
Al-Qaeda's Propaganda Advantage and How to Counter It

By Brigitte L. Nacos

In early 2006, Jarret Brachman and William McCants published an article entitled "Stealing al-Qa'ida's Playbook," that examined the writings of several prominent Jihadi scholars, among them Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's second in command. Within weeks, al-Zawahiri released a video commenting on the article and mentioning that the review was based on research conducted at the United States Military Academy at West Point. Originally posted on an extremist Internet site, the video was eventually available on Google as well. [1] In response to al-Zawahiri's review of the article, Brachman remarked that "postmodern doesn't quite capture it." [2] Perhaps not, but the incident illustrated how today's terrorists—even those hiding in the most remote places—can and do utilize global information and communication networks that did not exist a decade or so earlier or were not easily accessible.

During the 1990s, when Western television and radio networks, wire services, and leading print outlets dominated the global media market and the Internet was not yet a major factor, Osama bin Laden had to give interviews to Western reporters in order to get his propaganda messages across to friends and foes. In the mid-1990s, bin Laden had an Arab student in the United Kingdom establish an office known as the "media wing of al-Qaeda," with the understanding that a physical presence in important media markets was essential for effective publicity campaigns. In 1996 and 1998, when the al-Qaeda leader issued his so-called fatawa, or religious edict, these declarations of war against the United States, Western crusaders, Israel and Zionists, were first published by the London-based newspaper *al-Quds al-Arabia*. After al-Jazeera emerged as the first non-Western global TV network at the beginning of the War in Afghanistan against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, bin Laden and his associates no longer had to rely on direct contacts with the Western press, but made their videos and other communications available to the Arab television network. They knew that their propaganda would make its way via al-Jazeera and other Arab satellite network to the global media. Finally, the Internet allowed contemporary terrorists to circumvent media outside their control to post their propaganda tracts on their own web sites or friendly organizations' and individuals' sites.

Nothing is fundamentally new when it comes to terrorism; especially with respect to terrorists' emphasis on publicity and propaganda. Terrorists have always understood the need to advertise their existence and causes. From the very beginning, they knew violence was the surest means to promote their organization. The emergence of technological advances has greatly expanded terrorists' ability to spread their propaganda on a global scale via satellite telephones, the Internet, and the distribution of DVDs. The creation of the global television-networks al-Manar and al-Aqsa Television have greatly benefited Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Hamas respectively. In fact, today's terrorists utilize all of these communication mediums.

Hamdi Issac, who was one of the participants in the failed July 21, 2005 London bombing attacks told Italian interrogators in Rome that he had been recruited by another would-be bomber, Said Ibrahim. According to Isaac:

We met each other at a muscle-building class in Notting Hill and Muktar (Said Ibrahim) showed us some DVDs with images of the war in Iraq, especially women and children killed by American and British soldiers. During our meetings we analyzed the political situation and the fact that everywhere in the West Muslims are humiliated and that we must react. [3]

Most of today's terrorists, regardless of their ideological leanings, utilize other forms of media—including the entertainment genre. This is also true for Islamic extremists. Islamic extremists may condemn Western pop music as decadent, but they have their own brand of "Terror Rap." For example, the lyrics of "Dirty Kuffar" by the British Hip Hop group Sheik Terra and the Soul Salah glorify Osama bin Laden and the 9/11 attacks and vilify Tony Blair and George W. Bush. More recently, the same group produced a shocking rap video titled "Dirty Kuffar Murder Iraqi Civilians." [4] The group's videos are not hard to find because they are available on the most popular sites on the Internet, such as YouTube, Google Video, and Yahoo! Video. Other similarly accessible videos celebrate suicide bombers and attempt to recruit "martyrs"—even from the ranks of children. Furthermore, they have a substantial impact. After Hamas's al-Aqsa TV aired a children's program that depicted the real life story of a female Palestinian suicide bomber, the woman's little daughter pledged to follow her mother's example. [5]

While the communication revolution of the last decade or so has greatly enhanced terrorists' ability to circumvent the traditional media, for the time being, the traditional or "old" media (television, radio, and print; as well as the "old" media's on-line sites) remain central factors in terrorist propaganda.

There is no doubt that contemporary terrorists have utilized and exploited the accelerated globalization of communication and media. As a 2007 National Intelligence Estimate stated, "globalization trends and recent technological advances will continue to enable even small numbers of alienated people to find and connect with one another, justify and intensify their anger, and mobilize resources to attack—all without requiring a centralized terrorist organization, training camp, or leader." [6]

Failure of U.S. "Public Diplomacy"

The promoters of hate and violence against civilians have been able to indoctrinate and recruit impressionable young Muslims around the globe via the Internet, DVDs, TV programs, and hip hop lyrics. Washington, however, has not found effective communication strategies to counter terrorist propaganda from al-Qaeda and like-minded groups and individuals. The U.S. Department of State's post-9/11 public diplomacy programs have failed to deter terrorist recruiting in the Middle East and in the Muslim

diaspora—especially in Europe. When Karen Hughes, President Bush’s long-time confidant, resigned as head of the State Department’s public diplomacy section this fall, America’s image abroad, and especially in the Arab and Muslim world, was still on the downward slide that she had hoped to halt and reverse when she took the job two years earlier. In his analysis of the 2007 Pew Global Attitude Project, Richard Wilke wrote, that “in particular, the United States continues to receive overwhelmingly negative ratings in the one area that was the primary target of public diplomacy efforts during Hughes’ tenure: the Muslim world. Recent Pew Global Attitudes surveys show that, among Muslim publics, favorable views of the U.S. have remained scarce over the last two years and in some countries America’s image has eroded even further. Perhaps the most notable example is in Turkey, where America’s favorability rating has plunged into single digits -- only 9% of Turks currently have a positive opinion of the U.S., down from 23% in spring 2005, just before Hughes took office, and down dramatically from the beginning of the decade, when roughly half of Turks (52%) had a favorable view. [7]

Just like her predecessors Charlotte Beers and Margaret Tutweiler, Hughes was unable to replace the image of “the ugly American” with a positive brand. While astute in domestic politics, Hughes lacked knowledge of the Middle East. During her first “listening tour” of several Arab countries, she was perceived as clueless and patronizing. However, even if the now open job at the Department of State were filled by someone familiar with the premier target region, it would be next to impossible to succeed with the current public diplomacy strategy and tactics. While attractive branding and packaging matters in the marketing of products, in diplomacy it is the content of the box of cereal or wash detergent that ultimately determines success or failure. Similarly, while so-called strategic communication initiatives, such as Washington officials granting interviews to al-Jazeera and other Arab media, receive attention in the region, ultimately it is U.S. policy that matters, not the rhetoric of public diplomacy vendors.

In a recent speech, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates called on the U.S. government to spend more money and yield to “soft power” because “the military alone cannot defend America’s interests around the world.” [8] The defense secretary said furthermore:

The government must improve its skills at public diplomacy and public affairs to better describe the nation’s strategy and values to a global audience.

We are miserable at communicating to the rest of the world what we are about as a society and a culture, about freedom and democracy, about our policies and our goals.

It is just plain embarrassing that al-Qaeda is better at communicating its message on the Internet than America.

As laudable as it may be, spending more money and placing more effort into “soft power,” will not assure a more effective “public diplomacy” in the Middle East and among Muslims and Arabs. Even if the United States Information Agency were revived

and its once excellent parts revitalized, these vehicles of public diplomacy would not be successful in current target regions as they were during the Cold War when they were working within a far more limited and controlled communication environment. In today's global setting, most people of the world know almost instantly what happens elsewhere around the globe. They no longer need the Voice of America or Alhurra TV as their primary source of information. It is unlikely that they will react positively to Americans selling U.S. culture and values and the advantages of democracy and freedom.

When foreign governments decide to utilize strategic communication in order to convince the American public and elite alike to support or oppose particular policies, they do not rely on their own public relations, publicity, public diplomacy, or propaganda. Instead, they hire leading and well-connected Americans in the most prestigious firms to promote their interests. For example, after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the Kuwaitis hired and paid many millions of dollars to Hill and Knowlton, a large American public relations firm, to push the "Free Kuwait" cause in the United States. This action ultimately influenced America's decision to enter the first Gulf War.

While one would not want to repeat the tactics used in the Kuwaiti "public diplomacy" campaign, the advantage of using homegrown public diplomacy experts is indisputable. Thus, if the U.S. wants to make inroads against Islamic extremists' propaganda and its consequences, the best course of action is to win the hearts and minds of religious scholars and experts in the Arab and Muslim world and to communicate non-violent alternatives to the messages of hate and violence via the same range of media and communications that terrorist organizations and their supporters exploit.

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[1] See, <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-1172754576785196282&hl=en> , accessed May 20, 2007.

[2] Brachman made the comment in an e-mail to author.

[3] "Italy arrests another brother of London bomb suspect." Agence France Presse, July 31, 2005. Retrieved from Yahoo ! News, July 31, 2005, at <http://news.yahoo.com/afp/20050731/wl-uk-afp/britainattacksitaly-050731153552&prin...>

[4] <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=9083681522527526242&q=Sheikh+Terra+and+the+Sol+Salah+Crew> , accessed June 15, 2007.

[5] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqHUDwePfbM>, accessed June 1, 2007.

[6] National Intelligence Estimate, "The Terrorist Threat to the US Homeland," July 2007, http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20070717_release.pdf .

[7] Richard Wilke, "Karen Hughes' Uphill Battle." <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/627/karen-hughes>

[8] Tom Shanker, "From U.S.' hard power' sector, a plea of 'sofer' assist." *International Herald Tribune*, Nov. 27, 2007.