

Winning the War of Ideas

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We are indeed engaged in a battle for hearts and minds within the Muslim world. New media tools allow extremists ideologues to communicate their message with great effectiveness. Hearts and minds will be won or lost one person, one community at a time. In order to defeat extremism, the US and international community must call upon citizen-statesman to aggressively advocate the ideals of liberty and freedom within their own communities and spheres of influence.

Day after day the global airwaves are filled with entertainment and sports, humor and drama - each program telling its own subtle story. Our ever-ready media is also filled with more serious fare, documentaries and news, debate and commentary, often delivered with substantial spin or half-truths designed to convincingly sell the proponent's themes and messages. In the mass of this media, those able to master the news cycle have an advantage. The same is true in the realm of new media, where the internet, blogs, instant messages, and streaming video provide a constant and on-demand barrage of messages from anywhere, to anywhere. In a world that is flat, ideologues of all kinds have increased capacity to communicate their messages at a very low cost through the use of these technologies. Al-Qa'ida, Wahhabists and Iran, along with their proxies, have made extensive use of these new tools, along with tried and tested techniques for distributing propaganda materials to individuals through person to person contact in Islamic Centers, radical madrasahs, and mosques. They are working hard to further propagate their message of enmity and compulsion. The US and its partners, the standard bearers of liberty and freedom, are struggling to compete with these themes and messages - with many calling for an increased emphasis on the battle for hearts and minds, the war of ideas.

The very idea of a war of ideas is contentious. What is this "war"? If it is a war, who are we fighting? Why a war; why not a competition - after all, in a marketplace of ideas shouldn't the concept of an inalienable right to freedom of conscience win out every time over repression and compulsion? Further, if we are competing in a marketplace of ideas what are we selling?

What is the War of Ideas?

It is the struggle between the ideal of agency - our individual freedom to choose for ourselves what kind of lives we will live - and compulsion. The debate between the terrorists and those that love liberty is the original conflict; there is nothing new at the

core of this debate. Chauvinistic ideologies have claimed supremacy throughout history, justifying the warfare, torture and repression they encouraged for the sake of some greater good that only the “true believers” could understand. This is the Melian dialog - submit or be conquered, or the Inquisitions - “repent” or die. The most recent incarnation of this conflict was the Cold War. That too was a war of ideas. For over half a century, the battle between communist ideology and democratic values was fought in almost every corner of the globe, causing millions of deaths, crushing poverty, and the loss of individual freedoms for those occupied by communist regimes. Yet the result of winning that struggle has been remarkable, with greater freedom, economic opportunity, and development in the world writ-large than ever before in the history of the world. The bankruptcy of the communist ideology has been proven. This was a difficult but needful struggle, and the march of freedom continues because the fight for individual liberty is the great cause of man.

Yet concepts of liberty and individual rights face formidable challenges today. Repression continues under the banner of Wahhabism, Takfirism, and Khomeinism and its related ideology is spread abroad through proselytizing in radical madrasas, through the violence of al-Qa’ida (AQ) and its associated band of thugs, and through the machinations and revolutionary intrigue of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Forces (IRGC-QF). While not posing the same existential threat as the Soviet Union - there is no mutually assured destruction here - there is a very real threat to human liberty and dignity. As foreign fighters return home from Iraq, highly skilled in the tools of asymmetric warfare and funded by a seemingly endless source of revenue from their oil-rich patrons in the Middle-East, we will likely see more terror and not less. Additionally, in societies with fledgling democracies and weak civil society, like minded ideologues have been, and will continue to be, swept into power. Of course democracies are places where parties lose elections, and the natural consequence of poor policy is the eventual loss of power. But there is great danger that Takfiris, Wahhabist, and Khomeinists, once in power, will be able to remake the political process in a way that guarantees their continued grip on governance (ala Hezbollah or HAMAS). At the same time, well-entrenched enemies of liberty in the region are stronger than ever, with the high price of oil and global desire for regional stability all but assuring the continuation of the status-quo.

Defeating the opponents of liberty and advocates of compulsion cannot be accomplished through the force of arms by third parties. To pursue such a course would make us no different than our adversaries. Freedom really isn’t free - it comes at a cost that must be paid by those from those within the society that seeks it. Iraq for example, will never become an example of a liberal democracy until the Iraqi people strive for such a society. That people hold elections is not the hallmark of freedom, but rather when the mechanisms of a constitutional government responsive to the people and rule of law secure individual freedoms and check the tyranny of the majority. While progress in Iraq is heartening, we should not be confused about what we have achieved - Iraq at best will achieve stability through power sharing arrangements between factions; this is not freedom, but a more localized and less powerful system of tyrannical rule. The power brokers may no longer be the unity ba’athist regime, but entrenched, potentially

hereditary, power brokers will still exist in the form of the religious parties or tribal leaders. True freedom will require further development of civil society, an increased sense of individual responsibility, and an adoption of an ideology of liberty over the Hobbesian state of nature where all are in a state of war “and such a war as is of every man against every man.” Ideals of liberty must be engraved in the hearts of the people - this is the quintessential battle for hearts and minds. The Cold War was won once the people were willing to stand together in pursuit of liberty; the Berlin wall fell not by use of force, but by the steady and persistent battle of ideologies over the course of decades. When liberty had won over the hearts of the people, the communist era was done.

Again today, our adversaries are opposed to that which we hold to be our most noble ideals. They mock democracy, deride individual freedom, and decry human rights. They declare these principals to be man made, rather than the great eternal gifts to mankind that they are. Rather than encouraging individual virtue and righteousness, they require absolute submission to their own moral code - and haply declare that they will kill those that do not comply. Rather than seeing victory of the human spirit over the base instincts of the natural man as the great purpose of life, they require pure submission under the threat of force. Rather than seeing persuasion and encouragement of such human achievement as the purpose of society, they espouse control - to force, to compel and to drive.

The differences are profound, fundamental, and part of the eternal debate over agency - is the greatest good for society to be accomplished via individual liberty, or by mandating and imposing virtue? Compare the fundamental ideological cleavage:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

The matter is summed up for every person alive: Either submit, or live under the suzerainty of Islam, or die. (Usama Bin Laden)

These are irreconcilable values. This is the war of ideas.

Who Are We Fighting?

It is important to recognize who we are not fighting. This is not a battle with Islam. The values of freedom and human rights are as well rooted in Islam as they are in the other great world religions. The majority of Muslims do not agree with the use of murder, compulsion and violence to intimidate and cower their fellow brother and sisters into submission. We need to be clear in word and deed that we have great respect and reverence for Islamic civilizations.

We do have an issue within Islam, however. Though support for groups like al-Qa’ida is at a historic low, there are still a good deal too many that sympathize with this and like minded movements. These we are not fighting with; but are fighting for. The US cannot

be a credible voice in the debate within Islam. Esteemed Islamic jurists and reformed terrorist ideologues such as former al-Qa'ida spiritual advisor Abd Al-Qader Bin 'Abd Al-'Aziz (Dr. Fadl) must take the lead there. However, the US and its allies can and must communicate through deed and word our commitment to the universal value of liberty. Like the Cold War, this approach will be long and hard, but is ever worth it. This group must be the focus of the War of Ideas.

Who are we fighting? We are fighting a small faction - those irreconcilables that can only be captured or killed. Yet that is not the fight we are talking about here. While our military will continue to work with our international partners to neutralize this cancerous growth encroaching on Muslim societies, the fight we are talking about here is in communicating our message more effectively to those we are fighting for (the sympathizers) than those we are fighting with. Facially, there should be no debate - who could question liberty over force; mutual love, charity, respect, over enmity - yet we still are ineffective. We must be much clearer in our effort to communicate what we stand for, and to expose what our enemy stands for.

Why a War?

Is war the right term? This is a battle of soft-power; this is about influence and not about bombs. In many cases use of force against terror cells will actually hinder our efforts, as unintended collateral effects reverberate throughout society and become fodder for our adversary's propaganda machine. Yet even in this soft-power battle the concept of a War of Ideas is a useful way of framing the issue. War defines the level of effort - this must be intense, requires great resources, and will require sacrifice if it is to be effective. Thus, like the Cold War, it is aptly described.

What Are We Selling?

We must have a clear and consistent message. If we try to focus on everything, we focus on nothing. Our themes are enduring - but need renewed emphasis in both word and deed. We must be unyielding in our stance:

- that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are the intrinsic right of every human being.
- that governments that are representative of their people are less likely to resort to the use of force to resolve conflict.
- that countries with economic freedom and property rights increase opportunities for all and reduce pressure that make populations susceptible to radicalization.
- that all men must be subject to the rule of law - and that executive power does not create immunity in cases of violation of humanitarian and human rights law.

We must also rally the international community to renew its commitment to the goals of the United Nations: "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war... to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish

conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.” We must take these goals seriously and work diligently together to further their accomplishment.

How We Can Win

To win an insurgency, you must win over the people. The problems of inner city America may provide an instructive analogy here. Police efforts to route drug dealers are typically ineffective until that time that the community is willing to take a stand against drugs. Arrests can occur and aggressive policing can drive drug trafficking from one neighborhood to another, but that is the extent of it. Drug traffickers are only driven from the streets when people in the effected communities understand the destructive nature of these gangs, overcome a willingness to accept bribes and fear of retaliation, and begin cooperating with police. This, of course, requires a massive information and community policing campaign to convince the people first of the destructive nature of the crimes and second that the police can be trusted and that cooperation with them holds the hope of a better future. A similar approach will be needed here.

A possible model for winning over hearts and minds may be seen in the Turkish approach to the Turkish Hizbullah. In the summer of 2000, Turkish National Police raided the safe house of the group’s leader, Husayin Velioglu. They met fierce resistance they had not been expecting and Velioglu and his associates were killed. Evidence exploitation revealed a massive revolutionary organization, sponsored by Iran that had extended influence throughout the nation primarily through community mosques. Prior to this raid, Turkish authorities had winked at the group, which they viewed as an Islamic based Kurdish counter to the secular, separatist PKK (Partiye Karkere Kurdistan—now known as KADEK). Once the true nature and extent of the organization was revealed the Turks wasted no time in eradicating the group. For the better part of two years, the Turks conducted what can only be considered as a massive information operations campaign to coincide with aggressive counter-terror operations against the group. Nearly everyday, Turkish media ran story after story on the intentions and extent of the group. When it was discovered the group had committed grisly murders of dissenters in various sites nationwide, press releases and coverage quickly shifted to highlight the groups’ barbaric cruelty. The efforts to vilify the group and its supporters were successful as they coincided with security operations to capture or kill irreconcilable members of the group. Within two years, domestic support for the movement was gone and the group existed in name only. A similar effort to expose our adversary’s merciless tactics is needed here.

We must acknowledge that in many ways, the Takfiris and Wahhabists have done much to diminish their own popular support. As al-Qa’ida and associates have implemented draconian measures in Iraq, there has been popular resistance and resentment. However, all is not well. Khomeinists are a mixed bag - while Ahmedinejad’s half-crazed speeches and holocaust denials have hurt his ability to play the part of a serious leader in the international community, and Jaysh al-Mahdi are viewed by most Shia Iraqis as a band of criminals, the Lebanese Hezbollah has managed to hold off the Israeli Defense Forces

and pulled off a practically bloodless coup-d'etat in Lebanon. HAMAS remains entrenched in Gaza, and Taliban and al-Qa'ida are resurgent along the Pakistan/Afghan border. Foreign fighters still to flow into Iraq and al-Qa'ida cells in Africa continue to show a capacity to conduct terror operations. Terrorist plots thwarted in Europe, Asia and the US show the desire of these groups to maintain operational capabilities worldwide. So there is still much work to do.

The battle for hearts and minds will be long - we must penetrate places that have been governed by one strong man or another in a Hobbesian state of nature since the dawn of time. While few would argue with the idea that men and women inherently yearn for freedom, we acknowledge that these impulses run headlong into the reality of basic Maslowian needs of food/water/shelter in many places (i.e. Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas - FATA). Ideas do not provide sustenance and so in these places acquisition of basic necessities of life must be delinked from the traditional power structures that oppress and be guaranteed instead by representative governments until economic and land reforms can pave the way for a more prosperous future. Such changes are destabilizing and must be done incrementally. This will require renewed US leadership and commitment by the international community over the long term - there is no quick fix here. Sustainable poverty reduction efforts will pave the way for the debate that will eventually result in victory in the War of Ideas.

Most of the battleground is not so isolated or impoverished however and is ripe for this debate now. The US and its allies must act in ways that are consistent with our core values, rather than for short-term expediency and gain. Much has also been said about the need for a resurrected US Information Agency and Voice of America. Such national level efforts can and should be funded, but do not take into account the realities of the information revolution. Few of those we are trying to reach will be impacted by such messages - we may be able to speak to elites in that manner, but the average eighteen to twenty-something is not going to be tuning-in to what is perceived as propaganda. The use of the internet, blogs, streaming media, instant messaging and third generation phone technology has changed the communications landscape. The strength of al-Qa'ida's propaganda machine (and in fact their entire organization) is its flat, decentralized nature. The US is trying to debate and counter messages from hundreds or maybe thousands of quasi-independent advocates of terrorism (using all of these technologies) with just a small handful of top-leaders: the President, the Secretary of State, some of our Ambassadors and a few key spokesmen. The US also principally communicates through "mainstream" media sources that are unlikely to ever reach the target audience we are trying to win over. Khomeinist and Wahhabis have further advantages through their monopoly of state-controlled television, radio and print media as well as education curriculums. This constant barrage of negative messaging, and our ineffective counter, calls for a drastically new approach.

In an era before political parties, before the federal government existed, there was a different approach to the War of Ideas. Whether in arguing for independence, or for the necessities of a stronger federal government under the constitution, local and regional intellects provided the debate that won the day. These leaders, now known as our

founding fathers, were primarily acting in their capacity as private citizens during the course of the debate. The arguments of James Madison and Alexander Hamilton in the federalist papers may be the most prominent, but similar debates occurred in each state, in each community, before the great American experiment was actually on its way. Today we need a similar effort by concerned citizen statesmen to participate in this debate and carry it throughout the world. While al-Qa'ida is an extremely flat network, they are also a minority. Though Khomeinists monopolize state media, the Iranian people have access to the international community through the new media. If concerned citizens and intellectuals will band together in a decentralized but united fight against tyranny, the brutality of these groups and states will be revealed, regimes will feel a need to liberalize of face of revolution; the modern day inquisition will end and freedom will spread. This will take time and endurance - who knew the Berlin wall would fall when it did? In this fight it will likewise be hard to gauge progress, but we must fight on.

In addition to private citizens we call upon key influencers to recognize the power they wield to either support the cause of freedom and human rights, or to stand on the sidelines or inadvertently take up the cause of those at enmity with all we hold dear. University professors, think tank experts, journalist, Hollywood and other entertainment media are incredibly influential. The stories they choose to tell or not tell, the cultural influence and values they communicate are part of this War of Ideas. Like it or not, the film made in Hollywood communicates American values. When we turn-out film after film glamorizing illegal and immoral behavior, it is not hard to understand those we are fighting for, those currently sympathetic to terror tactics, would look at our "values" and say "no thanks". The irresponsible shrug of the media and response of "artistic freedom" is akin to Denis Rodman and Charles Barkley saying they do not want to be role models to American youth. Guess what?

In addition to our entertainment media, our journalists and editorial boards seem so caught up in flash and glitter that they have missed opportunities to communicate the viciousness of the enemy we face. Why did al-Qa'ida plot to blow up a girls school in Anbar province because they could not countenance women being educated - or the mass murder of young boys in Diyala province by al-Qa'ida in an effort to further spawn sectarian violence - not receive more than a blip of coverage while we were inundated with non-stop coverage of Brittany Spears, Anna Nicole Smith, or domestic elections at the same time?

We need a level of ideological commitment we are starting to see in relation to global warming and energy conservation. We need the human rights activist that are struggling to fight Guantanamo Bay to set their sights a little further afield, and use their considerable resources, reach and talent to eradicate this great evil. If we are to win the War of Ideas, we need a new level awareness, and greater level of commitment. After 9/11 America was waiting for its call to serve, and it never came. Now is the time. Not just for Americans, but for our friends in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Australia. We call upon concerned citizens everywhere to use the new media to spread our message of hope and to put a spotlight on the evils of our adversary. We call upon media, journalists and academia to recognize the challenge we face and act in a

responsible manner as they practice their professions in good faith. We must sacrifice, we must be involved. We cannot expect that in the age of the information revolution that our government alone can win this fight. This is a battle that will be won community by community and thus requires community involvement. Until none of us are willing to countenance these evils in our midst, we will not win—but if we are united, truth will prevail.

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