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Countering the Narrative: Combating the Ideology of Radical Islam

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The Western ways of thought . . . [have] an enmity toward all religion, and in particular with greater hostility toward Islam. This enmity toward Islam is especially pronounced and many times is the result of a well-thought-out scheme the object of which is first to shake the foundations of Islamic beliefs and then gradually to demolish the structure of Muslim society.

-Sayyid Qutb, from *Milestones*, 1964

Long before Osama bin Laden and the rise of Al Qaeda, Egyptian author Sayyid Qutb wrote *Milestones* (or *Signposts along the Way*), one of the most influential radical Islamist tracts ever written. Following a brief visit to the U.S., the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood described the evil of the West responsible for the corruption of Islam to a state of *jahiliyyah*, or ignorance, which rejected Sharia law.² Qutb argued all true Muslims must take up arms and any Muslim who refused was worthy of destruction.³ In 1966, Qutb was executed for his alleged role in the unsuccessful assassination attempt against Egyptian President Nasser. Elevated to the status of martyr, others would embrace his ideology. Inspired by Qutb, Ayman al Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden also advocated *jihad*, practiced *takfir*, and labeled other Muslims as apostate infidels deserving death. Thus, the writings of Qutb gave birth to the Narrative.

Countering the ideology of the Narrative is the single most important objective to defeat violent Islamic extremism. Unfortunately, the Narrative now enjoys a pervasive foothold in Islamic society. While eliminating key individual targets of strategic importance still holds merit, simply using kinetic means to destroy the various messengers will continue to prove difficult and costly. As a long term approach, several measures should be considered in a coalition strategy which leverages soft power. These measures include exposing the practice of *takfir* and Muslim murder, improving public diplomacy efforts, and partnering with de-radicalized extremists to counter the Narrative.

The Narrative

The Narrative asserts the West is at war to destroy Islam. Groups like Al Qaeda embraced this ideology and attempted to subvert others to achieve their strategic end state of restoring the ancient Caliphate over the Islamic world. A Salafi jihad ideology seeks to purge Islam of outside influence through violent means. While many Shiite in the Middle East may reject a Sunni Caliphate as the answer to their problems, faulting the West still resonates among most Muslims. Frustration over corrupt political leaders and unwanted U.S. presence empowers clerics with credibility. As scholar Mehrdad Mozayann observes, “Many grievances against the West were legitimate, but what the new approach entailed was to make it the sole scapegoat for all existing problems.”⁴ While not all who subscribe to the Narrative become violent Islamic extremists, such fertile ground left unattended may cultivate the mere few radicals necessary to inflict mass destruction on a global scale. This is why additional efforts to counter the Narrative are critical.

Countering such a deeply rooted ideology is a difficult task. It resonates well beyond just the war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan. Supporters can be found in Indonesia, Pakistan, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and even beyond the borders of these states. Former CIA operative and psychiatrist Marc Sageman believes the ideology transformed into a social network which is even more difficult to disrupt. Sageman argues the greatest threat facing the West today comes from a leaderless jihad, or cells of home-grown Western-born educated Muslims.⁵ To support this claim, compelling evidence and lessons can be found in the story of Maajid Nawaz.

In an April 2010 CBS *60 Minutes* segment entitled “The Narrative,” journalist Leslie Stahl interviewed Maajid Nawaz, a British Pakistani and former member of the Islamic political group in Great Britain, Hizb ut-Tarir (HT). Nawaz became radicalized while attending college at the University of London. His job was to spread the Narrative abroad, travelling to Pakistan, Denmark, and Egypt. Nawaz was arrested while in Egypt during a post-9/11 crackdown on radical Islamists. After five years in jail, he became persuaded by former members of the Muslim Brotherhood who had abandoned their jihadist views. They convinced Nawaz the version of Islam he had promoted was actually closer to Nazi fascism than true Islam.⁶ Today, Nawaz leads the Quilliam Foundation, the world’s first counter-extremism think-tank, dedicated to dissuading radical Islam.⁷

Unlike the kinetic measures to kill or capture suspected terrorists, the efforts of Quilliam are concentrated on disrupting the front-end of the jihadist cycle. In 2007, the NYPD introduced to Congress a research model that described the origin of homegrown Salafi jihad ideology.⁸ Their four-stage model described the path to radicalization as pre-radicalization, self-identification, indoctrination, and jihadization. Pre-radicalization includes the period of life before exposure to radical ideology. The self-identification stage begins when alienated or jilted individuals gravitate away from their old identity. The indoctrination phase occurs when the individual progressively commits to radical ideology and concludes that conditions exist where actions are required to support their cause. During the final stage

of jihadization, fully radicalized Salafi-jihadists designate themselves as “mujahedeen” and plan, prepare, and execute terrorist acts.⁹

Two broad options are available to disrupting the cycle: either destroy the messenger or destroy the message. As Sageman correlated, the target audience susceptible to the Narrative includes young, action-oriented, under-employed, middle class men, often with a collegiate-level education and indoctrinated through social networking in the mosques and internet.¹⁰ Another study from the Center for Terrorism Research (CTR) indicates religious faith alone does not propel radical religious ideologues into terrorist acts but requires a radical political view first.¹¹ While these insights provide valuable starting points to identify the potential audience of the Narrative, they do not offer a strategy to stop the cycle.

Senior RAND advisor Brian Jenkins suggests several domestic approaches, including blocking the message, removing the inciters, identifying recruiting venues, and dissuading potential recruits.¹² Today, the United States remains preoccupied with gathering intelligence to conduct surgical strikes, often by unmanned aerial vehicles. These kinetic “kill or capture” tactics remain an important aspect of defeating the Narrative, but they only serve as a short-term solution. Given time, other messengers will continue to emerge. As Jenkins suggests, the most viable way to defeat this ideology is to destroy the message before indoctrination takes root.

Defeating the Narrative

The U.S.-led counter-terrorism campaign has enjoyed many successes, such as the capture of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (9/11 mastermind), Omar Farouk Abdulmutallab (“underwear bomber”), and the killing of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi and Osama bin Laden. However, the global threat still exists, fueled by madrassas teaching, radical imam preaching, and conversion in foreign prisons during incarceration.¹³ Further, the Narrative is spread both in the home and at public schools.

A recent Center for Religious Freedom study provides a discouraging example from Saudi Arabia. The study found that even after previous indictment for intolerance, textbooks in Saudi Arabia still teach school children in grades 1 through 12 that spreading Islam through jihad is a religious duty.¹⁴ Overcoming such widespread cultural indoctrination is a difficult task. It is also a delicate task, potentially undermined by a single incident. This is evidenced by the global release of prisoner abuse photographs at Abu Ghraib which fueled more sympathy to the Narrative tenets in the Islamic world than any bomb dropped in Afghanistan. With this challenge in mind, successfully countering the Narrative should use several approaches.

Exploiting Muslim Murders

To successfully counter the Narrative’s premise that the West is at war with Islam requires exploiting its critical vulnerability and greatest weakness of *takfir* beliefs: the justified killing of Muslims. The popular jihadist propagandist Abu Bakr Naji acknowledged Muslim public distaste with the excessive use of violence, particularly against other Muslims.¹⁵ Moreover, Zawahiri reprimanded Zarqawi regarding this fact during his brutal Iraq insurgency campaign.¹⁶

Zawahiri was likely drawing from his personal failure which killed a 12 year-old girl named Shayma in an attempted assassination against Egyptian Prime Minister Atif Sidqi. Dubbed “The Shayma Effect,” the Egyptian government unleashed a media campaign suggesting the elementary school was

deliberately targeted.¹⁷ This had a devastating blow to the fledgling extremist movement in Egypt. Like the barbaric murders committed by Zarqawi, the “Shayma Effect” demonstrated the power of senseless violence to sway public opinion. While intentionally fabricating incidents is unacceptable, every opportunity to exploit the violent extremists’ disregard for Muslim casualties, especially the murder of children, should be broadcast to the global audience.

Improving Public Diplomacy at Home and Abroad

While the State Department is normally tasked with influencing foreign officials, nestled within the agency is a third-tier department headed by the Undersecretary of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. This department, formerly known as the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), is tasked with influencing foreign *publics*. It leads the U.S. government’s fight in the war of ideas, challenged with the goals of eliminating violence as an acceptable means of achieving political or religious objectives, undermining radical recruitment, and condemning and isolating perpetrators of violent Islamic extremism. The department seeks to repudiate violence by drawing from lessons of successful Cold War tactics conducted against communist ideology. Its current policy can be described as creating powerful and lasting diversion. It enlists credible Muslim voices which condemn radical ideology and promote productive alternatives such as entertainment, sports, literature, education, and business through social networking technology and broadcast media.¹⁸

This critical mission needs careful attention. During the Cold War, the USIA funded the premiere government radio broadcast arm, Voice of America (VoA), to effectively win over Soviet audiences with substance-rich editorial programs supplemented by jazz music. In comparison, following 9/11 the Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy Department funded Radio Sawa, a Middle East-wide radio broadcast designed to defeat radical ideology and overseen by the U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors. Instead of the necessary substance-rich programming such as intellectual debates required for winning the war of ideas, the Broadcasting Board of Governors inundated Radio Sawa with nearly 24 hours of MTV pop music.¹⁹ Senior Fellow Robert Reilly of the American Foreign Policy Council has dubbed this ineffective strategy “the battle of the bands, with grossly inadequate total expenditures roughly equivalent to the \$1.4 billion annual advertising costs of McDonald’s.”²⁰

Additionally, at home in the U.S., analysis shows the perception of a schism between Islam and the West is an important unifying belief of homegrown radicals. Civic engagement efforts, when conducted by the Muslim community, are effective countermeasures.²¹ One such organization, the One Nation Foundation, seeks to build relationships between Americans and American Muslims and their communities through civic action. By working together for a common good, such as Habitat for Humanity projects, One Nation hopes to undermine the post-9/11 animosity toward Islam that fosters alienation among Islamic youth.²² These domestic programs must be aggressively supported, not only to suppress homegrown radical extremists, but also to counter media spectacles like the “Ground Zero Mosque” debate while promoting images of harmony with Islam in the U.S. worldwide.

Partnering with De-radicalized Extremists

Our experience in both Afghanistan and Iraq validated many best practices of counter-insurgency doctrine, including a resounding truth from T. E. Lawrence’s writings, “Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly.”²³ That is, restoring stability must be accomplished by the host nation government viewed by its people as legitimate.²⁴ In many ways, the Narrative spreads like an insurgency within the Islamic faith, undermining the legitimacy of non-violent Islam. Similarly, defeating

the Narrative cannot be accomplished by the U.S. military or any other U.S. government representatives. Even our best efforts to win the hearts and minds are clouded by incidents like Abu Ghraib and an insidious cultural distrust. The most credible voices capable of speaking against this ideology must come from Islamic leadership itself.

The Quilliam Foundation is a perfect example of a non-profit organization which should be supported to undertake this tasking on a global scale. Strong willed and powerful debaters like Maajid Nawaz must be co-opted to engage the radical movement at its clerical base and stifle its spread. Not only is Nawaz credible as a Muslim, but also as a reformed radical himself. By infiltrating popular blogs, engaging in public debates, and sponsoring college campus outreach programs, partners such as Nawaz provide a testament for those in the pre-radicalization stage and those already indoctrinated into the destructive jihadist path. In addition to these grassroots efforts, deprogramming efforts for convicted violent Islamic extremists currently detained in world-wide prisons should be supported. In other words, the literal “captive audience” should not be neglected.

While no evidence points to a radicalization threat in our own U.S. prison systems, the same is not true abroad.²⁵ Current programs exist in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Singapore to rehabilitate imprisoned jihadists.²⁶ Despite popular belief suggesting a violent extremist cannot be reformed, these programs proved successful, especially in Saudi Arabia, with a recidivism rate of less than 2 percent.²⁷ The successful programs are tailored to cultural patterns. However, they also tend to employ reformed jihadists as the most effective method of rehabilitating violent Islamic extremists and may provide a template for other countries to emulate.

Conclusion

As the post-9/11 wars begin to subside, efforts to counter the Narrative should take center stage. Surgical strikes play a vital role and should not be underestimated, as the elimination of iconic figures and central masterminds like Osama bin Laden and Anwar Al-Awlaki can result in strategic effects. However, achieving an enduring end state of a world without extremist ideology requires countering the Narrative delivered not by America but by credible voices from within the Islamic world. Until this realization takes hold, the corrupted writings of Qutb will continue resonating among those most susceptible to indoctrination: a vulnerable population found not only abroad but increasingly at home in the West.

¹ Photo by Darko Bandic, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/8006012/ns/world_news/t/anti-us-rallies-erupt-over-handling-quran.

² Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (USA: SIME journal, 2005), 82.

³ 9/11 Commission, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, July 22, 2004), 51.

⁴ Mehrdad Mozayyan, “Glory in Defeat and Other Islamist Ideologies,” in *Armed Groups: Studies in National Security, Counterterrorism, and Counterinsurgency*, ed. Jeffrey H. Norwitz (Newport: Naval War College Press, 2008), 239.

⁵ Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the 21st Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

⁶ *The Narrative: an interview of Maajid Nawaz by Leslie Stahl*, produced by Rich Bonin, *60 Minutes*, CBS News, April 25, 2010. <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=6430933n>

⁷ For more information about the Quilliam Foundation, visit www.Quilliamfoundation.org

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