA should recruit Cold War-era veterans to teach methods of political warfare to the new generation of intelligence officers.

The United States should take stock of hatemongers by creating a database that compiles analysis of the speeches and writings of Islamist propagandists of violence. Included in the database should be anyone who funds such activities under the guise of charitable organizations in the United States, Western Europe, Latin America, and the Islamic world.¹³ The database would allow the U.S. government to monitor their activities, connec-

tions, sources of support, and front organizations.

CIA specialists fluent in the languages of the Muslim world should develop and monitor the proposed database in coordination with the Department of State's Office of Intelligence and Research. The White House Coordinator of Anti-Terrorism Activities and the Department of State's Counterterrorism Office should coordinate specific actions.

In addition, the United States will have to identify, recruit, and protect moderate Muslim spokespeople. As the number of liberal and pro-Western media outlets in the Muslim world grows, those involved in such outlets will be the primary personnel pool in the battle for hearts and minds. The U.S. government and private foundations can create a database of moderate experts on Islam, clerics, broadcasters, writers, and other intellectuals, cross-referenced by country, area of expertise, and language capabilities.

High-Level Planning. The United States government must fight the War of Ideas in a united, coherent way. A high-level interagency task force should coordinate the intelligence, defense, diplomatic, executive, and legislative communities.

Such a task force should have a principals committee, chaired by the National Security Advisor, and include the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, and Director of Central Intelligence. The deputies committee should include the Deputy Secretary of Defense, Deputy Secretary of State and/or Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy, CIA Deputy Director of Operations, and the National Security Council's Senior Directors for the Middle East, Democracy, and Human Rights. The committee should invite, as needed, views

of officials and outside experts, including representatives of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, U.S.-sponsored broadcasters, and—for issues involving domestic radical Islamist elements—the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Homeland Security.

Congress should be kept fully abreast of this policy and its implementation, especially the House International Relations Committee, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Select Committee on Intelligence, and the appropriations committees of the House and the Senate.

International Cooperation. The United States should coordinate efforts among Western allies and moderate Muslim governments to prevent recruitment, propaganda, and fundraising by radicals. These governments should terminate the ability of radicals to travel abroad freely, build new organizations, and recruit followers. U.S. constitutional freedoms do not apply abroad, and intelligence and law enforcement activities by foreign governments against terrorist groups and their financial and ideological infrastructure do not come under the purview of the U.S. constitutional law.

The EU, together with the United States, Russia, and other countries should step up diplomatic action against Islamist propaganda prevalent in mosques and the Islamic media. The White House should initiate this campaign, possibly by articulating it in a presidential speech or a major foreign policy address.¹⁴

The speech must be followed by diplo-

matic demarches and sanctions against perpetrators. The Departments of State and Treasury should engage in robust preventive action against militant Islamist organizations and their sources of funding around the world. These activities are not directed against freedom of religion; they aim to save lives, provide security, and protect the freedoms of Muslims and non-Muslims the world over.

As was the case with prominent exiles and defectors during the Cold War, such as Nobel Prize winners Czeslaw Milosz, from Poland, and Joseph Brodsky and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, from Russia, the United States should provide asylum for exiles from the Muslim world who will reach out to their audiences and challenge radicals in their home country.

Conclusion. Only twelve years after the end of the Cold War, the United States, the West, and their allies are facing a new protracted threat to their ultimate survival. This is not a war against Islam; it is a war against vicious militants trying to destroy America, hijack Islam, and topple moderate governments throughout the Muslim world. As in the war against communism, this struggle must be fought as a battle for hearts and minds—not just a battle of military tactics and equipment. Acknowledging and understanding how to reach potential audiences who can shape the future of Islam is only the first step in this battle. The creation of effective institutions and mechanisms to formulate and present key messages to fight this war of ideas is one of the greater foreign policy challenges of our time.

NOTES

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2 Gilles Kepel, "On the Origins and Development

of the Jihadist Movement: From Anti-Communism to Terrorism," *Asian Affairs* 34, no. 2 (July 2003), 91.

3 Timothy Appelby, "Jihad Not Just a Word for War," *The Globe and Mail* (20 September 2001).

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5 Mohammad Khomeini, lecture at American Enterprise Institute, 26 September 2003. Notes by author.

6 Cord Meyer, *Facing Reality* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 110–139.

7 Robert Satloff, "Devising a Public Diplomacy Campaign Toward the Middle East" (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy,

30 October 2001).

8 Meyer, 85–110.

9 Ibid.

10 Al-Akhdar, 4.

11 Satloff

12 Abd Al-Hamid Al-Ansari, *Special Dispatch—Jihad and Terrorism Studies*, Special Dispatch No. 307 (Washington DC: Middle East Media Research Institute, 21 September 2003).

13 For a critique of the current CIA performance in the Middle East see Reuel Marc Gerecht, "The Necessity of Fear," *The Atlantic Online* (28 December 2002).

14 Jeffrey Goldberg, "In the Party of God," *The New Yorker* (14 October 2002), 180.