

Toward Effective Global Influence

Curtis Johnson (cjohnso@sandia.gov)

"Hearts and minds are more important than capturing and killing people."
—Marine Lt. Gen. Wallace Gregson

Reducing the popular support for violent Islamic movements should be our highest priority in the war on terror. There are millions of Muslims who are neither terrorists nor potential terrorist recruits who provide critical material support, moral support, publicity, tolerance, and safe haven for violent Islamic groups. Without sufficient support, the movements will die. As long as there is fervent organized Muslim resentment toward the U.S. and the west, the violence will continue.

Unfortunately, the Department of Defense is ill-prepared to win a struggle for public opinion, and the State Department and the intelligence community are not in much better shape. Nevertheless, these massive agencies are gamely shifting their energies toward this end, even as they are plagued by obsessive reversions to what they know and understand: finding and killing bad guys and propaganda campaigns akin to those used in the struggle against Communism.

Three Weaknesses in Current Strategies

1. CONFUSION ABOUT THE TARGET POPULATION. Despite all of the talk about supporting moderate Islam and winning hearts and minds, the U.S. government, think tanks, and journalists remain fixated on the terrorist organizations themselves. Studies funded by the national security community focus on the psyche and circumstances of the terrorist or the potential recruit—not on the moderate Muslim. Otherwise sensible columnists, such as Ralph Peters¹, conflate the psyche of the suicide terrorist with the psyche of the entire social movement. It may be that we are so uncomfortable with the fact that there are millions of Muslims—no more and no less sane, moral, and rational than ourselves—who are really angry with the United States that we would rather confuse them with the terrorists (and be ineffective in our strategies) than accept this fact and deal with it.

2. BI-POLAR THINKING. Current strategies assume that the social landscape is a single axis with the U.S. at one pole and radical Islam at the other. In this model, the only strategic options are to discredit the radical movements, strengthen the moderate ones, and improve the U.S. image. History and (largely empirical) research show us that social movements like radical Islam can de-radicalize, weaken or expire in many ways: they can be diverted to other causes or tasks; they can be co-opted or curtailed by their outside financial support; their causes can be “stolen” by the establishment or competing movements; they can be given a legitimate (legal) voice; they can fall victim to internal dissent about means or goals; or their cause can fade as other compelling or urgent concerns arise and compete for time, attention, and other resources.²

The bi-polar strategy of discrediting one side and defeating it with its opposite may be among the most difficult and expensive of the options to execute. Pouring energy into “our side” often motivates the other side to a symmetrical expenditure. Attempts to discredit the other side—while they may positively influence the undecided few—often further radicalize and motivate those already against us.

Alternatives to bi-polar strategies, such as fostering orthogonal movements, diverting parts of the radical cause to other movements, or strengthening the legitimate means of expression for Islamic social and political concerns, have been overlooked and seem promising.

3. FOCUS ON ONE-WAY INFLUENCE. Current strategies adopt a one-way influence model, similar to commercial advertising or cold-call sales. Our product is already developed. We study the target population, develop a message to sell the product, and deliver it. This approach will have limited effect since Muslims have significant experience with the United States and its “products.” They don’t just view U.S. propaganda. They watch what our government officials say and do; they experience us through media and entertainment; they live with U.S. actions and decisions; and they have formed their own opinions about us. Muslims are also actively communicating with the United States and attempting to influence it by many means and channels. In this rich environment, it is hard to imagine leaflets, radio stations, and carefully placed favorable news articles turning the tide of Muslim opinion.

When marketers want to influence people on a deeper level, they turn to relationship-based marketing. They build rapport and earn confidence; they listen to and learn about the customer and tailor their offering accordingly. In relationship management, marketers are selling themselves more than they are selling a product, and thus their own image and behavior are important. Influence travels both ways in the relationship as customers attempt to influence the product offering. The marketer is therefore part of the system. The marketer's wants, needs, and self-image are engaged as the consumer tries to influence the marketer and the marketer tries to listen and understand the consumer's perspective.

Relationship marketing is much more time-, information-, and resource-intensive, but it is much more likely to be successful than one-way influence.

Toward an Improved Influence Strategy

We have concluded that an improved strategy would:

- Distinguish among terrorists, radical, non-violent Muslims, and broader Muslim communities;
- Consider alternatives to bi-polar strategies; and
- Adopt a customer relationship model for influence, rather than a one-way advertising model.

In this new strategy, we would study all of the actors and consider more variables. We would study the perceptions, wants, needs, and fears of various Muslim groups—not merely to tailor our message, but also to understand how they understand us and our “products” and how they would like us to be influenced and change. We would also study ourselves and how we react to Muslim attempts to influence us. We would want to understand our own biases and blind spots better so that we could hear the Muslim message more from their perspective.



In this new strategy we would need to develop a healthy curiosity about Muslim motives and behaviors. We couldn't afford convenient or self-serving assumptions about their motives (e.g., they are evil, irrational or misguided). And we would have to listen to their concerns even if these make us uncomfortable or defensive. We would try to discover the ways in which the U.S. and the West are threatening to Muslims and to respond to these feelings. We would be open to change and we would not assume that changing is “giving in to terrorism.”

This is much harder work than the advertising model, but it is much more effective. As long as we are perceived as an impersonal salesman, pushing a product in our own interests, our attempts to influence will fall short.

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A Tall Order

A robust, integrated, strategic relationship strategy is a very tall order, requiring deliberate, thoughtful, and costly study; sober reflection; humility; and a flexibility in policy and mindset that is rarely seen in governments striving to look strong and resolute in the face of terrorist threats. The U.S. would have to become more intent on deconflicting messages and actions and more serious about achieving the interagency cooperation necessary to implement a systems strategy.

The technical challenge is also enormous. Relationship management, with multiple interdependent variables, lends itself to systems dynamics and other modeling techniques. A systematic approach would require:

- gathering qualitative and quantitative social data with surveys, focus groups, academic expertise, intelligence, sensors, web crawlers, wireless PDAs, central data bases, and text analysis tools³;

- developing and implementing means to “ping” populations with information and actions in order to understand them better and anticipate their reactions to larger scale actions;
- sifting, sorting, analyzing, verifying, validating and updating the data, and understanding the uncertainties;
- distributing and displaying the information in concise and useful ways;
- using the information to develop descriptive or even predictive behavior models and gaming and scenario environments;
- supporting effective decision making in dynamic and ambiguous environments; and
- developing means to assess the effectiveness and consequences of our actions.

Unfortunately, Sandia is ill-prepared to shift its research and development focus toward these critical national security needs, and we are plagued by obsessive reversions to what we know and understand—peer nation-state enemies, kinetic weapons, physical sciences, and quantitative problems with closed-form solutions. We keep looking to China, Taiwan, North Korea, Russia and Iran, hoping for a critical national security problem we already know how to work.

Ironically, one road to reversion at Sandia is to argue: “We don’t want to get caught fighting the last war; we need to be looking ahead.” But terrorism and guerilla war will remain prominent strategies until they are rendered ineffective or more attractive alternatives arise. Further, the importance of influencing public opinion did not rise (and will not fall) with al Qaeda or terrorism; it rose with global communications, global transportation, and global citizens. There are ongoing national security battles over public opinion in China, Taiwan, Iran, and Russia (and would be in North Korea were there sufficient electric power available).

This branch of national security is in ascendance. The DoD and State Department will spend more and more money and effort in this area. The question is whether we at Sandia (or any one else in the R&D community) will step up to the task.

References

¹*The Counterrevolution in Military Affairs*, Ralph Peters, The Weekly Standard, February 6, 2006

²A good discussion of the decline of social movements may be found in *Political Process and Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*, Chapter 3, by Doug McAdam, University of Chicago Press, 1982.

³There is an FY ’07 Joint ACTD proposal for a “human terrain” mapping system. ■