

Jihadist Propaganda and Its Audiences: A Change of Course?

by Manuel R. Torres Soriano

Winning the 'hearts and minds' of the Muslim world have been a priority of al-Qaeda and its network of affiliated groups of the Global Jihadist Movement (GJM) from the earliest days. This is a logical priority when considering that to achieve their primary strategic objectives; jihadists need to mobilize Muslim Populations. Indeed, an analysis of jihadist communiqués shows a clear preference for Muslim audiences. From 2001 to 2005, 92% of the GJM propaganda products targeted Muslim audiences, 6 % were designed for an undifferentiated audience, while only 2 % was directed specifically at non-Muslim audiences.[1]

Past messages directed exclusively at the non-Muslim not only constituted the smallest percentage, but were mostly dedicated to articulating threats and blackmail. The general tone was scorn or indifference with respect to the possibility of 'winning over' this portion of the population. Therefore, the desired effect of such propaganda on Western public opinion was to demoralize through fear rather than attempting to invoke feelings of sympathy for or comprehension of the motivations of GJM members. For example, one of the principle strategists of al-Qaeda, Abu 'Ubeid al-Qurashi, wrote: *"They did not aspire to gain Western sympathy; rather, they sought to expose the American lie and deceit to the peoples of the world – and first and foremost to the Islamic peoples..."* [2] in an article posted in a Jihadist website in reference to September 11th.

Although quantitatively these types of messages pale in comparison to the avalanche of messages directed at Muslims, it is important to distinguish the "quality" (measured by the importance placed on the messages by their protagonists, such as Bin Laden or al-Zawahiri) of some of these communiqués. That stated, a detailed analysis of these messages reveals that although some relative importance was placed on non-Muslim audiences; it was by far the least emphasized.

Nevertheless, recently we have observed a possible change in this trend. Increasingly, jihadist groups devote more energy attempting to connect with this potential "western" audience by developing new communication "products" that seek to demoralize and evoke fear in the realm of non-Muslim public opinion. For example, the Iraqi Sunni insurgent groups are on the vanguard of this change of strategy as they attempt to reach beyond their traditional support base and target foreign audiences.[3] They create English mirrors of their Arabic websites and translate various public messages and reports about their 'main operations' against the 'invader' into several European languages.

This new communicative priority has been implemented through initiatives which have been adapted to the characteristics and modalities of the Western public. For example, an organization created a website to glorify 'juba', the sniper of the Islamic Army of Iraq. The website contained English commentary and claims of responsibility for the deaths of hundreds of US soldiers. The sophisticated videos of his sniping operations could be downloaded from the website. Another significant example is the insurgent's engagement

in the 'black propaganda' operation called 'Lee's Life for Lies.' This operation involved fabricating the false history of American soldier Lee Kendall, whose USB flash drive was found by insurgents. The insurgents utilized the information contained in the USB to write a fake letter that described the desperate situation of the foreign soldier in Iraq and the existence of abuses and unpunished war crimes.[4] A person could obtain the material via a downloadable video which contained the reading of the false letter by an anonymous narrator using American-accented English.

However, the emergence of the Taliban movement bolsters the principal argument of this thesis regarding the increasing importance of the propaganda directed to the western public opinion. One of the most significant observations of the last several years has been how the Taliban have changed from their very strong iconoclasts beliefs, into zealous practitioners of the propagandistic lessons popularized by al-Qaeda. For example, in July, 2007 a Pakistani journalist filmed a Taliban "graduation ceremony" for would-be Western suicide bombers organized in six national "brigades" (British, American, Canadian, German, French and Afghan). The video shows a large group of terrorist ready to travel to the United States and Western Europe to carry out suicide attacks. Whereas prior videos attempted to inspire others to become "martyrs," this one sought to intimidate and threaten Western populations, promising a "storm" of brutal attacks in American and European cities. The Taliban commander Mansur Dadullah said in this video: *"Listen, all you Westerners and Americans. You came from thousands of kilometers away to fight us. Now we will get back to you in your countries and attack you."* [5]

What is the reason for this change of communicative priorities? A possible explanation is the limited effectiveness of the jihadist propaganda directed at the Muslim world. In spite of its capability to mobilize significant activist support, the reality is that the dream of a Global Islamic Insurgency has yet to be achieved in the intended capacity that would be capable of demolishing some of the Muslim governments that al-Qaeda has qualified like "apostates" and corrupt. To be sure, and in spite of their limitations, the majority of the polls in the Muslim world indicate that jihadist propaganda has not significantly increased the levels of popular support towards al-Qaeda and its objectives.[6]

Although Bin Laden's organization has an enormous influence on more radical segments of Muslim populations, its influence has been very limited on the vast majority of Muslims who view with incredulity or distaste al-Qaeda's political assertions. This ineffectiveness may have caused jihadist networks to devote increasing attention to Western audiences. The jihadists recognize that the 'crusader enemy's' determination to fight and use its material superiority depends on the support of its internal constituencies. Certain propaganda initiatives have further demonstrated to jihadists that reaching and manipulating the Western public is an attainable goal.

The jihadists' desire to continue developing this line of propaganda work, along with their relative failure to mobilise significant Muslim participation, has led to a perceived change of strategy in terms of communication products. The next months and years will reveal

whether this is a merely a perceived or actual strategic shift and what insights it will illuminate on the strategy and direction of jihadist mobilisation efforts.

About the Author: Manuel R. Torres Soriano is a Lecturer of Political Science at the Universidad Pablo de Olavide de Sevilla, Spain.

NOTES:

[1] Torres, M.; Jordan, J. & Horsburgh, N. "Analysis and Evolution of the Global Jihadist Movement Propaganda", *Journal of Terrorism and Political Violence*, Volume 18 Number 3 Fall 2006. (pp. 399-421)

[1] MEMRI, "Al-Qa'ida Activist, Abu 'Ubeid Al Qurashi: Comparing Munich (Olympics) Attack 1972 to September 11", *MEMRI*, March 12, 2002.

[3] See: Zambelis, Chris. "Iraqi Insurgent Media Campaign Targets American Audiences", *Terrorism Focus*, Volume 4, Issue 33 (October 16, 2007). <http://www.jamestown.org/terrorism/news/article.php?articleid=2373721>

[4] See: <http://www.lee-flash.blogspot.com>

[5] Combelles, Pascale. "Taliban Graduation Ceremony Demonstrates Change of Tactics", *Terrorism Focus*, Volume IV, Issue 21 July 3, 2007

[6] For example see the different polls of Pew Research Center like: PEW RESEACH CENTER. "Islamic Extremism: Common Concern for Muslim and Western Publics. 17-Nation Pew Global Attitudes Survey". July 14, 2005. Available in: <http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/248.pdf>