Communication and Media Strategy in the Jihadi War of Ideas

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recent controversies surrounding U.S. efforts to influence media in Iraq and the Middle East signal increasing interest in a war of ideas that is part of the conflict between the West and the worldwide jihadi movement. Clear thinking about this issue requires an understanding of how the jihadis struggle for hearts and minds. Yet many people are under-informed about the nature and extent of jihadi strategy regarding communication and the media. The purpose of this paper is to piece-together this strategy from texts captured during operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, translated statements from jihadi leaders, as well as other open-source documents, such as speeches and website material.

These texts reveal three strategic goals for communication and media in jihadi operations. First they must **legitimate** their movement by establishing its social and religious viability while engaging in violent acts that on their face seem to violate the norms of civilized society and the tenets of Islam. This is perhaps the biggest ongoing communication challenge they face. Second they aim to **propagate** their movement by spreading messages to sympathetic audiences in areas where they want to expand. This prepares the way for political efforts that precede establishing actual operations. Third they seek to **intimidate** their opponents. This applies not only to existing enemies but to sympathizers in the Muslim world who might think of turning against them.

Jihadis pursue these strategies using sophisticated, modern methods of communication and public relations. They segment audiences and adapt their message to the audience, apply some of the same PR techniques used by large corporations, conduct disinformation campaigns, and coordinate communication with operations. They do this using a variety of sophisticated means, including traditional mass media and new media channels. This paper places particular emphasis on new media channels, especially the Internet, to understand the implications of a "virtual jihad."

Six recommendations are generated from our analysis: (1) adopt a long term strategy of improving our credibility with Muslim audiences, (2) degrade jihadis' ability to execute their communication and media strategy, (3) identify and draw attention to jihadi actions and outcomes that contradict Islam, (4) deconstruct jihadi concepts of history and audience, (5) redouble efforts to engage jihadi new media campaigns, and, (6) make better use of sympathetic members of the American Muslim community.

BACKGROUND

We developed this paper in response to recent controversies about efforts by the United States to influence foreign media coverage of jihadi activities in Iraq and the Middle East. We join this debate not by taking a position on one side or the other, but instead by focusing on the "flip side" of the issue: The efforts by jihadis to influence media coverage of their activities. Whether a particular operation on the U.S. side is justified is a legitimate matter of argument. But while we deliberate such issues, the jihadis are busy executing a communication and media strategy of their own. It is designed to spread their ideas, proliferate their movement, and intimidate their enemies through traditional and new media. It seems beyond question that the United States should follow and resist these efforts, even if the proper methods for doing this remain an open question.

It is obvious that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods; in fact, its ratio may reach 90% of the total preparation for the battles.

Osama bin Laden

The goal of this paper, therefore, is to describe the strategies and principles underlying jihadi communication and media efforts. The role of communication practices in promoting jihad "has been systematically undervalued" (International Crisis Group, 2006, p. 4) in discussion of how best to resist the movement. Osama bin Laden, in a letter to Emir Al-Momineen, states: "It is obvious that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods; in fact, its ratio may reach 90% of the total preparation for the battles" (AFGP-2002-600321). Yet we find that many otherwise well-informed people are surprised to learn that this "battlefield" even exists. They do not realize that jihadis have an explicit communication and public relations strategy, that they execute this strategy in a sophisticated manner that makes use of modern tools and techniques, and that they are rapidly assimilating new media into their repertoire in hopes of establishing a worldwide virtual jihad movement.

Just as surprising as the extent of jihadi communication strategy is the ease with which it is understood. It does not take sophisticated analysis and secret spy operations to understand their plans; we need only to listen to what they are saying. Accordingly, this review relies primarily on quotes from recently de-classified captured documents and other open source reports. The main documents consist of 28 texts captured in operations against al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and "range from single page letters to 70+ page excerpts from larger jihadi texts, and were authored both before and after September 11, 2001" according to the Combating Terrorism Center (2006a) report in which they were released. They are cited with the letters "AFGP" to correspond with the numbers used in that report.

One hazard of working with documents like this is that we may be analyzing an organization of the past. There is broad agreement in the counter-terrorism community that the al Qaeda of the 9/11—an organized army of jihadi special operations personnel complete with training facilities—is a thing of the past (Combating Terrorism Center, 2006a;

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Hoffman, 2004).   Today it is more of an *ideal* or social movement that is replicated by relatively disconnected groups (as in the cases of the Madrid and London bombers) than a network of cells controlled by a "mother ship."   This is the reason we use the more general term *jihadi*, referring to organized Salafi extremists, rather than specific present or past groups like al Qaeda.

Analyzing older documents in light of this change is not too much of a worry for the present analysis. We are not interested so much in specific tactics, but rather in the jihadi *concept of operations* with respect to communication and the media. As the movement metastasizes, we can expect this to spread right along with the other ideological machinery. Indeed there is recent evidence that contemporary jihadis show unabated zeal for media operations. U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld recently quoted al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi as saying, "More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of Muslims" (Rumsfeld, 2006).

We also include as a point of contemporary reference three more recently released documents. The U.S. military recently conducted an operation against al AQI, capturing a jihadi who was carrying documents. Three of these were subsequently released for distribution (Combating Terrorism Center, 2006b). We include references to these letters in particular as a way of demonstrating that some of the tactics described in this paper are alive and well in contemporary jihadi practice. They are cited with "IZ" followed by numbers. Other sources include translated statements of jihadi leaders, as well as speeches, documents and web site material, all available in the open source literature.

In the sections below we describe the jihadi thinking about communication and media, and some of the approaches they have for putting their plans into action. The first section describes overall jihadi strategy and then focuses on communication and media strategy in general, showing that it is designed to legitimate, propagate, and intimidate. The second section shows how the jihadis follow modern principles and fundamental practices in executing their communication and media efforts. The third shows that jihadis view new media—especially Internet-based communication and information technologies—as a platform for global operations and virtual jihad. We conclude by arguing that our ability to directly interfere with jihadi communication efforts is limited, but that within these constraints several strategic opportunities are apparent.

COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA IN JIHADI STRATEGY

Our first point is that Jihadis place great importance on communication and media as elements of their overall strategy. A *strategy* is a plan that leads to a goal, and is distinct from tactics, which have to do with using resources to execute plans. The goal of the Jihadis is a matter of some dispute, and depends on the time horizon in question. There is general agreement that in the short run they want to drive those they see as invaders (e.g., the United States and its allies) from the Arabian Peninsula. This goal has been regularly professed by Osama bin Laden, most recently in his offer of a "truce" to the United States (Bin Laden Tape, 2006). In Iraq, where the jihadis are currently most active, "the armed opposition's avowed objectives have thus been reduced to a primary, unifying goal: ridding Iraq of the foreign occupier. Beyond that, all is vague" (International Crisis Group, 2006, p. 11).

Jihadis place great importance on communication *and* media *as elements of their overall strategy.*

The lack of agreement on longer term goals should not be mistaken for a lack of ideas. One stated intermediate goal of al Qaeda is the toppling of "apostate regimes" in the Middle East. This would lead to restoration of an Islamic Caliphate of the kind that ruled the region in the Middle Ages. Having established this Caliphate, an even longer term goal is to expand its influence and rule as far as possible, if not worldwide. One of the goals often expressed in jihadi texts is the fulfillment of a desire to be governed by devout followers of Islam. In "A Response to Accusations Against Sheikh Albani," Ayman Zawahiri explicitly voiced this goal, demanding that the infidel, turncoat, and backsliding leaders who currently do not follow Islamic Sharia begin to govern by the revelations of Allah, and urging readers to kill them if they will not. He prioritizes this goal of a devout Islamic Caliphate above all others, including attacks on Western Imperialists and the retaking of Palestine from Israel (AFGP-2002- 601041).

Our goal here is not to dwell on overall jihadi strategy but to show the importance they place on media strategies that help facilitate their overall goals. One sign of importance is the incorporation of communication and media functions in jihadi organizational structures. For example the formal structure of al Qaeda includes military, political and information committees. The *military committee* is responsible for operations. The *political committee* interacts with the wider Jihad movement, establishes political relationships, and maintains relations with the government of the host country. The *information committee* is responsible for the "means of communications setup in all categories of Islamic people, taking great pains in making it aware of its enemies' plans, aspiring to concentrate all of the scientific, legal, and Jihad capabilities in the first level in order to obstruct one line in front of the alliance of the infidel and the ugly ones." (AFGP-2002-000078). Our examination of

documents describing the activities of these committees reveals three main strategic goals of legitimating, propagating, and intimidating. We describe these next.

Legitimating

Jihadis see themselves as "outsiders" and they use violence to achieve their overall goals. Violent methods inevitably harm innocent people, so there is a built-in drag on the organization's legitimacy. Worse for the jihadis, their ideology is also heavily rooted in Islam, which on its face appears to prohibit the kinds of violent methods they use. So not only is there a huge need to establish and maintain social and religious legitimacy, there is also a rich source of contradictions to complicate this effort. Jihadis recognize this and have been concerned with legitimating their efforts "from the start" (International Crisis Group, 2006, p. 8). This is perhaps the biggest communication challenge they face, and accordingly it is given much attention in their writings.

Social legitimation means having the communities in which they operate know their story, share their goals, and accept and support their efforts. This is a central focus of "A Memo to Sheikh Abu Abdullah" (AFGP-2002-003251). In it the author, Abu Huthayfa, laments that "most of the people inside [the country] are unaware of the great effort the mujahidin made against the American forces" in Somalia. He urges use of the media to spread these stories because "publicizing those events will motivate and encourage the nation, breaks the barrier of fear and it gives a live and actual example of the recent experiment in which the mujahidin succeeded in achieving the target and driving the enemy away." Spreading word of the heroism of the mujahidin will "arouse the nation and affirm the movement's credibility." Another document notes how previous jihadi efforts have failed on this account:

> The mujahideen failed to define their identity, their intentions and motivations; such an explanation was and still is the main pillar for attracting the masses and mobilizing the base members on an intellectual and ideological level to partake in this dangerous work (i.e. Jihad). (AFGP-2002-600080)

Religious legitimation means having the jihadis' efforts be seen as acceptable under the religious tenets of Islam. As noted already, on its face Islam would seem to ban their violent practices. For example, in one passage the Quran condemns the killing of Muslim children:

> They are lost indeed who kill their children foolishly without knowledge, and forbid what Allah has given to them forging a lie against Allah; they have indeed gone astray, and they are not the followers of the right course. (Quran 6:140)

Jihadi suicide bombers routinely kill children "foolishly without knowledge." Have they not, then, "gone astray?" Interpretation of the

Quran is a complex matter of competing arguments by scholars. Thus jihadis spend considerable rhetorical effort promoting their interpretations in this discourse, and refuting or preempting criticism by outsiders. For example, in Iraq

> The more active groups now appeal to the same Koranic passages, and tend to interpret current events through the prism of the Crusades (of which U.S. imperialism is seen as the latest manifestation), and invoke mythical/religious events and people (the battle of Hittin in the early age of Islam; the heroic figures of Saladin, liberator of Jerusalem, and al-Qa'qa'; the early Muslim fighters, and so forth). (International Crisis Group, 2006, p. 10)

They also try to mitigate the need for such interpretive defenses by letting others take the blame:

> So the brothers raided his house in the middle of the night wearing the national guards uniforms and driving similar cars, they took him and killed him thank god. The next morning his households and neighbors started talking to the tribe saying it was the national guards, they added that they heard some of them speaking English, meaning that the Americans are the ones who took Abu Dhari … no one claimed responsibility for this killing, thank god. (IZ-060316-01).

Propagating

Brachman (in press) points out that "in recent decades, jihadi ideologues have focused significant energy on crafting and implementing an aggressive, historically informed and universally applicable strategy to take over the world" (p. 6). Clearly then the jihadis do not want to merely legitimate their actions but also to spread their movement to other areas and groups, linking their efforts to a wider struggle involving Muslims everywhere. This goal is discussed at length in a document entitled "Interior Organization" (AFGP-2002-000080), a bylaws-like tract establishing the structure of al Qaeda. In the opening section on their principles of "general politics" we find:

Jihadis want to link their movement to a wider struggle involving Muslims everywhere.

> 5. Our relation with Islamic movements and groups and workers of Islam [TN- the term "friendly Jihad" is crossed out here and replaced with "workers of Islam"] is one of cooperation towards righteousness and strength, with continuing attempts towards merger and unity.

> 6. Our relation with non-Jihad Islamic groups is one of love and friendship and advice, and bringing out the good in them and correcting their mistakes if the situation requires it.

> 9. Eliminate regionalism and tribalism. We struggle in any place in Islamic countries if the situation requires it and our capabilities allow it.

10. The concern over the role of the Muslim people in the Jihad. And struggle to agitate (them) so that they will be in the rank of al-Jihad because they are fuel for the battle.

(AFGP-2002-000080; items 7 and 8 were "crossed out" in the original document)

In executing these principles the jihadis make concerted efforts to develop media contacts outside their immediate sphere of influence because they view the media as the vehicle that will make their message heard world-over (AFGP-Book by Mustafa Hamid). For example, in a letter to Mohammed Omar, Osama bin Laden recounts many requests for interviews from the press, and suggests that "this is a good opportunity to make Muslims aware of what is taking place over [in] the land of two Holy Mosques as well as of what is happening here in Afghanistan" (AFGP-2002-600321). Jihadis view this political communication as very important because it paves the way for establishing bases of operations in other countries, allowing the jihadist movement to take a step forward in achieving their overall goals (AFGP-2002-600113).

Intimidating

Notwithstanding the division into the military, political, and information committees described above, the jihadi concept of organization reflects tight integration of the three functions. Information activities spread the message to Muslims worldwide, which provides the basis for political activities that form relationships needed to spread the movement. These relationships help establish bases of operations, which can be used to fight jihad. The ultimate goal is the fight, and everything else is simply part of a "supply chain" that prepares for battle. In this sense, then, legitimating and propagating the movement are themselves part of the intimidation strategy.

Yet jihadis also seem to make more direct use of communication and media in an attempt to scare and intimidate their opponents, a function closer to what we traditionally think of as propaganda. One consistent theme is *putting the enemy on notice* that there can be no room for compromise. The bylaws-like document described above states this in unequivocal terms:

Our position on dictators of the earth [TN- hegemons?] and secular groups and others that resemble them is that there are innocents among them and unbelievers among them and that there will be continuing enmity until everyone believes in Allah. We will not meet them half way and there will be no room for dialogue with them or flattery towards them. (AFGP-2002-000080)

They express especially harsh intentions toward the Muslim rulers whom they view as apostate. They have gone so far as to send "open letters"

threatening and taunting these rulers (AFGP-2002-000103), presumably in an effort to intimidate them.

Jihadis also attempt to scare and intimidate the "far enemy," especially the leaders and people of the United States. In his "Letter of Threat to the Americans" in 2002 (AFGP-2002-001120) Abu Abullah Al-Kuwaiti issues a number of statements and threats of this kind. As Table 1 shows, his message contains six themes that bear a remarkable similarity to a statement issued by Osama bin Laden in January 2006 (Bin Laden Tape, 2006). Given the sophistication of jihadi communication and media practices in general, it would not be surprising to learn that these themes reflect "talking points" recorded in information committee documents somewhere.

Theme	al Kuwaiti 2002	bin Laden 2006
We seek direct dialog.	The statement/letter should be directed to the American people.	My message to you is about the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and the way to end it.
We didn't want to fight you, but you have made us do it.	There is no animosity between us. You involved yourselves [Europe and US] in this battle. The war is between us and the Jews. You interfered in our countries and influenced our governments to strike against Muslims	Based on the above, we see that Bush's argument is false. However, the argument that he avoided, which is the substance of the results of opinion polls on withdrawing the troops, is that it is better not to fight the Muslims on their land and for them not to fight us on our land.
We easily penetrate your security measures.	The groups that are present in Europe and the US are above suspicion. We obtain our intelligence information from your government and intelligence agencies.	On the other hand, the mujahideen, praise be to God, have managed to breach all the security measures adopted by the unjust nations of the coalition time and again.
Your leaders are inept and/or corrupt.	Isn't it time to end American arrogance and begin listening to your people before you experience more devastating disasters?	Bush said: It is better to fight them on their ground than they fighting us on our ground. In my response to these fallacies, I say: The war in Iraq is raging, and the operations in Afghanistan are on the rise in our favour, praise be to God.
Things are getting worse for you and better for us.	I am pleased to inform you the billions you have spent fighting us so far have resulted in killing a small number of us.	Praise be to God, our conditions are always improving and becoming better, while your conditions are to the contrary of this.
We continue to plan attacks against you.	We warn you that our war against you has not ended, but its effects will increase.	Operations are under preparation, and you will see them on your own ground once they are finished, God willing.

Comparison of themes used by al Kuwaiti and bin Laden in media statements

Messages in these six themes contribute to the jihadi media strategy of legitimating (things are getting worse for you and better for us), propagating (we continue to plan attacks against you) and intimidating (we easily penetrate your security measures). Methods for disseminating these themes and other jihadist media messages are discussed next.

METHODS AND PLANNING

Our second point is that jihadis use sophisticated methods to plan and execute their communication and media operations. By "sophisticated" we mean that they use principles that align with modern methods of communication and public relations. The scope of jihadi PR may not match the multi-million dollar efforts of public corporations, but the point is that their messages are engineered using similar principles and probably gain effectiveness as a result. The documents reviewed in this study revealed evidence of audience segmentation and adaptation, use of tools of the trade, use of disinformation, and coordination of media with operations.

Audience Segmentation and Adaptation

Understanding the Audience

The most fundamental rule of any communication effort is to understand the audience. Jihadi communicators appear to have taken this principle to heart by regularly applying conceptual distinctions when discussing their enemies and/or their communication efforts against them. One distinction in evidence is between people inside and outside the movement. For the *insiders*, the communication problems have to do with controlling an amorphous, distributed, secretive organization and orienting everyone to common objectives. This has been discussed in a recent report (Combating Terrorism Center, 2006a) so we will not dwell on it here. But the distinction is still relevant because the insiders are responsible for executing the legitimation and propagation strategies described above. In "Lessons learned from the armed Jihad ordeal in Syria" the unknown writer says that one of the failures was:

> 6th: Week [sic] public relations campaign both inside and out:

> We talked previously about the failure of the mujahideen on the inside to propagate their vision, goals and slogans in a clear way easy enough for the people to comprehend and support. They did not have a planned communicable public relations campaign capable of mobilizing their base, backers or supporters. They only issued few ineffective communiqués. (AFGP-2002-600080)
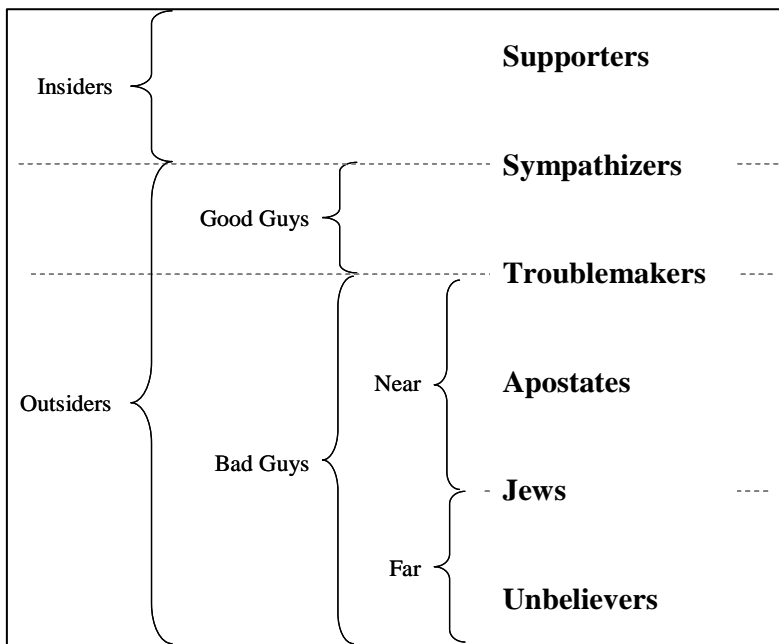
The *outsiders* are divided into categories. A basic distinction is between the good guys and the bad guys. *Good guys* are the "backers, and supporters" of the previous quote, the good Muslims who provide emotional and/or material support for the jihadis' efforts, and Muslims

who could potentially be brought into that fold. Jihadis have almost parental attitudes toward this group, viewing their relationship as "one of love and friendship and advice, and bringing out the good in them and correcting their mistakes" (AFGP-2002-000080).

The *bad guys* include everyone who is not a good guy, and there are two varieties of these. The *apostates* are "fallen" Muslims who are the most immediate objects of jihadi scorn (and operations), especially if they are rulers of countries. Sometimes described as the "near enemy," this is the group against which the jihadis define their social identity, and who seem to be the main targets of their short term goals. The *unbelievers* are the foreigners, especially those in the West, who are sometimes referred to as the "far enemy." These outsiders are problematic in the short term because they meddle in the affairs of the Arabian Peninsula. They also figure in the long term dreams of a worldwide Caliphate.

Two other groups of outsiders appear in jihadi writings. The *troublemakers* include people like members of "the deposed regime, the tribal cliques, the hired fighters, and the standard criminals" (AFGP-Thoughts about the security of principal squads). They are viewed as enemies of the movement, but less serious enemies than the bad guys, and possibly redeemable. The *Jews* are the penultimate objects of the jihadis' wrath, yet the level of contempt expressed toward them in our sample of documents seems no different than that heaped on the apostates. Indeed the plan seems to be to depose the apostates, which will allow formation of the Caliphate, which will then be in a position of strength from which to attack the Jews, which can then move on to the West. Though we found no explicit message planning for these specific groups, they seem to fill-in the cracks between the good guys and bad guys to complete the jihadi audience concept.

Jihadi Plan

1 Depose the apostates

which allows

2 Formation of the Caliphate

which puts the Jihad in a position of strength from which to

3 Attack the Jews

which will enable the Jihad to

4 Conquer the West.

Insiders
{ Supporters
{ Sympathizers

Good Guys

Troublemakers

Near { Apostates

Outsiders

Bad Guys

Jews

Far { Unbelievers

Jihadi Audience Concept

Adapting the Message and Medium

The second most fundamental rule of any communication effort is to adapt the message and the medium to the audience. Here again, there is evidence that the jihadis are following the rule. Sympathizers, as well as potential sympathizers in the lands of the near and far enemies, are primarily targeted with social and religious legitimation messages. Personal communication and other face-to-face methods like speeches and sermons has always been a preferred medium for this task, but as we discuss below the Internet is coming into the mix, especially as a way of cultivating sympathizers in far away places.

Jihad radio stations operating in Yemen and Somalia will have a more powerful effect on them than nuclear bombs.

Hassan al-Tajiki

Increasingly, there is evidence that good guys are also being targeted with intimidation messages. In one of the AQI documents the unknown author concludes that "we should make the public and the ignorant know clearly our policy fighting the renegades, so they won't side with them for their fight against the Mujahidin" (IZ-060316-01). The same document also shows that the troublemakers category is something of a moving target that slides toward those who do good things for the people. In describing its "restrictions on beheading the heads of the Islamic Party member" AQI says its policy is to "first kill the corrupted and the ones with negative effects, before the ones who try to guide people, and has a positive effect" (IZ-060316-01).

The bad guys are, naturally, targeted to a greater extent with intimidation messages. For the near enemy local media come into the mix because, as discussed above, the jihadis view this kind of coverage as a good means of criticizing existing leaders in preparation for political operations that build relationships with new members and sympathizers. For example, in "Five Letters to the Africa Corps" Hassan al-Tajiki advocates establishing pirate ratio stations and predicts that "jihad radio stations operating in Yemen and Somalia will have a more powerful effect on them than nuclear bombs. Jihad operations in Yemen against communism will give jihad action in the Peninsula credibility and effectiveness" (AFGP-2002-600053). The far enemy, because he is far, is more likely to be threatened using international mass media. This is the preferred outlet for recordings regularly issued by Osama bin Laden, Ayman al Zawahiri, and Abu Musab al Zarqawi.

Tools of the Trade

Another sign of jihadi sophistication is their use of standard concepts, theories and best practices in their communication and media efforts. Perhaps the most impressive example of this is their use of after-action review. "A Memo to Sheikh Abu Abdullah" (AFGP-2002-003251), already quoted at length in this document, contains a detailed critical assessment of the failure of the jihadis to properly exploit their victory over the Americans in Somalia. "Lessons learned from the armed

Jihad ordeal in Syria" (AFGP-2002-600080) attributes failure to win support for their efforts to lack of an acceptable public relations campaign. This and other documents we reviewed indicate that the jihadis do the functional equivalent of SWOT (strengths-weaknesses-opportunities-threats) analyses on their communication and media operations in an effort to improve quality.

There is also evidence of theoretical thinking about how effective communication campaigns are conducted. For example the lessons learned document just cited says:

> Obviously the most essential element of any revolutionary organization is putting forward a series of goals and slogans that attract the masses, and presenting itself as a revolutionary pioneering organization with crystal clear objectives. The true mujahideen failed to put forward their ideology, slogans and objectives via a well crafted media campaign. … such an explanation was and still is the main pillar for attracting the masses and mobilizing the base members on an intellectual and ideological level to partake in this dangerous work (i.e. Jihad)." (AFGP-2002-600080).

This conclusion would not sound out of place in a modern social science classroom. For example it reflects a "accessibility-based" orientation to public opinion formation (Kim, Scheufele, Shanahan, 2002; Nisbet et al., 2004).

As for particular tools, in the 1990s al Qaeda ran a now-defunct paper called Nashrat al Akhbar. More recently we have seen the taped statements jihadis release on a regular basis. Videos of hostages and their executions can also be thought of as a kind of press release. In fact, a new group (or sub-group) has surfaced, calling itself the "Brigade of Media Jihad." Their mission is to intimidate the West through release of these videos, as well as videos of dead and wounded U.S. soldiers, via al Jazeera and the Internet (Trabelsi, 2005). The jihadis also place a great deal of emphasis on having good, succinct slogans. They were mentioned in the quote above, and also in "Five Letters to the Africa Corps" where al Tajiki concludes that "Somalia needs a comprehensive national front that agrees on general, not detailed, Islamic slogans. That front must lead to an expanded national government approved by the major forces in the country: tribes and political groupings. The slogan acceptable to all is "Somali Freedom and Islamism" (AFGP-2002-600053).

Disinformation Operations

Jihadi media strategy is also sophisticated in that it apparently makes use of disinformation. This mainly has to do with propagation of rumors that cast the apostates, Jews, and unbelievers in a bad light. Even

though these reports fall on a scale somewhere between fantastic and absurd to the Western reader, the disinformation seems calibrated to appeal to the prejudices of the jihadis' audience, making them more receptive to legitimation and propagation arguments.

The jihadis and other terrorists have a long history of using this tactic. In the early 80s a rumor spread from Morocco to Indonesia that Neil Armstrong heard the call to prayer on the moon and converted to Islam but had to keep it secret for fear that he would lose his U.S. government job (Mark Woodward, personal conversation). More recent examples are not quite as fantastic, but equally dubious. Rumors we have heard include:

- The U.S. Marine Corps barbequed Somali babies;

- 4000 Jews were warned by the CIA/Mosad not to come to work at the World Trade Center on 9-11; and most recently,

- The Indonesian Tsunami was caused by a nuclear bomb detonated by the U.S. Navy.

These represent but a few examples that have gotten significant traction.

This disinformation serves the jihadis' legitimation strategy by casting the West (and the United States in particular) as duplicitous and evil, as a force that Muslims are obligated to resist. Disinformation has the advantage of being impossible to disprove. As a bonus, if the rumor catches on and spreads wide enough, it leads officials to issue defensive responses (as happened with the WTC/Jews rumor). These responses can then be claimed by the jihadis as even further evidence of Western duplicity.

Coordination with Operations

Jihadi efforts are also sophisticated in that they are coordinated with operations. A specific example of coordination comes from one of the AQI documents, showing that the practice is alive and well among contemporary jihadis:

> There's who we prepare for him in few steps, like bringing him down through the media, then kill him, or kill his assistant who does the work for him, and see his reaction, then kill him, or fight him through the media, until his publicity is dead. (IZ-060316-01)

The thinking behind this coordination is explained by Abu Huthayfa:

> Political and informational functions are combined. Both are linked in the military function, and all which act together harmoniously to serve the ancestral jihad plan without dominance of one on the other. This is the obligation of the wise command, which administers and directs work with knowledge and charisma whereas it knows when to push politically, when to cool down the

informational media, and when to kick off militarily. For each phase there is a plan and mechanism that fit its requirements and achieves the goals. (AFGP-2002-003251)

One of the mechanisms gaining popularity in the jihadi media strategy is the use of the Internet as a tool for disseminating information, as "the Web seems to be an appropriate technical infrastructure for communications and organizational design" (LaPorte, 1999, p.215). Specific uses of this mechanism for both political and informational functions are described in more detail next.

JIHAD AND NEW MEDIA

Our third point is that jihadis are technically savvy and intent on pushing jihad into the sphere of new media.   By *new media* we mean electronic communication and information technologies other than traditional one-to-many broadcast methods of radio and television. While this could be considered another tool of the trade as discussed above, these media deserve singling out because they represent something of a convergence. On the one hand, al Qaeda has been transformed from a formal organization into a distributed social movement (Combating Terrorism Center, 2006a; Hoffman, 2004). Experts agree it is now more like a global network organization (Miles & Snow, 1986) than an army of fighters. The new media technologies that have exploded in the last decade are key enablers of global network organizations (Desanctis & Monge, 1999).

These facts are not lost on jihadis. Abu Huthayfa's letter describes several planned applications of new media. He goes on at some length about the need to develop a "huge database" that will support modern knowledge management practices that will enable the leadership to "manage struggle cleverly" and "carry on the appropriate strategies for each crisis." He also plans support for insiders when they need to collaborate and exchange information:

Jihadis are technically savvy *and intent on pushing jihad into the sphere of new media.*

> Its [this cell's] main function is receiving the final product of the informational section and securely transmitting it in the country by an accurate Movement plan via using all available communication means. Personnel can be creative in utilizing secure methods of receiving and sending. For instance the electronic mail (e-mail) which may give a memory of up to (4MB) in sending attachment files along with the original message. This is a very fast method for sending the product of the informational section. Also, large web site locations to store files on the Internet are available for this purpose such as (www. Driveway.com), which ranges from (25MB) to (100MB). (AFGP-2002-003251)

The www.driveway.com reference illustrates the dangers noted above. The site is no longer in operation as such, and the domain name now leads to a site called remotepc.com, which is in turn owned by Pro Softnet Corp.

of Woodland Hills California. It is entirely plausible, even likely, that this company bought the domain name on the open market after its previous owner abandoned the registration. If so then the owners and records of the site referenced in the quote are in all likelihood lost to posterity. This is quite suitable for the jihadis, as anonymous file sharing and so-called "warez" sites like the former driveway.com have mushroomed in recent years. They have no doubt moved on to a new favorite site, which will in time shut down and cover what few tracks they have left there.

Other applications of new media are aimed at outsiders. For example, the web is seen an essential mechanism for legitimation and propagation:

> The importance of establishing a web site for you on the internet in which you place all your legible, audible, and visible archives and news must be emphasized. It should not escape the mind of any one of you the importance of this tool in communicating with people. (AFGP-2002-003251)

Still other Internet applications are aimed at intimidating the enemy, as the earlier example of the "Brigade of Media Jihad" illustrates. There are even more extreme examples of new media in jihadi practice: There are reports that jihadis have developed a CD of children's computer programs that mixes innocent games with first person shooter games featuring American targets (Brachman, in press)

The marriage of jihad with new media represents a dangerous development for several reasons. First, the Internet is, by design, decentralized and not subject to easy control by authorities. Second, laws have not yet caught up with the new media so there are many opportunities to operate outside regulation (as do offshore Internet gambling operations), and what regulations exist are inconsistent across countries. Third, the new media are (after all) new, so big government has not caught up to technology in many respects. In particular there are still many people in government—especially higher-up in government—who have little experience with new communication and information technologies and/or avoid using them for some reason. Fourth, any period of rapid development is chaotic, so new and unpredictable applications appear all the time. The result is an environment where jihadis can be anonymous, operate outside the law, exploit a shortcoming of their more ossified opponents (an "asymmetry" in military parlance), and tap a stream of new developments in doing so.

The marriage of jihad with new media represents a dangerous development.

The concern on the one hand is that jihadis will use new media as a tactical platform. Based on a netwars (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001) scenario, decentralized but like minded groups would use technology to coalesce, seemingly from nowhere, fight the authorities (who are not well-structured to oppose such threats), and then dissipate just as fluidly. There is also concern on the other hand that new media will become a platform

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for "virtual jihad." Strong evidence exists that jihadis are moving into the new area of "social networking" services that have skyrocketed in popularity in recent years. "Most jihadist message boards on traditional websites are in Arabic and require users to know someone connected with the board before they can gain access. Social networking services such as Orkut, Friendster and MySpace, however, allow users to create personal profiles and associate with 'communities' based on shared interests" (Hunt, 2006).

Mediated communication is known for its ability to produce bonds between people who have never even seen one another. There is something of an epidemic in Japan of young adults meeting on the Internet and committing suicide together (McCurry, 2005). When non-fatal, relationships developed online can be even stronger than those developed face-to-face (Walther, 1996). Thus the new media have great potential as legitimation and propagation devices. As Brachman (in press) explains:

> One sees that the jihadi movement is not simply using technological tools to recruit new members, receive donations and plan attacks – all very real and serious threats. Rather, its membership is actually seeking to catalyze a computer-linked global social movement emerging from the very use of this technology; they are crafting a global counterculture based on the very process of participation as well as product. (p. 1).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Before giving recommendations based on our analysis, there is an important constraint to address. The credibility of the United States in the Muslim community (writ large) is perhaps at an all-time low. Statements from U.S. officials, such as President Bush calling the war on terror a "Crusade," have played directly into the hands of the jihadi communication strategy. They routinely frame the current U.S. presence in the Gulf region as a modern day reproduction of the Crusades, call U.S. forces "the Crusaders," and so on. This taps negative collective memories (which in this part of the world seem longer and more robust than elsewhere) that help jihadis cast U.S. forces as untrustworthy invaders. Other incidents, such as prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, create rhetorical opportunities for jihadis to claim the United States is fundamentally no different from the defeated regime in Iraq and other apostate regimes in the region. Our inability to restore basic services in Iraq calls into question our capability to do what we say, whether or not our intentions are honorable.

The point of raising these cases is not to rehash criticism of U.S. actions. But regardless of whether these failures were preventable, they have seriously degraded U.S. credibility with Muslims in the Middle East and to varying extents worldwide (see Kohut, 2005). Given that our credibility with this audience was already low before the Global War on

Terrorism, it is probably safe to say that it is currently in the range of slim to none. This places severe constraints on our ability to directly engage and compete with the strategic communication activities described above. For example, any messages designed to refute or undermine jihadi legitimation arguments are likely to be framed as further attempts to manipulate and corrupt Muslim minds.

This creates serious challenges for any counter-strategy designed to compete with the jihadis in the war of ideas, but it does not mean that we are helpless in the short term or that we should simply surrender the war of ideas to the jihadis. On the contrary, it is essential to resist their efforts, and there are indirect ways of doing so that do not depend on having high source credibility. We conclude this paper by recommending a long term effort to restore lost credibility, followed by a set of short-term strategies for competing with the jihadi communication and media strategy in the mean time.

1. Adopt a long term strategy of improving our credibility with Muslim audiences.

Perceptions of credibility can be cultivated. According to existing research the main dimensions of credibility are trustworthiness, competence, and goodwill (see McCrosky and Young, 1982). If these dimensions generalize to Muslim culture, then we can improve credibility there rather straightforwardly, by behaving in ways that the Muslim world views as trustworthy, that demonstrate our competence to accomplish outcomes that prove our goodwill.

This recommendation entails two challenges. First, it is a long term effort that will not serve immediate goals of resisting jihadi efforts in the here and now. Restoring lost credibility requires an accumulation of experience over time that outweighs (or at least balances) the negative experiences of the recent past. This is an important constraint because until such balancing takes place there is little point in *overtly* competing with jihadi rhetoric or engaging in public diplomacy exercises. These efforts will simply not be taken seriously by the intended audience.

A second challenge is that our scientific and philosophical understanding of credibility is anchored firmly in Western culture, deriving from ideas of the ancient Greeks about effective participation in public discourse (e.g., Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*). It may be that exactly the same dimensions of credibility exist in Muslim ideas of public discourse, but to our knowledge no one has determined whether this is really the case. It is also possible that the same dimensions exist, but are based on different evidence or experiences. In other words, what Westerners think indicates trustworthiness might not be the same as what Muslims think indicates trustworthiness. So our long term effort to restore credibility must include research into the generalizability of Western notions of credibility to the Muslim world.

2. Degrade jihadis' ability to execute their communication and media strategy.

The discussion above noted the jihadis' concern over having a simple, effective, coherent message. We also know from their after-action reviews that this is not an "automatic" occurrence. Previous efforts have, in the jihadis' own estimation, foundered on the failure to accomplish it. Having good PR is therefore a *challenge* for jihadi organizations. Doing it takes resources, coordination, and special effort. As with any organization, these things are in limited supply, meaning that events and priorities elsewhere in the organization can interfere or compete with the communication-related tasks. Therefore actions taken by the United States to create problems for jihadis on the organizational level should in turn impede their ability to formulate and deploy coherent messages.

Two recent publications offer suggestions about how we might pressure jihadi organizations. The "Harmony" report (Combating Terrorism Center, 2006a), which contained many of the jihadi texts analyzed for this paper, is one. It concludes that the new "social movement" version of jihad creates significant problems of control for leaders, who encounter resistance from subordinates and allied groups. The difficulty of monitoring the actions of these deputies and allies creates conditions of suspicion and distrust that have the potential to degrade their organizational climate and ability for coordinated action. In another paper, Corman (in press) argues that all the activities of the jihadis are part of a structured, focused system. Some activities are compatible and complementary whereas others are incompatible or mutually-exclusive. By viewing jihadi organizations as complex systems of these activities, it is possible to find combinations of inputs that cause maximum stress for the organization. Then operations can be undertaken to cause these kinds of inputs.

3. Identify and draw attention to jihadi actions that contradict Islam.

A key problem for jihadis is legitimating what they do, and as we said above the tenets of Islam provide rich sources of contradiction that complicate their legitimation efforts. An important way to compete with the jihadis, then is to (a) identify these contradictions and then (b) make or encourage efforts to draw attention to them. One example, already mentioned, is the sin of killing Muslim children. The more we can promote knowledge of incidents where jihadis have killed children in the course of operations, the more the jihadis are challenged to "spin" these events in a way that maintains their legitimacy: "In the battle of perception management, where the enemy is clearly using the media to help manage perceptions of the general public, our job is not perception management but to counter the enemy's perception management" (Shanker & Schmitt, 2004, p.1). Drawing attention to these discrepancies can also aid in implementing our second recommendation, as jihadi efforts toward perception management take resources away from other parts of the system.

Identifying the contradictions demands deep knowledge of Islam. It is necessary to identify passages in the Quran and associated religious texts that might call the jihadi actions into question. Since Islam is so decentralized (organizationally speaking) one must also know how these passages have been interpreted by relevant local/regional scholars. Because the jihadis are pursuing a legitimation strategy, their own efforts to drive the religious debate on certain issues might also tell us where they feel most vulnerable in this regard.

Once problematic actions and outcomes are identified, drawing attention to them requires (at minimum) a reliable source of information about when and where they happen. Returning to our example of child killings, reports of these incidents sometimes appear in news media, but we know of no source that systematically tracks the deaths in a detailed way. If there were, for instance, a web site that tracked children killed in jihadi attacks, making individual stories of the impacted families known, then relevant news media could be encouraged to make use of it. While the U.S. government would not be a credible host for such a site, it might be possible to encourage and support the development of one by a peace-oriented non-Salafi Muslim group.

4. Deconstruct jihadi concepts of history and audience.

Jihadi ideology depends on a very particular construction of history. Their narrative begins during the golden age of the Caliphs and declines from there on. As Zerubavel (2003) notes, "historical plotlines are often extrapolated to imply *anticipated* trajectories" (p. 17). This means that if an audience accepts such a narrative, then they are apt to believe that as bad as things are now, they can only get worse in the future. This promotes the belief that going back to the past will solve all problems, and provides a built-in logic for rejecting anything in the present associated with the decline. Orienting to this idealized past simultaneously helps solidify identity, creates a sense of legitimacy, and sets an unambiguous path ahead.

It is possible to generate counter-narratives to this one of decline. As Zerubavel explains, "we are not dealing here with actual historical trends but with purely mental historical outlooks. The very same historical period, after all, is remembered quite differently depending on whether we use a progress or a decline narrative to recount it" (p. 16). More research and analysis would be needed in order to shape a counter-narrative of progress. However introducing it into the public discourse would call into question the wisdom of returning to the past that the jihadis value so much, helping to undermine the very foundation of their ideology and disrupt their legitimation efforts.

In a similar way, jihadi communication and media strategy depends on a particular construction of the audience, described above. Blurring the lines in this scheme makes messages designed for particular

audiences less effective. In the audience concept shown above, the sympathizers and troublemakers are the ones at risk because the bad guys are already condemned. If troublemakers can be convinced that they will sooner or later be viewed as the bad guys, and sympathizers can be convinced that they could easily be reclassified as troublemakers, then the good guy end of the audience concept begins to look less like safe categories of tolerance and more like a process that transforms good guys into bad guys.

5. Redouble efforts to engage jihadi new media campaigns.

Our review shows that jihadis are increasingly moving their communication operations out of the mass media and into the new media, especially the Internet. This provides them with the ability to coordinate actions and build community even if they are not concentrated in geographical space. Their abilities in this area represent an asymmetry, as many Americans who did not grow up with the Internet still do not understand it well. This includes analysts, policymakers, officers, and so on who are responsible for fighting the jihadis. Without background knowledge of Internet "culture" it is difficult to understand how it might be used, or keep up with innovations that jihadis can adapt for their purposes.

Evening this playing field demands creative action. We envision creation of a permanent "geek battalion" dedicated to understanding, monitoring, disrupting, and counteracting jihadi Internet activities. This unit would include to as great an extent as possible young people recruited for their knowledge of Internet culture and technology. There are informal "roles" in this culture that could be particularly useful for this effort. For example "white hats" are hackers who use their skills for good, to catch other hackers, reveal security weaknesses of systems to their operators, and so on. Certain people are discussion board and chat room mavens who are good at knowing who is talking about what in which locations. Internet porn and warez traders would naturally know all the latest tricks and resources for exchanging files anonymously. A team composed of such people, especially if combined with relevant language skills, would go a long way toward reducing the asymmetries the jihadis now enjoy.

We also note that while the Internet may serve the jihadis they are also vulnerable to its foibles. For example, jihadi web sites are purposely of obscure origin, so there is no good way to distinguish a real one from a fake one. Fake web sites might be used to claim responsibility for deaths that jihadis would rather see blamed on others, as in the AQI example cited above. It is also possible through various techniques (well known to spammers) to "hijack" visitors to various web sites and take them to a different one with a competing message. Given operators with the proper knowledge, an array of such tactics could be deployed to make jihadi Internet use less effective.

6. Make better use of sympathetic members of the American Muslim community.

In closing we point out that an untapped resource in this effort is the American Muslim community. With the possible exception of recommendation 2, they are in a better position than almost anyone else to understand how to execute these strategies. Help from this community would be key in developing a "Muslimized" theory of credibility. They are better equipped than any analyst or non-Muslim academic to identify the tenets of Islam that are most at odds with Jihadi strategy and actions, and understand which of these contradictions are most likely to resonate with Muslims in the Middle East and elsewhere. They would be essential in framing a narrative of progress to undermine the jihadi narrative of decline. And an effective geek battalion would have to be rich in Arabic speakers who understand Muslim culture. In our view it is past time to start making use of this untapped resource in the war of ideas.

CONCLUSION

This report shows that jihadis place a great deal of emphasis on developing comprehensive media and communication strategies to aid their side in the war of ideas. However, the jihadis' ability to implement such strategies is not well understood and has been "systematically undervalued." Sophisticated media strategies aimed at themes of legitimating, propagating and intimidating serve the jihadi short and long term interests of driving invaders from the Arabian Peninsula and restoring and expanding an Islamic Caliphate. Their strategies are crafted after careful audience analysis and message adaptation, two of the most fundamental rules underlying any communication or public relations campaign. The increasing use of new media, such as the Internet, aid the jihadi cause further, by allowing an asymmetrical operating environment from which information may be disseminated while maintaining organizational security. While these practices and strategies are strong, it does not mean that they are infallible or irresistible. The recommendations we give in this report revolve around the ideas of establishing credibility and exploiting weaknesses and contradictions in jihadi messages. The resources to be a contender in this media war are within our reach, but we need to mobilize these resources and use them to our advantage.

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