

Winning the War on Terror- Psychology as a strategic framework.

*By Dr Nicholas Beecroft BSc MBBS MRCPsych MBA
Psychiatrist and Director of Psypplomacy*

The West is exposed to threats from a growing number of terrorist groups and states who will sooner or later be armed with weapons of mass destruction. We are presently braced for a major Al Qaeda attack. Despite the best efforts of our security forces, it is likely that we will remain vulnerable to a range of potential enemies.

International Relations have been traditionally understood through economics, geopolitics, sociology and lawⁱ. These models are failing to provide comprehensive solutions to emerging security problems. One way to fill this strategic gap is to remember that behind the abstract concepts and theories of international relations lie people. Psychology provides a framework to assess and manage our relationships with other peoples. The fundamental driver is the individual human whose emotions, cognitions, and relationships determine their behaviours within groupⁱⁱ and intergroup dynamicsⁱⁱⁱ.

Terrorists are people, just like us. So instead of viewing our dealings with them as an open-ended 'War of Terror,' it is far more usefully understood as the result of a dysfunctional relationship between the Muslim world and the West. This relationship can be improved and the underlying causes of terrorism and "rogue" regimes can be reduced.

Keeping a clear head

When terrorists commit brutal acts against innocent people, this creates very strong feelings in all concerned. After the initial shock come fear, anxiety and anger. These feelings may be unbearable but still have to be dealt with in order to be able to function. Ideally, this is done through grief, expression of feelings and mutual support followed by dialogue, rational analysis and development of an effective strategy.

There are many possible pathological responses that handicap effective action. A temptation is to blame others, to rally around over-idealised leaders, to seek revenge, and to stop talking to the people we don't like or understand. Fear can drive us to behave in ways which generate further hatred and thus create new terrorist recruits. Sometimes with conscious intent, leaders may resort to one of many possible psychological defence mechanisms. These include demonising the enemy- such as Osama Bin Laden and the fundamentalists. One can scapegoat or stereotype^{iv} another group as bad or mad. A cathartic aggressive act such as a war, maybe in Iraq, can be used to dissipate tension and displace energy^v. Instead of falling into this trap, we need to keep a clear head and open mind just when it is most difficult to do so.

Them and us

Under threat, group emotions become intense and can be irrational. A cohesive group under threat often becomes more unified, support their leaders more and identify more strongly with their own group as distinct from the enemy.^{vi} They tend to idealise their

own leader. If a leader wishes to provoke and maintain a conflict, this group dynamic can be very usefully exploited.

Bin Laden said, "These young men realized that an Islamic government would never be established except by the bomb and rifle. Islam does not coincide or make a truce with unbelief, but rather confronts it." This statement is the mirror image of George Bush's that, "you are either with us or against us" and reference to "the axis of evil." It gives people the comfort that things are very simple and clear.

When people are anxious and afraid, there is a loss of tolerance for ambivalence, uncertainty and complexity which makes simplistic and extreme positions more attractive leading to polarisation. Those who share some of the views and identity^{vii} of the terrorists are forced to take sides.

Taking revenge is a natural impulse after an attack, especially if it is felt to be undeserved or viciously motivated. "Revenge is a dish best served cold." It is also important to realise that pure revenge, actual or perceived, is likely to strengthen the resolve of the enemy and increase the support they receive. Some people felt that the attack on Afghanistan was unconsciously motivated by displaced anger and revenge.

Understand the enemy

We need to understand why we have been attacked to prevent it from happening again. We need to win the hearts and minds of those who may support, or become, terrorists. In the past, this kind of approach was dismissed as naïve idealism. In the current security situation, it is simply rational self-interest.

To unlock more effective strategies we should remember that terrorists are individuals and teams affected by morale, motivation, leadership and teamwork, just like everyone else. A powerful recipe for violence is to feel that one's identity, well-being or existence is threatened; that one is not respected; not listened to; exploited and that there is no hope that peaceful means can improve the situation. This combination of feelings makes people feel violent impulses and makes them more likely to act violently or support those acting violently.

Death for suicide bombers and fighters can mean union with their god and brethren. It can thus seem to feel good. For most westerners, it means loss of attachment to life, family and friends.^{viii}

Fundamentalism provides the believer with absolute truth, simplicity, certainty, security and comfort. Unfortunately, reality is complex and no such systems are accurate. It is hard to argue with fundamentalist belief systems because they have a simple, emotionally charged answer for everything and their own fundamental reference points.

Terrorist's behaviour makes it difficult to have dialogue, to be open and reasonable. Their behaviour and the feelings of exasperation of those attacked can provoke a counter-terrorist response which reinforces their belief system and wins them more recruits.

Winning hearts and minds

Governments are used to taking into account the positions and feelings of other governments. Even the mightiest power, the US, has to work to gain the support of governments of small countries, like Qatar, in order to achieve its aims.

The opinions of the populations of undemocratic countries like Jordan or Saudi Arabia have traditionally carried little weight. Western, especially US, foreign policy has tended to focus on realpolitik amongst the leaders of those countries.

The widening availability of mass communication, the Internet, air travel and of weapons of mass destruction is shifting the balance of power towards the developing countries and within them, towards their people. For those who value universal democracy and human rights, this is a good thing.

September 11th and subsequent terrorist attacks have made it very clear that the opinions of the general population, individuals and subgroups in developing countries can have a direct impact upon the physical, psychological and economic security of even the most powerful country. A powerful military and intelligence infrastructure is necessary but not sufficient to secure a country's people.

Public diplomacy

From a Western viewpoint, priority should be given to winning the hearts and minds of the Arab and Muslim public. President Bush said he is not going to give each terrorist therapy until they change their behaviour. The most committed terrorists are probably not open to persuasion at this time. However, many of their followers and potential followers may be. Indeed, even the most determined terrorists can make peace and cooperate with former enemies as numerous peace processes have shown. Thus at every stage of the "War on Terror," it is essential to communicate as effectively as possible with all parties.

The US and UK have woken up to this and have allocated more resources to public diplomacy. The US set up a radio station, Radio Sawa to broadcast in Arabic. The British government has tried hard to influence the Arab media through a more determined PR operation. The British Council has stepped up a gear in its longstanding work to improve cultural relations with other populations.

Improving communication and understanding.

Communication requires the recipient to at least listen, understand and process the message from the person sending it. A message is more persuasive if it is perceived to be balanced and come from a credible source. Recent BBC interviews with the intended audience of the US Arabic Radio Sawa generally showed that they enjoyed the music but were very sceptical about the message. Many felt that communications from the US are not credible as they disguise other motivations such as control of oilfields or simply because it is seen as propaganda.

Many media interviews of people in the Middle East and Europe have detected a strong perception that the foreign policy of the US is inconsistent and hypocritical. The US tends to justify its foreign policy in terms of morality and justice, as opposed to pure self-interest. In these terms, US insistence that Iraq must comply with UN resolutions is incongruent with its lack of equal determination in the case of Israel, in the eyes of most Arabs and many Europeans. This inconsistency makes the US government case less credible and, in some, generates anger and hostility.

Similarly, while most Arabs appeared to be horrified by the murders on September 11th, it angers many that the lives of Palestinians or Iraqi's lost, in their view as a result of US policy, are seen as less valuable than New Yorkers. This perceived lack of respect for other people is a powerful motivator of violence.

We should support journalists as best we can to give a true and independent picture of the world to both people at home and abroad. The budget for the BBC world service is tiny and there is huge potential for expansion in both radio and TV for relatively low cost.

We can provide support to people within other countries to help promote communication within and between countries, especially in those where the governments attempt to control this.

Building trust and reputation

Actions speak louder than words. Reputations are based more upon what people do rather than what they say. So there is a limit to what PR management can achieve. With mass communication, people worldwide see how each country behaves on a global scale and experiences the effect of that behaviour locally.

It is vital to consider the long term impact of behaviour.^{ix} To gain the respect of people, countries need to act consistently, honestly and sincerely^x. The tradition in international relations has been far from that. It is in our long term interests to be liked, respected, trusted as well as to be strong.

Perceived double standards

If one tried to manage the relationship between friends and family by acting solely in self-interest and justifying it in other terms, it would quickly cause problems. Increasingly, this is true of international relations.

The argument that the possession of weapons of mass destruction by Saddam Hussein justifies disarmament by force and regime change may or may not be valid. However, if it is true for him, why not for North Korea, China, Israel, India or Pakistan? Certainly, it leads many to disbelieve the genuineness of the motivations behind the policy on Iraq.

Another major flaw in the policy of the West in the eyes of the developing world is the perceived double standards on freedom and democracy. There is a compartmentalisation between what standards and morality are considered

appropriate for us, people like us and others. This is linked to identity and cultural relativism.

If democracy, security, prosperity and freedom are good for the West, why are they not good for Arabs? There have been several traditional justifications for this. The moral argument is that it is not for the West to interfere in internal affairs of others. The cultural relativist argument is that Arabs and Arab culture is different and that it is their natural choice to have absolute monarchies and one party states. The developmental argument is that Arab cultures are not yet ready for democracy and that it is not for the West to hurry them along. These arguments are weakened by the inconsistency in their application globally.

Thus the cynic is free to conclude that the real reason for Western support for the regimes in the Middle East is simply about maintaining control over resources and trade.

Tackling resentments

Israel always tops the list of Arab grievances against the West. I don't want to comment on the rights and wrongs of this complex situation. There is no doubt that Arabs feel very intensely that an injustice has been done and continues to be done to the Palestinian people. They feel angry and powerless and this is a powerful motivator for violence and hatred. Until justice is done and seen to be done, there will be no resolution of this problem.

We ought to try to facilitate dialogue and a just solution. It is important to ensure that the intended audience is aware of our efforts and believes them to be genuine and sincerely motivated.

Israel and the West are certainly responsible for genuine grievances for Arab peoples. However, the intensity of this bad feeling is hugely magnified by the lack of freedom within those countries. The US, Israel and the West in general provides a convenient scapegoat for the anger, frustration and energy away from the many grievances that Arab peoples have against their own governments. When they cannot freely criticise their own governments or address issues of direct relevance to themselves, Israel and the West provide safe targets for expression of pent up emotions.

If we are to stop being the scapegoat for their internal problems and the victim of subsequent terrorism, we need to support those in Islamic countries who seek to promote free expression, democracy and a free media. This would redirect a lot of this frustration back where it belongs- at the doors of their own governments and give those people the power so solve their own problems.

Axis of Freedom

Hundreds of thousands of Arabs attempt to migrate to the US, Europe and Australia every year. It seems likely that they want a share of the relative freedom, security and opportunity available there. Given the ongoing power shifts in the world, it would be wise for Western governments to be seen to align themselves with these aspirations

and at the very least, not be perceived to stand in their way by being seen to support so many undemocratic regimes.

In practical terms, this help can come in many ways. We can provide resources to NGOs in other countries which promote democratic values. They need money, materials, protection, asylum, facilities and moral leadership. Liberal students in Teheran, for example, would be helped with money, video cameras, internet access, satellite phones, computers, asylum and moral support.

Promoting mutual interests

There are many NGOs from the West promoting better education, health, freedoms, human rights, justice and environments for other peoples. Where this results in reducing the causes of conflict and hatred and improving our relationships they should be promoted, protected and supported.^{xi}

Defining the War

Defining who is fighting who is essential to devising a strategy and executing it with support. Tony Blair, among others, tried hard in the aftermath of September 11th to insist that this was not a clash of civilisations, or religions, countries or races but was a conflict between decent, peaceful people and terrorists. The challenge is to make this both true and believable for the non-Western audience.

The challenge is to remain engaged in relations with that decent majority and to improve the quality of the relationship to maximise the chance of cooperation and peace and to minimise support for Al Qaeda.

If we are to fight a war, it needs to be a war of ideas and values which are not specific to any country, religion or race. The best starting place is to genuinely stand for relations between people based upon respect, trust, mutual understanding and cooperation. Most people would say that we try to do that already. However, the challenge is not just to think it and say it, but to genuinely do it and be seen to do it.

Conclusions

Our security is increasingly dependent upon building healthy relationships with other peoples through a sustained effort to facilitate dialogue, with as much emphasis on listening and empathy, as on force, persuasion and manipulation. We will need to have alliances and networks of states, groups and individuals who share the core values of freedom, democracy and human rights. We need to “win the hearts and minds” of people the world over.

We need to take a consistent approach to our international behaviour to build mutual trust, respect, understanding and cooperation. We must be determined to defend and promote our core values, but also open to change our behaviour where other’s grievances are valid. Where possible, we should try to resolve disputes, address frustrations and resentments and to remove the causes of humiliation and injustice

where possible. People everywhere seek security, prosperity, freedom and purpose just as do those in the West.

While these aims would always have been the expressed intention of the West, now it really is urgently in our rational self-interest.

ⁱFifty Key Thinkers in International Relations, Martin Griffiths, Routledge, 1999

ⁱⁱ Bion WR Experiences in Groups. 1998 Routledge

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^{iv} Introduction to Social Psychology, Hewstone, Stroebe, Codol, Stephenson, 1989, Blackwell.

^v The Psychology of War, Lawrence Le Shan, Helios Press, New York, Second Edition, 2002

^{vi} Groups: theory and experience, Napier & Gershenfeld, 6th ed, Houghton & Mifflin, New York, 1999

^{vii} Personal Identity, National Identity and International Relations, William Bloom, Cambridge Studies in International Relations: 9, Cambridge University Press, 1990

^{viii} Terrorism and War- the unconscious dynamics of political violence, Edited by C Covington, P Williams, J Arundale and J Knox, Karnac, London 2002

^{ix} Political Psychology and Foreign Policy, Eric Singer, Valerie Hudson (Editor) Westview Press. Hardcover - June 1992

^x Working with Emotional Intelligence, Daniel Goleman, Bloomsbury 1998.

^{xi} After the Terror, Ted Honderitch, 2002