Psychological Operations

and Counterterrorism

By JERROLD M. POST

Soldiers handing out newspapers in Mosul, Iraq

According to Chinese strategist Sun Tzu, whose The Art of War continues to inform political-military strategy after 2,000 years, "What is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy's strategy. . . . Next best is to disrupt his alliances. . . . The next best is to attack his army. . . . The worst policy is to attack cities."

Sun Tzu also observed that of the five fundamental factors affecting war, the first is moral influence: "that which causes the people to be in harmony with their leaders so that they will accompany them in life and unto death without fear of mortal peril." Elsewhere he observes, "To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill." In effect, Sun Tzu is advocating psychological undermining of the enemy, a prescription still valid today.

Psychological operations (PSYOP) has been defined as "the planned use of communications to influence human attitudes and behavior. It consists of political, military, and ideological actions conducted to induce in target groups behavior, emotions, and attitudes that support the attainment of national objectives."[1]

The term psychological operations, especially when combined with political warfare, denotes "operations, whether tactical or strategic, on the battlefield or in the theater, in peacetime or in

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war, directed primarily at our adversary's mind rather than his body."[2]

Yet historically, psychological operations has for the most part only been employed tactically, in wartime. There has been little attention to the potential of strategic PSYOP in undermining the enemy to prepare the battlefield. Properly conducted, it should "precede, accompany, and follow all applications of force"[3] and be an integral component of the overall strategic plan. Yet because planners overrely on technological superiority and pay insufficient attention to an enemy's psychology, it is either omitted or is a late afterthought. But information operations—preparing the battlefield—must be integrated with battle planning from inception, and in particular not merely tactical PSYOP but also strategic. Enemy resistance is not undermined with the turn of a switch; it is a long process. Influencing attitudes requires deconstruction of the enemy. By this is meant identifying the constituent elements—and audiences—of its power base and the sources of its influence.

PSYOP should be the primary weapon in the war against terrorism

Terrorism is a vicious species of psychological warfare waged through the media. It is a war for hearts and minds. If one accepts this premise, then the war against terrorism will not be won with smart bombs and missiles. One does not counter psychological warfare with high-tech weapons.

Indeed, research on the effects of retaliation on terrorist behavior conducted by the author and Ariel Merari, with support from the U.S. Institute of Peace, demonstrated that the major goal of retaliation against terrorism was solipsistic—meant to convey to the public that the government was strongly defending them. There was no statistical evidence in the three cases examined, which included Israeli retaliation against the terrorist campaign in the 1970s, that retaliation deterred terrorist actions. To the contrary, in some cases there was a trend suggesting that it reinforced the terrorist group. Thus the way to counter psychological warfare is with psychological warfare, and PSYOP should be the primary weapon in the war against terrorism.

Four major elements of a psychological program designed to counter terrorism are:

■ inhibiting potential terrorists from joining terrorist groups
　■ producing dissension within groups
　■ facilitating exit from groups
　■ reducing support for groups and their leaders.

These elements are components of a strategic psychological operations program that must be con-

ducted over decades, for these attitudes are not easily changed when hatred is bred in the bone. Vladimir Lenin conveyed that "the goal of terrorism is to terrorize." This suggests a fifth element of a sustained campaign of strategic psychological operations: insulating the target audience, the public, from the intended goals of the terrorist to terrorize. These five elements of a sustained strategic psychological operations campaign deserve a closer look.

Addressing the Source

The first element, inhibiting potential terrorists from joining terrorist organizations, is the most important and complex of the five. Once an individual is in a body, especially underground, group dynamics will enforce his psychological commitment to its goals. From childhood there is a normalization and social value attached to joining a terrorist group, especially in the constituencies of particular concern to Israel. In a research project the author directed under the auspices of the Smith-Richardson Foundation, for which Ehud Sprinzak served as principal scientist, 35 incarcerated Middle Eastern terrorists in Israeli and Palestinian prisons were interviewed: 21 radical Islamist terrorists from Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah and 14 secular nationalists from Fatah and its military wing as well as from the Palestinian Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine.[4]

It was clear that the major influence was the social setting. As one terrorist remarked, "Everyone was joining." Individuals from strictly religious Islamic backgrounds were more likely to join Islamist groups, while those with no religious background might join either a secular or a religious group. Peers were of great influence and often recruited the subjects. For the secular groups the social environment centered on schools and clubs, while for Islamists the mosque, religious organizations, and religious instruction dominated. Some 64 percent of secular members, but only 43 percent of Islamist members, reported that their group was the most active in their community. Over half of the secular group cited their community or a youth club as the primary influence. For Islamist groups, almost half cited the mosque, Moslem Brotherhood, or other religious influence as central, and another 20 percent cited a university or professional school. Only 30 percent of secular and 20 percent of Islamist group members reported their families as a vital influence. Although introduction to the cause varied, almost all subjects grew up in villages or refugee camps that were active in the struggle. Some 80 percent of secular group members were raised in communities that were radically involved compared with 75 percent of Islamist members. Less

Muqtada al-Sadr
poster, Baghdad

than a tenth of each group came from communities that were not particularly active.

Representative quotes follow, beginning with the Islamist view:

■ I came from a religious family which used to observe all the Islamic traditions. My initial political awareness came during prayers at the mosque. That's where I was also asked to join religious classes. In the context of these studies, the sheik used to inject some historical background in which he would tell us how we were effectively evicted from Palestine. . . . The sheik also used to explain the significance of the fact that there was an [Israeli] military outpost in the heart of the camp. He compared it to a cancer in the human body which was threatening its very existence.

enlistment was a natural step for the secular terrorists too

■ At the age of 16 I developed an interest in religion. I was exposed to the Moslem Brotherhood and began to pray in a mosque and to study Islam. The Koran and my religious studies were the tools that shaped my political consciousness. The mosque and the religious clerics in my village provided the focal point of my social life.

Community support was important to the families of the fighters as well:

■ Families of terrorists who were wounded, killed, or captured enjoyed a great deal of economic aid and attention. And that strengthened popular support for the attacks.

■ Perpetrators of armed attacks were seen as heroes. Their families got a great deal of material assistance, including the construction of new homes to replace those destroyed by the Israeli authorities as punishment for terrorist acts.

■ The entire family did all it could for the Palestinian people and won great respect for doing so. All my brothers are in jail, and one is serving a life sentence for his activities in the Izz a-Din al-Qassam

battalions. My brothers all went to school and most are university graduates.

The emir blesses all actions.

■ *Major actions become the subject of sermons in the mosque, glorifying the attack and the attackers.*

Joining Hamas or Fatah increased social standing.

■ Recruits were treated with great respect. A youngster who belonged to Hamas or Fatah was regarded more highly than one who didn't belong to a group and got better treatment than unaffiliated kids.

■ Anyone who didn't enlist during [intifada] would have been ostracized.

The hatred for the Israelis was remarkable, especially given that few reported any contact with them.

■ You Israelis are Nazis in your souls and in your conduct. In your occupation you never distinguish between men and women, or between old people and children. You adopted methods of collective punishment, you uprooted people from their homeland and from their homes and chased them into exile. You fired live ammunition at women and children. You smashed the skulls of defenseless civilians. You set up detention camps for thousands of people in subhuman conditions. You destroyed homes and turned children into orphans. You prevented people from making a living, you stole their property, you trampled on their honor. Given that kind of conduct, there is no choice but to strike at you without mercy in every possible way.

Secular influences had an impact, beginning with family background and early life. As with other Palestinian terrorist organizations, there is a dichotomy between how families felt in theory and how they felt in reality. Publicly, families supported the organization and were proud of their sons for joining. Privately, they feared for their sons and often for what the security forces might do to the families. One mother who lost a son reported in an interview about "human bombs" that if possible she would cut a hole in her heart and sew her remaining son inside for safety.

■ Families who had paid their dues to the war effort by allowing the recruitment of a son tried to prevent other sons from enlisting too.

While most Fatah members reported that their families had good social standing, their status and experience as refugees were paramount in developing self-identity.

■ I belong to the generation of occupation. My family are refugees from the 1967 war. The war and my refugee status were the seminal events that formed my political consciousness and provided the incentive for doing all I could to help regain our legitimate rights in our occupied country.

Enlistment was a natural step for the secular terrorists too.

Soldiers arriving in Haiti, March 13, 2004

1ˢᵗ Combat Camera Squadron (Andy Dunaway)

■ In a way, [enlistment] can be compared to a young Israeli from a nationalist Zionist family who wants to fulfill himself through army service.

■ My motivation in joining Fatah was both ideological and personal. It was a question of self-fulfillment, of honor, and a feeling of independence. . . . The goal of every young Palestinian was to be a fighter.

■ After recruitment my social status was greatly enhanced. I got a lot of respect from my acquaintances and from the young people in the village.

Combating such deeply ingrained attitudes will be difficult. Yet failing that, there will be a growing stream of terrorists to replace those killed or arrested. Particularly problematic is schooling. The virulent anti-West brand of Islam being taught in the radical *madrassas* of Pakistan is a case in point. What steps might ameliorate the poison being dispensed? How can moderate clerics be encouraged to temper the curricula? Under a program the Department of Labor recently funded in Pakistan to combat child labor, for $80 a student can receive a year's education at a secular school. Each child enrolled is one not exposed to the anti-Israel, anti-West propaganda in the radical *madrassas*.

Youth taught by hatemongering leaders and seeing a bleak future are impelled to violence out of despair. What can be done to open pathways for ambitious young people within their society? Support to programs that encourage economic development and opening of societies, be it Pakistan, the West Bank, or Gaza, can shrink the reservoir of dispirited youngsters.

Both measures—educational support and economic programs—require funding by government agencies or nongovernmental organizations, but the investment would go a long way toward reducing the population that sees no path other than terrorism.

Isolating the Group

The second element is to produce dissension within the group. Terrorist organizations are often hothouses of tension. When they are attacked, internal tensions disappear and it becomes them against the world. What would magnify tension, sow distrust, recast the image of the leader or pretenders to the throne, or weaken the already stressed climate and paralyze the group? Injecting such influences into a closed body is by no means easy but would reduce cohesion and efficiency.

The third element, facilitating exit from the group, exposes a danger of becoming a terrorist: once one has made that choice it is hard to turn back, for an early hurdle for full acceptance is to carry out a terrorist action, which can lead to a criminal sanction. Yet a number of governments countering terrorism have instituted creative amnesty programs, akin to the U.S. protected witness program; amnesty is given in return for cooperation and information. The bargain includes

financial support for a new life and can extend to resettlement in other countries and even plastic surgery, as Spanish authorities provided Basque Fatherland and Liberty defectors. The Italian pentiti program was instrumental in breaking the back of the Red Brigades. Moreover, information developed by defectors can be fed back to the group to strengthen option two, producing internal dissension.

The fourth element is information operations directed against the group to reduce public support. An exemplar of this goal is al Qaeda. For years Osama bin Laden has been unchallenged in the arena of marshalling opinion to his view of Islam and the West. The virulent brand of Islam he has championed and the violence he has justified with his extreme interpretation of the Koran are consistent with those of Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders and have not been countered. Al Qaeda has attracted alienated Muslim youth sensitized in the *madrassas* and mosques. In the 2001 trial of the al Qaeda bombers of the U.S. Embassies in Tanzania and Nairobi in Federal court in New York, the author served as expert witness during the death penalty phase and spent many hours with one of the lower-level participants of the bombing in Dar es Salaam as well as one of the seniors. The roles of the *madrassa* and the mosque were particularly noteworthy. In the *madrassa* in Zanzibar, the participant was taught never to question learned authorities, especially those with religious credentials. In the mosque in Dar es Salaam, where he felt welcomed as a member of the uma (the community of observant Muslims), he heard of the obligation to help other Muslims wherever they were. He was

> **if the act of one extremist youth can derail fragile movement toward dialogue, terrorism is being rewarded**

Soldiers explaining U.S. mission in Afghanistan

55th Signal Company (Matthew Burkhart)

shown films of Muslim mass graves in Bosnia and the bodies of women and children in Chechnya.

Alone and isolated except for the mosque, he vowed, in his words, to become a soldier for Allah and defend these innocent victims against the soldiers of Serbia and Russia. When he gave voice to these sentiments, he was informed by a spotter for al Qaeda that to be a soldier for Allah he must get training; so using his own money, he went to Pakistan to be screened and was sent to an Osama bin Laden training camp in Afghanistan. After 7 months there, when he was offered only participation in Kashmir rather than fighting soldiers in either Bosnia or Chechnya, he returned to Dar es Salaam and was isolated as an assistant grocery clerk. Still participating at the mosque, he received the call to take part in a jihad job 3 years later. He responded immediately. His pious wish to defend Muslim victims was bent into participating in an act of mass casualty terrorism. As he was confronted with the consequences of the bombing, in contrast to other terrorists, he was overwhelmed with the death of innocents, which he saw as inconsistent with his views of jihad: "Their jihad is not my jihad." Nor is it the jihad of the majority of mainstream Muslims, yet they have been remarkably mute, giving free rein to the extremists to steer alienated youth into violence in the name of Islam. Osama bin Laden's justifications, as spelled out in the al Qaeda terrorism manual, are inconsistent with the Koran, and yet to the alienated youth they are justification for killing in the name of God.

What can counter these religiously based arguments? This will take moderate Islamic clerics and leaders reclaiming their hijacked religion and depicting Osama bin Laden and his ilk as distorting the meaning of the Koran and violating the spirit of Islam in the service of self-aggrandizing motivations. The goal is to make the group not a mainstream path for alienated youth but a deviant path, and to not have the leaders seen as romantic heroes but as preachers of a perverted Islam. This requires activating voices not now heard, for these changes must come from within Islam, and at present the extremist view is uncontested.

Insulating the Public

Addressed thus far is a fourfold approach to countering terrorism by reducing the attraction to the group and confronting and undermining internal cohesion, but as important is the fifth element: defending against the central goal of terrorism—to terrorize. If the act of one extremist youth can derail fragile movement toward dialogue and reconciliation, terrorism is being rewarded. Sustained public education is needed.

Militants showing children how to hold assault rifles

Israel has come a long way in this direction, but the United States, as witnessed during the paralyzing effects of the Washington area snipers, has far to go.

A complicated need of a strategic information campaign is a coordinated information policy so statements from the White House or the office of the Prime Minister are in sync with the message campaigns coming out of the operational units. Indeed, public diplomacy statements designed to reassure the domestic constituency too often undermine the information goals of those conducting psychological operations. It is difficult in a large bureaucracy to integrate and coordinate information campaigns among key elements of government, for many of the targets of influence will require pressure and inducements for which the Department of State or foreign ministry might take the lead. To inject threatening information within the inner circle may require the sophisticated and covert techniques of the Central Intelligence Agency or Mossad.

In sum, coordinated information operations are seen as an underutilized but critical weapon in combating terrorism. A five-pronged strategy has been specified for strategic psychological operations. It will take years to alter attitudes, for when hatred is deeply inbred it does not easily yield.

To conduct sophisticated strategic psychological operations campaigns requires nuanced research and analysis of the history, politics, and culture of potential enemies, and in particular of their leadership and strategic culture.   **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] Alfred Paddock, Jr., "Military Psychological Operations," in Political Warfare and Psychological Operations, edited by Carnes Lord and Frank R. Barnett (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1989), 45.

[2] Alvin H. Bernstein, "Political Strategies in Coercive Diplomacy and Limited War," in Lord and Barnett, Political Warfare and Psychological Operations, 145.

[3] Ibid., 45.

[4] The results were published in Political Violence and Terrorism in March 2004.