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Bridging the Religious Divide

RAYMOND L. BINGHAM

Academics, east and west, hotly debate the fundamentals of the war on terror. In our nation's capital, decisionmakers and renowned scholars meet regularly to posit the pros and cons of US foreign policy. Internationally, countless daily editorials are published highlighting current US efforts and shortcomings in the Middle East. Much has also been written about Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, the insurgency, and the mechanics of the 9/11 attacks. Conversely, the one debate that seems to elude even our best and brightest intellectuals is an assessment of why—not how—9/11 occurred. Efforts to defeat ongoing insurgent attempts to destabilize Iraq and Afghanistan must start with a debate on what is driving the nature of conflict in the region. Understanding why the insurgents hate America so much is equally important as knowing how the attackers of 9/11 were able to infiltrate our systems of protection.

Over the last two years, after countless lessons learned during Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, Coalition forces now have a limited but clearer understanding of the drivers of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan. A number of redeployed top military commanders recently pointed out that the true nature of this war is centered on economics, political will, culture, and religious ideology.¹ Research indicates that many Islamic scholars concur with the following assessment: the insurgency is slowly developing into a war of ideas that will serve as a catalyst for the globalization of religious extremism if left unchecked. The analysis that follows focuses on the vital but poorly understood role that religion is playing in shaping the ongoing insurgency in the Middle East, an insurgency fueled by religious extremists.

The Role of Religion: Understanding the Culture of Islam

The Iraqi insurgency clearly demonstrates the existing chasm between western and eastern cultures. Understanding Arab culture and the cul-

ture of Islam is the first step in bridging the religious divide that America currently faces. America must get to know the people of Islam and their cultural imperatives. Our understanding needs to account for every tribe, sect, and social class, to include radical extremists; we must become students of Islam. Abdurrahman Wahid implores governments, people of faith, and strategic planners alike using a straightforward message: “We are in a crisis of misunderstanding—of Islam; even by Muslims themselves.”² For many, his message is hard to hear; the distractions of globalization, urbanization, and transnational terrorism cloud the reception of those with the greatest need to listen. Our failure to understand the nature of Islam permits the radicalization of Muslims worldwide while blinding the rest of humanity to a solution which hides in plain sight—a solution that must include a closer examination of the influence Islam has on its community of faith.³ Before America can build an effective strategy to neutralize the extremist ideologies that underpin the Iraqi insurgency (and by extension, the global Islamic extremist movement), we must first commit to understanding Islam as it is practiced and observed by Muslims today.

The need to understand religious culture as a key element of change in the Middle East is further evidenced by the failure of US and international efforts to effectively engage religious leaders with any measurable consistency. US strategies for dealing with religious actors have tended to be ambivalent and reactive, focusing exclusively on certain religions or leaders seen as either close allies or immediate threats. When religion is addressed, the discussion is too broad, and the work often takes the form of dialogue rather than focusing on actions, processes, and results. Scholars of Islam take a slightly different approach to the issue. They characterize the ongoing war of ideas as a lack of western understanding regarding religion and the role of indigenous religious leaders in the Middle East. These misunderstandings center on America’s lack of knowledge of Islam, the Quran, and the religious faith of Muslims, which is in direct contrast to the liberal interpretations taken by astute Islamist extremists with Islam and the Quran. Muslims are not convinced that the secular humanism the United States is offering is the right solution for

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followers of Islam. By far the biggest challenge to the US push for democracy and modernization in the Middle East is not the insurgency in Iraq; it is the basic characteristics of Islam itself.

Francis Fukuyama takes a similar point of view concerning the culture of Islamists: “Extremists exploit the common misunderstanding of Muslims’ holistic view of life; everything is religion and everything is Islam; financial, social, intellectual, theological, military, and political.”⁴ For many Muslims the war of ideas, rightly or wrongly, boils down to the perception that the Global War on Terrorism is essentially a systematic attack on their faith. In direct contrast to Mr. Fukuyama, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi offered a point of view that is usually dismissed (in the west) as simply more extremist rhetoric. Zarqawi stated, “We are fighting so that Allah’s word becomes supreme and religion is all for Allah. Anyone who opposes this goal or stands in the way of this aim is our enemy and will be a target for our swords, regardless of their name or lineage—a Muslim American is our dear brother: an infidel Arab is our hated enemy, even if we both come from the same womb.”⁵ This divergence of ideals magnifies the depth and breadth of division between policymakers and insurgents. While the American government and the US military fight for democracy and freedom, radical Islamists and the insurgency point to religion and religious obligation as their primary source of motivation to defend Islam. When the United States invaded Iraq, the American government intended to strike a blow for freedom; however, the forces unleashed were considerably more complex. When the Pandora’s box of religion was opened, extremist ideologies brewing for the last 30 years came pouring out, ideologies that are now fueled by America’s continued presence in Afghanistan and Iraq.

These and other complexities are better understood when we take a closer look at the customs and traditions of Muslim society as a whole. For example, researcher Ron Hassner points out that civil and customary law in Muslim states often extends the restrictions on non-Muslim access from the boundaries of a shrine to the city in which a shrine is located or to the entire region surrounding the shrine. Consequently, protests in Muslim states have occurred in opposition to the presence of Coalition forces in Iraqi cities known for their sacred sites. Indeed, several Muslim movements hold the extreme position that any non-Muslim presence on Muslim lands constitutes sacrilege. Osama bin Laden also expressed his support for this opinion in his initial call for jihad against the United States. Hassner concludes that a similar position has been embraced by radical opponents of the US occupation of Iraq who consider the very presence of foreign troops in the Persian Gulf as an affront to Islam and compare it with the Crusades or the Mongol invasion of Iraq.⁶ While western culturists grapple with the compatibility of democratic values and

Islam, the equally complex subject of religious influence adds to an already heated debate.

Religious Influence: The Sistani Factor

International bombings and the continued conflict in the Middle East have sent scholars, planners, and senior leaders worldwide scrambling to harness the influence of Islam on the Muslims and leaders in their communities. It also appears evident that not many diplomatic strategists predicted and even fewer military planners were prepared for the significant role several Islamic leaders have established in the ongoing conflict. Osama bin Laden, Ayatollah Sistani, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi each demonstrated their ability to impede progress or influence change within the Muslim community. Understanding this type of religious influence on all aspects of change in an Islamic society is critical to the successful integration of democracy and the stability of the region. For instance, in Kabul, Afghanistan, prosecutors charged Abdul Rahman with apostasy during his recent divorce hearing because he had converted from Islam to Christianity 16 years prior. The charge is punishable by death under some interpretations of Islamic law. The judge hearing the case said Mr. Rahman would get the death penalty unless he repudiated Christianity.⁷ This example underlines the uneasy balance between Afghanistan's new Constitution and conservative Islamic values within the legal system, and it emphasizes Shireen Hunter's point that "in the near term there will be more obstacles than remedies as modernization and democratization meet the Muslim world."⁸

The demonstrated influence of the Grand Ayatollah Ali Husseini al-Sistani became clear to the Coalition Provisional Authority and senior military commanders on the ground when Sistani issued a number of *fatwas* to direct participation in the voting process.⁹ When the Askaria Shrine was attacked, the Grand Ayatollah, once again, stepped in with a different type of authority. He spoke of the need for Shi'ite Muslims to defend themselves with armed, religious militias if the Americans and the Iraqi government cannot.¹⁰ This magnitude of influence by religious leaders implores additional questioning. Were the civil and military strategic planners and the Coalition Authority aware of the Ayatollah's influence prior to the *fatwas* being issued? Were strategic planners aware of his span of control prior to arriving in theater? Finally, what are they doing to bring Sistani aboard now? The answers to these questions will serve as yet another measure of the divide between the religious leaders of Afghanistan and Iraq and the makers of policy in the United States.

Pakistani officials recently provided information on the Arab (religious) influence of madrassas in the 20th century. In 1979, Saudi-Wahhabi

proselytizing was initiated in response to the Shi'ite Islamic Revolution in Iran. Geoffrey Clarfield explains how petro-dollar-funded preachers and teachers wielded powerful influence on the face of Pakistani Islam because the Quran is printed in Arabic and Pakistanis do not read Arabic. Interestingly, if the preacher or teacher stresses a Wahhabi interpretation, then the people—unable to read Arabic—have no scriptural grounds from which to argue with him.¹¹ During the 1980s, Kashmiriat was dealt a blow from which it may never recover. Moderate Kashmiri Muslims woke up to find that their mosques had new preachers, many of whom had been trained outside the country. They preached against old versions of Islam and insisted that their intolerant Wahhabi strain must be adopted by all Kashmiris. Women were to adopt the veil, and music was forbidden. They also preached that indigenous Hindus should be forced to leave, so that Kashmir could become a land reserved for Muslims. No doubt they were inspired by the world's silence following the near total expulsion of the 50,000-strong Hindu community of Kabul after its conquest by the Taliban.¹²

An improved understanding of the Islamic rule of law and how Muslims interpret the Quran is imperative to the successful incorporation of western ideals. Western values, including individual and religious freedoms, are not natural fits for the culture of Islam. Iraqi politician Iyad Jamal Al-Din notes that young boys, as a way of life, grow up with religion in the Middle East. They end up in the mosque, learning from the Imam; depending on the interpretation, they learn moderation or extremism, and in between the two, there lies an abyss.¹³ As a result, more and more Muslims are answering the jihadi call to arms—which has led some observers to accuse the Islamic clergy of booby-trapping minds and exploiting the state of frustration suffered by the Muslim youth to perpetuate violence.¹⁴

This influence by the Imams, Mullahs, and clerics over the young, disenfranchised, and impressionable is more than significant in determining what Islam is and what values are promoted. Islam's sphere of influence seems unlimited in Middle Eastern culture. Many religious leaders in the Middle East regularly stimulate efforts to provide humanitarian relief, pursue justice, and advance peace while simultaneously arranging attacks. Moqtada al-Sadr, the outspoken Shi'ite cleric and growing political force in Iraq, who has led two deadly uprisings against American troops, is emerging as a dominant figure in Iraqi politics. During several volatile periods in Iraq, Moqtada al-Sadr also assisted in providing food, medical care, and security in poor neighborhoods, preventing widespread Shi'ite attacks on civilians, while simultaneously encouraging violence against US military forces.¹⁵ In recent strife, religious leaders like Sadr routinely demonstrate their ability to justify social division, sanction terrorism, and encourage violence.

Religion and influential religious leaders continue to play a critical role in shaping global strife and reconciliation. Whether destructive or constructive, religious leaders, organizations, and institutions often influence the direction of conflict-prevention and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. Religious groups are typically deep-rooted, mature organizations with independent resources to shape conflict-prevention and reconstruction efforts from the grassroots to the international level. The broad range of activities carried out by religious actors in conflict-prone settings demonstrates both the significant threats they may pose and the great opportunities they represent. These organizations are invaluable if effectively utilized. They are uniquely positioned to help or hinder evolving situations at the local level far better than any military organization or secular relief effort. Intelligence-like assessments of the religious environment are (in hindsight) critical to mission success. The actions of religious actors like Sistani and Sadr accentuate the need for increased “religious situational awareness.” Policymakers, military leaders, and nongovernmental strategic planners all benefit from understanding the influence of religion within a given region of conflict. Meaningful work to embrace Islam’s clergy in ways that are mutually beneficial must occur if nascent peace is to become the foundation of a US exit strategy from Afghanistan and Iraq.

Islamic Extremism: A War of Ideology

The world watched the ringleader of the 7 July 2005 terrorist attack in London, his voice inflected with a West Yorkshire accent, preaching jihad in English. Al Jazeera aired the communique of 30-year-old Mohammad Sidique Khan, in which Khan explained why he helped murder over 50 of his fellow Britons on a bus and in the Underground. “Until you stop bombing, gassing, imprisonment, and torture of my people, we will not stop this fight,” Khan declared. “We are at war, I am a soldier and now you too will taste the reality of this situation.”¹⁶ The London bombings emphatically demonstrated the inroads made by Wahhabi and Salafi ideologies throughout the Muslim world, especially the alienated Muslim diasporas in Europe. Attacks like these are further evidence that Islamic fundamentalism has evolved into a well-financed, complex, global movement.

The religion of Islam is undergoing a significant revolution due to the pervasive pressures of Wahhabi-Salafi and jihadi-insurgent ideologies. The insurgency consists of people who draw upon a long tradition of extreme intolerance within Islam that does not distinguish politics from religion and distorts both.¹⁷ Extremists believe Islam is the only true religion and there is no room for interpretation. A jihadi believes that his immoral acts of violence are moral and that he is on the right path to God. Extremists also believe in ful-

fillment of the Prophecy of Islam and world rule for Muslims as described in the Quran. Dr. Louis Beres provides a staunch warning on the violent realities that threaten mankind: “Today each and every one of us is threatened by ecstatic sacrificial killing masquerading as a resistance . . . which is best described as homicidal religious collectivism.”¹⁸

In a message commemorating the end of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, the ousted leader of the Taliban regime, Mullah Mohammad Omar, called on Muslims to continue their jihad against the United States, naming America “the greatest enemy of Islam” and further stating, “armed jihad has become the duty of every Muslim.”¹⁹ Messages like this point to religious extremists as not only the drivers of conflict, they also appear to serve as the originating source of disagreement. Sherifa Zuhur makes a profound observation in her research on the Islamist threat. When attempting to understand Islamic terrorism, western scholars tend to gravitate in the direction of a view skewed to pathology: When we think of terrorists, we believe “their minds ‘work differently’ than ours—when the issue is really one of different values and disassociative techniques.”²⁰ Moreover, America has a history of classifying then demonizing its enemies. The defeat of the communist Soviet Union (the evil empire) and the end of the Cold War can be attributed to this technique. The trouble with this practice is that we are likely to miss opportunities to fully understand our enemies and develop effective countermeasures in our zeal to label them.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, we are currently witnessing a spiritual tug-of-war between Islamic *Hirabah* (terrorist) and Coalition forces to win the hearts and minds of the people who are in essence the living spirit of Islam. This conflict is not limited to improvised explosive devices, traffic checkpoints, or door-to-door searches. This war is about regional stability, failing nation-states, and religious ideology—a war unbounded by conventional conflict with a reach that extends to incidents like the recent caricaturing of the Prophet, whereupon terrorists and global jihadists rallied thousands in defense of yet another perceived attack on Islam. This perceived threat perpetuates the radical extremists’ cause and serves to lengthen an already protracted conflict between east and west.

Most scholars agree that there is nothing intrinsically violent about Islam as a way of life. Yet many suicide bombers’ only dream is to fulfill what they believe to be their destiny, namely to be a *Shaheed* (martyr).²¹ Obviously, all Muslims are not *Hirabah*; however, all terrorist attacks (in the Middle East) have been perpetrated by radical Muslim extremists. Publicly, extremist terror is perpetrated in the name of Allah; yet, the terror imposed upon the world provides neither salvation nor sacredness. Clearly, there is a plethora of useful lessons to learn concerning the values, beliefs, and cultures of Islam, to include

those of radical fundamentalists. An enhanced understanding through increased debate and open dialogue about the nature of religious extremists will better assist civil and military planners in the execution and support of the foreseeable long war against (unholy) terror. The next portion of this article will explore the strategy of the United States and the insurgents in the fight for Iraq and Afghanistan.

Strategic Planning and Religion

Williamson Murray and Mark Grimsley write, “Strategy is an inherently human enterprise. It is not solely a consideration of objective factors; strategy involves human passions, values, and beliefs, few of which are quantifiable.”²² A review of strategic literature on the subject of religion reveals nothing fundamentally new about radical Islamists or jihadi-insurgents. Historians indicate that radical Muslims have been pushing for change since the beginning of Islam’s decline in the 12th century. The assassination of Anwar Sadat and the bombing of Khobar Towers are clear examples that the insurgency did not start with current US operations in Iraq. These past events serve to highlight years of planning by a then-budding insurgency, an insurgency that has systematically developed into a network of operations cells, financial backers, and communications outlets with the sole purpose of propelling the extremist agenda forward. Although tacticians and theorists have studied the techniques and procedures of the insurgents for years, the mainstream media and literature give minimal consideration to the very source of the extremist strategy—the religion of Islam.

Radical Islamism: Doctrine of the Unruly?

The fundamentalists use a strategy that is simple and straightforward. It is rooted in Islamism; a totalitarian ideology that seeks to use Islam as a vehicle of power.²³ Michael Scheuer’s recent analysis of insurgency doctrine identifies religious obligation as the central point on which al Qaeda’s insurgency doctrine was and is grounded. Osama bin Laden and a number of Islamist leaders and clerics have declared a “defensive holy war” against the United States. They are using an insurgency doctrine developed by al Qaeda that has been evolving for more than a quarter-century.²⁴ The extremists’ basic strategy is to drape themselves in the mantle of Islam and declare their opponents *kafir* (infidels), thus smoothing the way for slaughtering nonfundamentalist Muslims.²⁵ The common use of literal and highly selective interpretations of the Quran and other Quranic teachings allows extremists to establish direct influence over the global Muslim community.

The extremists have a grand strategy of their own. They publicly state their objectives for all to hear: to destroy and then rebuild a new *Umma*

(community of Muslims), and spread their altered version of Islam, by any means necessary. This position is likewise supported by the Salafi-jihadists in Iraq, who see the Iraq conflict as part of their jihad, first and foremost, and second as a springboard for a wider regional conflict that has as its central aim uprooting the current political order in the region.²⁶ This aim is often achieved through Arab-on-Arab attacks by the al Qaeda in Iraq network. But these attacks are mainly viewed as damaging to the insurgents' cause. In this light, al Qaeda is largely considered more of a threat to the worldwide Muslim community. In a keen display of information awareness, al Qaeda in Iraq publicly justifies targeting Shi'ite Arabs based on their close cooperation with the occupation force and not on their supposedly "heretical" beliefs.²⁷ Al Qaeda, therefore, attempts to justify the targeting of Shi'ite security elements on political rather than religious grounds. Meanwhile, local insurgents spread their extremist doctrine from tribe to tribe and mosque to mosque. They incite violence using the one bond the majority of Arabs have in common—Islam.

Internationally, al Qaeda and jihadi-insurgents have been extremely successful in finding new recruits through their well-informed use of the internet. Their ability to spread the call to (un)holy war on a global scale using professional-grade media production companies like As-Sahaab is unparalleled. Religious rhetoric floods the internet on countless websites, carrying messages of hate, all in the name of Allah. This new, cyber dimension of warfare is well-suited for a force that maintains a relatively small footprint yet a larger-than-life message. On the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan, however, al Qaeda and the Taliban, as did the Viet Cong, give residents only two choices in supporting their efforts to draw fellow Muslims back to the "true Islam": join via peaceful persuasion or suffer sheer violence.

US Strategy for the Long War

The *National Security Strategy* (NSS) is the centerpiece of American national security policy. This March 2006 document clearly acknowledges the significant role religion plays in the Middle East today. President Bush states his position as follows: "A new totalitarian ideology now threatens, an ideology grounded not in secular philosophy but in the perversion of a proud religion. Its content may be different from the ideologies of the last century, but its means are similar: intolerance, murder, terror, enslavement, and repression."²⁸ The "Way Ahead" section of the NSS succinctly describes the war on terror as a war of ideas and not a battle of religions; it also points out how extremists are misinterpreting Islam to spread a new brand of religious hatred. While the NSS goes on to speak out against religious intolerance and misinformation, in the end it offers only a broad solution to defeating terrorism in the Middle East—democracy and political reform:

“The strategy to counter the lies behind the terrorist ideology is to empower the very people the terrorists most want to exploit: the faithful followers of Islam. We will continue to support political reforms that empower peaceful Muslims to practice and interpret their faith.”²⁹

The 2006 NSS clearly reflects the wisdom of the religious lessons learned from the ongoing Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. Political reform and governance—not unity of effort to prevent the fall of Islam—is the call to action. But with regard to Islam, the 2006 NSS is a vast improvement over the September 2002 version, in which the words religion and ideology were used just once. This suggests several questions, the foremost of which is this: If our leaders had better understood the religious underpinnings of the 9/11 attacks, as described in the 2006 NSS, before the invasion of Iraq, would we have proceeded differently? One point is certain: In the March 2006 release of the updated NSS, decisionmakers in the White House clearly demonstrated their ability to apply recent lessons learned in the Middle East to current national policy. They also correctly identify several key elements currently driving the insurgency in Iraq and the conflict in general throughout the region. Regrettably, the NSS still falls short in addressing religion as a source and catalyst for change, however. The need for a comprehensive religious assessment remains an issue that needs to be addressed in the current US strategy for the global war on terror.

Prior to the release of the 2006 NSS, the President took the 2004 NSS one step further in November 2005 when he published the *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* (NSV). The NSV defines US strategy in the “long war” against Iraq. It depicts a clear strategy that will help the Iraqi people build a new Iraq with a constitutional government that respects civil rights and has security forces sufficient to maintain domestic order and to keep Iraq from becoming a safe haven for terrorists.³⁰ In spite of strong language from the President of the United States, the Secretary of State, and the Attorney General, the NSV tenders little discussion on the key religious issues that are paralyzing the country of Iraq today. But it does provide a detailed strategy for the integration of political, economic, and security objectives in the short, medium, and long terms. These all-encompassing objectives are supported by strategic pillars that are also regrettably void of any line of action to confront Iraq’s pressing religious issues. In short, the NSV provides strong operational guidance for diplomats and military leaders executing the war on terror in Iraq, but it is an execution-oriented document that neglects to openly speak to a strategy regarding the broader crisis in Islam. The primary focus of the NSV is best recapped by its defined short-term goals: “an Iraq that is making steady progress in fighting terrorists and neutralizing the insurgency; meeting political milestones; building democratic institutions; standing up robust security forces to gather intelli-

gence, destroy terrorist networks, and maintain security; and tackling key economic reforms to lay the foundation for a sound economy.”³¹

The March 2005 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) adds to the strategy toward Iraq. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld sums it up as follows: “The NDS outlines our approach to dealing with challenges we likely will confront, not just those we are currently best prepared to meet.”³² The NDS provides outlines for targeting major terrorist vulnerabilities, the first of which is countering ideological support for terrorism. Additionally, the NDS identifies support models to build stronger ties to the Muslim community, to help change Muslim misperceptions of the United States and the west, and to reinforce the message that the Global War on Terrorism is not a war against Islam.³³ Although the NDS comments on DOD’s strategy to defeat religious extremists, it lacks any in-depth discussion outlining plans to address the ideological motivations of global terrorism. The *National Security Strategy* and *National Defense Strategy* serve as the foundations and overarching guidance that drive the creation of the *National Military Strategy*.

Then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Richard Myers, summarized the 2004 *National Military Strategy* (NMS) as follows: “The NMS serves to focus the armed forces on maintaining US leadership in a global community that is challenged on many fronts—from countering the threat of global terrorism to fostering emerging democracies.”³⁴ The NMS provides modest guidance concerning extremist ideologies and focuses even less on the issue of religion.

Finally, US forces deployed and preparing to deploy routinely demonstrate an ever-increasing level of sophistication in addressing the adaptive nature of religious extremism. US policy needs to equally reflect a flexible posture, and an earnest will, to understand the strategic, operational, and tactical natures of the insurgency, in order to establish relevant and reality-based lines of action in the Middle East. This assessment of US strategic policy suggests that our experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq highlight the need for a more comprehensive strategy to achieve longer-term national goals and objectives.³⁵

At the strategic level of war, the integration of religion remains such a nonstandard task that most military planners have difficulty knowing where to begin. But lessons learned from the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq provide a solid start point. Our battle-hardened forces possess a wealth of knowledge and on-the-ground experience that currently shapes the training of units preparing to deploy. The Army recently instituted an enhanced cultural awareness program based on four years of combat operations in the Middle East. This program is designed to address issues concerning traditions, customs, and religion. Cultural awareness training now includes lectures by outside experts, Arabic language lessons, and recommended readings. More

officers and enlisted soldiers have instituted study programs in basic Islam and local mores to prepare for nation-building duties. Redeploying commanders openly share techniques and procedures that incorporate cultural awareness into current tactics. Operational resources and funding levels have also been adjusted to provide for more linguists and active recruitment of Muslim clergy to active duty.

Bridging the Religious Divide: A Strategy for Change

Bridging the religious divide between America and Islam requires an enhanced understanding of the fundamentals of Islamic culture and extends to the development of effective counterstrategies that address the seminal issue of religious extremism. Such a strategy should include a *religious assessment* of Islam and the Middle Eastern region.³⁶

A religious assessment provides civil and military planners with a tool for evaluating religious actors and their environments in a conflict or post-conflict setting within a given theater of operations. The goal of the religious assessment is to enhance the speed of the learning process of civil and military practitioners in conflict-prone settings. The following assessment framework is organized around five distinct areas:

- *Religious Ideology.* Ideology plays a major role in shaping behavior in the Middle East.
- *Culture.* Islamic history, culture, traditions, and pride are rooted in the Middle East.
- *Religious Influence.* Understanding who controls the power assists decisionmakers in determining where to focus resources and efforts.
- *Social Structure.* Understanding the social structure of a society allows for leaders and planners to develop support for the force within the population.
- *Strategic Communications.* The internet and television play prominent roles in shaping perceptions, influencing mindsets, and inciting reactions.

The assessment framework also integrates the three levels of war; strategic, operational, and tactical, which serve as the structure for the following recommendations.

Strategic Religious Assessment Considerations

The continued development of a counter-ideology in the form of traditional Sufi and modern Islamic teachings is essential. America needs to demonstrate the ability to translate such works into key languages and spread them

using popular Muslim traditions and values. This is a global task that requires coordinated support and backing from international governments, nongovernmental organizations, and peace-seeking Muslims worldwide. Muslims maintain many cultural bonds to the religious traditions of Islam. This reality gives the Islamic faith the ability to cross national and cultural borders in the name of religion. We must therefore identify regional holders of power and their religious affiliations. Leaders should follow this initiative with the identification of the social caste and class structures, ethnic and tribal groups, sects, and other kinships within the regions. This information will serve as the basis for defining the social and religious networks in play.

America also must seek alternative approaches to the strategic communications challenge of religious inaccuracy. We need to make better use of media tools like CNN and regional television. Rafiq al Sabban points out that in most Egyptian households, the Muslim holy month of Ramadan revolves around television in the Arab world. Families watch shows like *Al Hoor al Ain* (The Beautiful Virgins), which is loosely based on the November 2003 bombing in Saudi Arabia that killed 18 people, all of them Arab. The show is one of several which challenge the view that Islam justifies terrorism.³⁷ Scholars believe this type of Arab solution to the Islamic problem of extremism will resonate with young and old Muslims alike. Garnering Muslim support for anti-extremist Arab-based strategic communications should be a priority in the global war on terror.

The television station Al Hurra (the Free One) is a noteworthy attempt by America to counter the extremist media assault. Reminiscent of Voice of America, it is a 24-hour-a-day Arab television station created for a Middle Eastern audience. Al Hurra's primary message is freedom and democracy, and it focuses on positive news stories of American Arabs. The United States should continue to develop this effort and find ways to counter Arab criticisms that label Al Hurra as impartial and untrustworthy due to its American influence.

Finally, we should stop mislabeling terror. Islamic law scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl explains that radical extremists entirely ignore the Quranic teaching that the act of destroying or spreading ruin on this earth is one of the gravest sins possible: "This is considered an ultimate act of blasphemy against God. Those who corrupt the earth by destroying lives, property, and nature are designated as *mufsiduun* (corruptors and evildoers) who, in effect, wage war against God by dismantling the very fabric of existence. . . . [T]he crime is called *Hirabah* (waging war against society)."³⁸ Americans need to avoid language that supports the insurgents' position of jihad and mujahadin, terms they often use to legitimize their use of indiscriminate violence in the name of Allah.

Operational Religious Assessment Considerations

Another recommended counterstrategy for combating extreme ideologies is the development of a national campaign that simply tells the truth about Islamic doctrine. This effort should start with Muslims themselves collectively speaking out against the misinterpretations of the Quran to discredit extremist ideology. Western (non-Muslim) attempts to expose extremist misgivings will never be accepted as credible to Islamists, or, for that matter, to other Muslims. For many in the American military, a politician who has never served a day in uniform and who criticizes the performance of the armed forces lacks credibility; similarly, non-Muslims have no broad, accepted credibility to speak authoritatively about the inaccuracies of Quranic teachings by Islamists.

We should also push to create environments within nation-states where Muslim youth can create their own religious identity. We need to fight against isolating and ostracizing Muslims who live outside the Middle East. Negative attitudes within non-Muslim communities only serve to push new recruits to Osama bin Laden and his religious extremist movement. In order to achieve this objective, the international community has to foster a better understanding of Arab culture, to include the traditions and practices of Islam. In America this begins by generating non-threatening surroundings for Muslim Americans to openly live their faith.

Local leaders play a crucial role in shaping national environments. America should take the lead in fostering relationships with Islamic leaders across the globe. The first step is to identify the regional and national political figures and their religious affiliations. Next, determine the type of power and authority in use by religious leaders—social, political, or coercive. Then examine the social structures within the operational environment, which may include mosques, hospitals, schools, and elite social networks.

Finally, the internet is a powerful tool in modern-day unconventional warfare. America needs to redouble its efforts to neutralize the operations of extremists in the cyberspace domain. The internet currently serves as the operational backbone of the insurgency's command, control, and signal infrastructure. We need to develop the technology to control the flow of extremist rhetoric on the internet, while taking advantage of this abundant source of real-time intelligence. Our leaders should be prepared to disseminate progressive views, monitor opposing views, and collaborate with like-minded individuals and organizations offering support throughout the world.

Tactical Religious Assessment Considerations

Before commencing tactical operations, commanders should have access to any existing strategic (national) and operational (theater) religious as-

assessments. These assessments should be modified to support tactical (local) operations. A religious analysis also should provide the historical context of the ongoing operations. The tactical environment provides leaders with the best opportunity to collect information about the Islamic extremists' internal agenda by tracking and analyzing the quantitative data of his activities.

Tactical leaders should focus on these tasks:

- Determine the local ethnic and tribal fissures in the region.
- Track any attacks on religious actors, sites, or ethno-religious groups.
- Identify the power elite for each religious party, including ethnic and religious affiliations.
- Identify the language requirements for interaction with each religious group.
- Learn the local religious terms of reference and titles.
- Incorporate the symbols and rituals used by each tribe, sect, and racial group.
- Account for the cultures and traditions that specifically address local greetings, gestures, courtesies, and negotiations.

Conclusion

Army Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl got it right in his acclaimed 2005 book: in order to win the war against terror, America must first “learn to eat soup with a knife.”³⁹ Nagl’s point borrows from the T. E. Lawrence aphorism that war is messy, and in Iraq we must learn as we go. America, and all nations, need to do more to embrace and understand Islam and the call for truth. We must endeavor to understand the effects of integrating democracy and freedom into the Islamic religion-based culture of Muslims. The last four years clearly demonstrate that the compatibility of democracy and Islam has not been a natural transition for Afghanistan or Iraq. The expected long war against terrorism must account for more than defeating improvised explosive devices and pacifying unruly clerics. The need for a better understanding of Islam is only part of the solution.

If we are to succeed in Iraq and in the broader war on terror, we must not fail to account for the forces driving social change and the manifold pressures surrounding political governance. Any counterinsurgent strategy to defeat the Islamist extremists should begin with a religious assessment, as outlined above. Furthermore, US national security policy should be expanded to reflect language that unmistakably articulates our plan to fight the war on terror—not a war on Islam. America’s grand strategy should reflect a comprehensive understanding of why radical extremists fight and how we can best influence extremist ideologies. One key objective should be to estab-

lish a common understanding of what Islam, the Quran, and Sharia law truly mean to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Without that explanation, people will tend to accept the unrefuted extremists' views—further radicalizing Muslims and turning the rest of the world against Islam itself.

America and its allies need to continue to vigilantly identify the advocates of extremism, understand their goals and strategies, evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, and effectively counter their every move.⁴⁰ Until America takes additional steps to bridge the religious divide in the Middle East, religion and radical extremism will continue to make for a messy, complex campaign.

NOTES

1. Lieutenant General David Petraeus, former commander of the Multinational Security Transition Command—Iraq, “Iraq Evolving Forces,” briefing, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 7 November 2005; Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry, Commanding General, Combined Forces Command—Afghanistan, briefing, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2 February 2006.

2. Abdurrahman Wahid, “Right Islam versus Wrong Islam,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 December 2005, sec. A, p. 16. Mr. Wahid, former President of Indonesia, is patron and senior advisor to the LibForAll Foundation (<http://www.libforall.org>).

3. Ibid. The Sunni (as opposed to Shi'ite) fundamentalists' goals generally include: claiming to restore the perfection of the early Islam practiced by Muhammad and his companions, who are the Righteous Ancestors; establishing a utopian society based on these Salafi principles by imposing their interpretation of Islamic law on all members of society; annihilating local variants of Islam in the name of authenticity and purity; transforming Islam from a personal faith into an authoritarian political system; establishing a pan-Islamic caliphate governed according to the strict tenets of Salafi Islam, and often conceived as stretching from Morocco to Indonesia and the Philippines; and, ultimately, bringing the entire world under the sway of their extremist ideology.

4. Quoted in Sherifa Zuhur, *A Hundred Osamas: Islamist Threats and the Future of Counterinsurgency* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, December 2005), p. 26.

5. Murad Al-shishani, “Al-Zarqawi's Rise to Power: Analyzing Tactics and Targets,” *Terrorism Monitor*, 17 November 2005, <http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2369831>. The Jamestown Foundation conducts global terrorism analysis. Analysts considered Zarqawi, before his recent death, to be Iraq's most notorious insurgent and former leader of the Tawhid, the jihad's insurgent group. Tawhid merged with Osama Bin Laden's al Qaeda network in 2004.

6. Ron E. Hassner, “Causes of Terrorism and Insurgency; Fighting Insurgency on Sacred Ground,” *The Washington Quarterly*, 29 (Spring 2006). Osama justified his view in terms of the US presence in “the land of the two sanctuaries,” a reference to Saudi Arabia, where the great mosques of Mecca and Medina are located.

7. J Alexander Their, “The Crescent and the Gavel,” *The New York Times*, 26 March 2006, sec. 4, p. 13. Mr. Rahman's wife's family told the court that he was unfit to care for his children because he converted to Christianity. This case illustrates the uneasy balance between the democratic norms of Afghanistan's constitution and the conservative Islamic values its judiciary upholds. Afghanistan's post-Taliban judiciary has shown a propensity to use Islam as a political weapon, which only demonstrates that the misuse of religion is not limited to terrorists or terrorism.

8. Shireen T. Hunter, *Modernization and Democratization in the Muslim World: Obstacles and Remedies* (Washington: CSIS Press, 2004), p. vii.

9. “Iraqi Government Resigned to Partial Boycott of Elections,” *The Daily Star* (Beirut, Lebanon) 15 December 2004, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=2&article_id=11018.

10. Robert Reid, “Iraqi Blast May Prove Turning Point,” *Express* (a publication of *The Washington Post*), 23 February 2006, p. 6.

11. Geoffrey Clarfield, “Forcing Hindus into Exile,” *National Post*, 25 October 2005, available at <http://canadiancoalition.com/forum/messages/10680.shtml>.

12. Ibid.

13. Iyad Jamal Al-Din, “The Arabs Use Israel as a Pretext for their Backwardness, But Don't Really Want Democracy,” 30 November 2005, Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) TV Monitor Project, Clip No. 979, <http://www.memritv.org/transcript.asp?p1=979>.

14. Muhammad bin 'Abd Al-Latif Aal Al-Sheikh, "Jihadist Salafist Ideology is Like Nazism," MEMRI, Special Dispatch Series, No. 1007, 17 October 2005, <http://www.memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Area=saudiArabia&ID=SP100705>.
15. Janine Di Giovanni, "Reaching for Power," *National Geographic*, June 2004, p. 19. Al-Sadr's actions saved Sunni and American civilians.
16. Spencer Ackerman, "Why American Muslims Haven't Turned to Terrorism," *The New Republic Online*, 12 December 2005, <http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=20051212&s=ackerman121205>.
17. Norvell B. DeAtkine, "Islam, Islamism and Terrorism," *Army*, January 2006, p. 56.
18. Louis René Beres, "Dangers of the Herd Mentality: Violent Ideals Threaten Mankind," *The Washington Times*, 28 February 2006, sec. A, p. 19.
19. "Former Taliban Leader Calls for Jihad, Promises Stronger Attacks in Afghanistan," Radio Free Afghanistan, 10 January 2006, <http://www.azadiradio.org/en/dailyreport/2006/01/10.ASP>.
20. Zuhur, p. 11.
21. Lisa Sylvester interview with French documentary filmmaker Pierre Rehov (including *The Psychology behind Suicide Bombings; Suicide Killers*), CNN.COM, 23 July 2005, <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/050723/cst.03.html>.
22. Williamson Murray and Mark Grimsley, "Introduction: On Strategy," in *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War*, ed. Williamson Murray, Alvin Bernstein, MacGregor Knox (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press 1994), pp. 86, 89.
23. DeAtkine, p. 57
24. Michael Scheuer, "Al-Qaeda's Insurgency Doctrine: Aiming for a 'Long War,'" *Terrorism Focus*, 28 February 2006, esp. the section titled, "Al-Qaeda Doctrine in Iraq and Afghanistan: The Military," <http://jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2369915>. There Scheuer writes that this is "a form of jihad that mandates the participation of every Muslim through taking up arms, financial donations, prayer, providing safe haven, or some other form of support." Scheuer also writes that al Qaeda doctrine "has been developed from the group's experiences during the Afghan war against the Red Army, and has matured through each of the insurgencies . . . from Eritrea to Xinjiang to Mindanao. In presenting their doctrine, al-Qaeda's strategists [have acknowledged] the significant lessons they have learned from Sun Tzu, Clausewitz, Mao, General Giap, and even Ahmed Shah Masood, as well from the training manuals of the US and UK Marines and Special Forces. Ironically, al-Qaeda strategists have discussed all of these matters for years in their Internet journals, but this discussion has garnered little interest in Western essays."
25. Wahid, p. 16.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid. Colonel Thomas Hammes of the National Defense University describes these tactics as fourth-generation warfare. The insurgents are seeking to convince US political leaders that America's strategic objectives are too costly. Their aim is to outlast coalition forces and break the American political will and sever the support from home through death and destruction, all based on the premise that Americans have no staying power when combat losses continue to mount.
28. George W. Bush, *National Security Strategy* (Washington: The White House, March 2006), p. 1.
29. Ibid.
30. George W. Bush, *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* (Washington: The White House, November 2005).
31. Ibid.
32. Donald Rumsfeld, *The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: Department of Defense, March 2006), p. iii.
33. Ibid.
34. Richard Myers, *The National Military Strategy of the United States: A Strategy for Today; A Vision for Tomorrow* (Washington: Department of Defense 2004), p. v.
35. Ibid., p. 6.
36. Additional details regarding religious assessments are contained in the author's Civilian Research Project, "Bridging the Religious Divide." US Army War College, 2006, "Tab A: Religious Assessment (A Religious Assessment Model—Middle East)."
37. Charles Levinson, "What's on During Ramadan? Antiterror TV," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 3 November 2005, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/1103/p01s03-wome.htm>.
38. Khaled M. Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), p. 21.
39. John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005), p. xii.
40. Wahid, p. 16.