

Winning 'the War of Hearts and Minds': Public Perception in Afghanistan and the Middle East

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In the context of today's discussions, I would like to focus my presentation on some of the questions that have emerged during the course of the day. Specifically: support for the Taliban in Afghanistan and beyond; counter propaganda; what the Western world can do better, both on the home-front and abroad; and how we might engage local communities in ways that are meaningful and relevant, to influence public perception and ultimately win support for countering the terrorist cause.

There is a plethora of literature and expert analysis that discusses whether or not terrorism is effective. Contemporary terrorism and, most notably, militant Islamist terrorism, is often described as 'a war for hearts and minds'. However, we must recognise that terrorism also has strategic and/or material goals. Strategic or long term political goals are rarely achieved to their full extent. However, there is some argument that the anti-colonial wave of terrorism was highly successful and that Palestinian terrorism has indeed achieved a measure of success in international recognition of the Palestinian State. Material goals, such as money, are much more immediate and therefore it is easier to assess their success.

Whether or not terrorist organisations achieve their strategic or material goals, terrorism is successful if it is able to instill fear in the target population and mobilise material or moral support for its cause. Both of these objectives involve influencing mass audiences in different ways by using propaganda. Terrorism has been described as 'propaganda by the deed', meaning that the act of violence perpetrated by terrorists is the principal means of communicating their message.

Originally, propaganda was not considered to be negative and referred to the propagation of religious faith. During the First World War, United States president, Woodrow Wilson, employed propaganda to influence public opinion in favour of the war. In Nazi Germany, The Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda effectively used propaganda to win national support for Nazi policies by demonising Jews and other minorities.

Since the use of political propaganda during WWI, propaganda has played a central role in conflicts. It has been used to gain public support for participation in wars and to demonise enemies of the State.

Ultimately, the use of violence by terrorists is a propaganda tool, used to influence a population in two ways: by inspiring fear either through the terrorist act itself or through provoking counter actions by governments that magnify and perpetuate terrorism as a looming threat.

Modern terrorist organisations incorporate psychological warfare strategies into their operations. They study the media to find the most effective way of communicating their threats or manipulating public attitudes towards government actions. One senior member of Al Qaeda has been quoted as saying 'Sheikh Osama knows that the media war is no less important than the military war against America. That's why Al Qaeda has many media wars. The Sheikh has made Al Qaeda's media strategy something that all TV stations look for.'⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾Schuster, H (2005), Al Qaeda's Media Strategy, In Greenberg, K.J. (Ed), Al Qaeda Now, New York: Cambridge University Press, 117

In his video messages broadcast on the internet and through media outlets, Osama bin Laden addresses the American people, often referencing the United States government's support for Israel as putting the American people at risk of further terrorist attacks. Boaz Ganor succinctly summarised how terrorists use psychological warfare tactics when he wrote:

The terror organisation knows from the outset that it will not achieve its goals purely by means of terror attacks. It must enlist the help of its victims themselves in gaining its objectives. A victory that would be impossible by military means is thus brought within reach through a protracted, gnawing campaign of psychological warfare—a war of attrition that gradually erodes the target population's will to fight and turns the tables against the stronger power.⁽²⁾

Apart from the victim population, terrorists also seek to influence potential supporters, sympathisers and recruits, through the use of psychological warfare. Terrorists strategically use violence as a way of forcing governments to retaliate with severe counter-terrorism responses which, in turn allows the terrorists to gain support from the audiences they claim to represent.

Scholars have argued, for instance, that the Irish Catholics successfully used guerrilla tactics to provoke the British government into responding in ways that collectively punished the entire population for the actions of the IRA and ultimately boosted its cause. In the 1960s, the ETA used a similar strategy of attacking Spanish targets to provoke the government into introducing measures of collective repression. The same dilemma now exists in Iraq, where the foreign military presence risks mobilising mass support for terrorists in the region. Australian troops on peace-keeping missions in East Timor are in a similar quandary.⁽³⁾

Turning now to Afghanistan, in at least the initial stages, the negative view of the US and coalition forces, was mainly due to lack of knowledge about the reasons for their presence. Taliban and Al-Qaeda propaganda also sought to perpetuate the perception that the attacks were against Islam, drawing on a historical legacy of ambivalence between the West and the East in the region.

The goal of the Taliban government and the Al-Qaida network was to gain the support of the Afghan population, mould the political will of the people, and to promote hatred and resistance towards any Western efforts in Afghanistan. Psychological Operations or PSYOPs were used as a counter measure to reach the local population, through the distribution of food and messages in the form of leaflets and broadcasts. These efforts were designed to demonstrate to the Afghans that the United States was not engaged in a battle against Islam but against terrorism.

The Afghanistan leaflets campaign (2001) focused on two objectives:

1. To counter the negative view of the coalition forces among the local population
2. To counter Taliban and Al Qaeda propaganda

The leaflets used in the campaign had four different but related focuses:

1. Target public support for the Taliban (including reward posters)
2. Target the 'enemy'- defined as Taliban fighters / Al Qaeda
3. Target public perception of the US and coalition forces and their actions
4. Educate and inform the local population (with a secondary purpose of improving the public perception of the US).

⁽²⁾Ganor, Boaz (2002), *Terror as a Strategy of Psychological Warfare*, <http://212.150.54.123/articles/articledet.cfm?articleid=443>

⁽³⁾Ethan Buena de Mesquita and Eric S. Dickson (2007) *The Propaganda of the Deed: Terrorism, Counterterrorism, and Mobilization*, *American Journal of Political Science*, 51 (2), 364-381

These four elements were achieved through the distribution of leaflets that combined powerful images and key messages. One leaflet called for the local population to "drive out the foreign terrorists". This leaflet clearly identifies foreign (mainly Arab) fighters as terrorists and may bolster attempts to fracture the Taliban along potential fault lines of ethnic, religious or political agendas.

Another message used in the leaflet campaign sought to eradicate public support for terrorism by portraying terrorists as enemies of the Afghan people. One leaflet, for example, uses an image of Osama bin Laden and Taliban leaders and states: "Terrorists are the people who do not care about your family or your life; they are traitors. Why do you let these people take your brothers away to fight when they do not know why they are fighting or what they are fighting for?"

Another full colour leaflet targeted public perception of the United States and sought to address the terrorists' propaganda that the West was engaged in a war against Islam. This leaflet featured images of American Muslims worshipping in American Mosques. It states "Muslims in the United States worship freely. There are more than 7 million Muslims and 1200 mosques in the US."

Other leaflets portrayed the coalition as friends of the local population: "The coalition of the United Nations is here to help", and called on the local population to support the rebuilding of Afghanistan.

The Afghanistan leaflet campaign is just one example of the use of PSYOPS in conflicted areas. However, with the internationalisation of terrorism and the growth of diasporic communities in multicultural countries like Australia, countering terrorism also necessitates the use of strategies to influence public perception among the homegrown population.

Increasingly, governments are using principles borrowed from marketing and social marketing to devise campaigns designed to influence public opinion and attitudes towards terrorism. Social marketing is the application of marketing principles to social issues, to encourage positive behavioural change or discourage negative behaviour.

Recently, social marketing has also been applied to the development of campaigns targeting public support for terrorism. Interestingly, these campaigns have been initiated by governments in countries like Iraq, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

Perception campaigns in the Middle East fall under four categories, each with a specific goal:

1. Target public support for terrorism
2. Target public perception of the United States
3. Target public perception of terrorist ideologies
4. Target nationalist/loyalist traditions.

These four categories combine secular and religious messages according to the context. Saudi Arabia's anti-terrorism messages, for example, draw on a long tradition of loyalty to the ruling monarch as a basis for encouraging the population to resist terrorism.

The 'Say No to Terror' campaign includes websites, videos, print advertisements and a blog (all in Arabic). The print advertisements are freely available to download and focus primarily on public support by portraying the destructive nature of terrorism. One poster in Arabic states "Terrorism, I am Muslim and I am against it." ⁽⁴⁾

⁽⁴⁾<http://www.saynototerror.me>

"Yeh Hum Naheen": Say no to Terrorism, began as a musical event featuring some of Pakistan's biggest music artists in a music video that imitated Western produced music videos, such as "We are the World". The ongoing campaign features posters and print advertisements, as well as a website dedicated to eradicating public support for terrorism through an emotional appeal. The print advertisements feature emotional images of suffering and ask questions such as "Are we the ones who are destroying our own future?"; "Are we the ones who deprive mothers of their children?"; and "Are we the ones who deprive children of their father's affection?" ⁽⁵⁾

Based on a view of the struggle against violent extremism as a war of ideas that centres on the legitimacy of authority, Saudi Arabia's anti-terrorism campaign stresses loyalty, recognition of authority and obedience to leadership. The campaign centres on the message that the use of violence within the Kingdom is not permissible and only legitimate authorities can authorise Jihad. It is a message that works within Saudi Arabia: a Muslim monarchy and the seat of Wahhabism.

According to Saudi Arabian sources, their 'soft approach', which includes a de-radicalisation counseling program for prisoners, is highly successful. Around 3,000 prisoners have participated in portions of the counseling program, and about 1,400 of them have renounced their former beliefs and been released. ⁽⁶⁾

What constitutes a successful counter-terrorism campaign and how can success be measured? There is actually very little in the way of research to draw any real conclusions about the short and long term effectiveness of psychological operations and communication campaigns that aim to influence public opinion (and ultimately public behaviours). To begin we might propose that certain criteria need to be incorporated in the development of anti-terrorism messages, informed by careful consideration of the target audience and the context:

1. Authenticity - the message must be authentic and sincere. This requires knowledge and understanding of the world views of the target population and their constructs of terrorism and violence.
2. Cultural and contextual relevance - the message must work for the context. The Saudi Arabian approach requires a central and stable authority, and public support for authority- factors that are lacking in Afghanistan and Iraq. Images of violence that are designed to affect emotion and depict the destructive nature of terrorism will be less effective in combat zones where violence is an everyday experience.
3. Credible sources and mediums - the message must be delivered by a trusted source. Research can cultivate an understanding of pathways of influence and inform the development of campaigns that are effective in reaching the target audience.
4. Transparency of the message - the motivations and sources must be clear, so that it is not perceived to be an attempt at 'brainwashing' the public.

To conclude, public support for terrorism is the most pressing issue that is facing governments and the international community today. Today's terrorists are media savvy, technologically adept and fully cognisant of the power of public support for their cause. Unfortunately, countries like Australia and the United Kingdom lag behind, without a dedicated communication strategy that targets public perception of terrorism and support for the terrorist cause. However, recent events, such as the arrest and subsequent sentencing of an Australian man for publishing terrorist content on the internet, have highlighted the need for a strategy that engages the terrorists' audience, de-legitimises the terrorist cause and counters the terrorist propaganda.

Social change is a long-term and tedious process that requires continual reinforcement and constant monitoring. Campaigns that aim for social change need to be relevant to the context, credible and authentic- we need to know our target audience, their world views and how they are influenced, before we can begin to change their perceptions.

⁽⁵⁾http://www.yehhumnaheen.org/cc.php?finalpage_os=index.php

⁽⁶⁾Boucek, C 2008, Saudi Arabia's 'Soft' Counterterrorism Strategy: Prevention, Rehabilitation and Aftercare, Carnegie Papers, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.