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## **A Strategy for Fighting International Islamist Terrorists**

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Almost seven years after the tragedy of September 11, 2001, the United States still does not have a comprehensive and rational strategy to combat the terrorists who inflicted this horror. The National Strategy for Combating Terrorism (White House 2006) relies more on wishful thinking than on a deep understanding of the enemy. It promotes a political vision of democracy and freedom as an antidote to terrorism that may resonate with American audiences but is seen by Muslim populations as an exercise in cynicism. The deficiencies of this approach are all too apparent six years after it was first articulated. The classified National Implementation Plan appears to be a laundry list of small-scale tactical goals; without any underlying unifying concept, it simply does not add up to a strategy. Awarding appropriations to individual government agencies in the fight against the enemy seems likely to co-opt those agencies, with the danger that, over time, programs will become ends unto themselves, regardless of their contribution to the fight.

The goal of any campaign to fight terrorists should be homeland security: protection of the population from an enemy. Moreover, any rational strategy must be based on an understanding of the nature of the enemy's behavior. In this case, "the enemy" is a relatively small group of mostly young people, who aspire or belong to a violent social movement that uses violence against civilians for political ends in the name of their version of Islam. The overwhelming majority of traditional Muslim scholars have clearly condemned this version of Islam as deviant,

but journalists have selectively given voice to the minuscule number of mostly self-appointed imams who support this use of violence. Muslims understand the difference between Islam and the claims of the terrorists and point to biased Western reporting as just another instance of this "war against Islam." It is this very media image of a war against Islam that increases the pool of young Muslims susceptible to the message of the terrorists, namely, that they are the only ones who defend Muslim interest and honor against Western cultural and physical aggression.

Terrorists are simply young people seeking fame and thrills, like all the terrorists all over the world in the past 130 years (Sageman 2008, 151-52). They believe that they are special, part of a small vanguard trying to build a better world in the name of a cause. These specific terrorists want to build a utopia modeled on the community around the Prophet because they claim that it was the only time in world history when a just and fair community existed. They are willing to sacrifice themselves for this utopia in the name of God. Contrary to popular belief, radicalization into terrorism is not the product of poverty, various forms of brainwashing, youth, ignorance or lack of education, lack of employment, lack of social responsibility, criminality, or mental illness. The mobilization of young people into this violent social movement is based on friendship and kinship. Lately, more than 80 percent of arrested terrorists in Europe and the United States are part of the Muslim diaspora, mostly second- and now third-generation immigrants (Bakker 2007; Sageman 2008, 140-43). They are radicalized in the West, not in the Middle East. Usually, they are radicalized in small groups of friends and relatives, who spontaneously self-organize into groups that later turn to terrorism. Before 9/11, they were able to travel freely and to connect with al Qaeda Central, giving the movement a greater appearance of unity than it ever had. At this point, only a few radicals can physically connect with fellow travelers of the al Qaeda terrorist organization, through family connections in Pakistan or by chance. Otherwise, these new groups are physically isolated but connected through [\*225] Internet forums, inspired by the extremist ideology and hoping to be accepted as members of al Qaeda through their terrorist operations.

The strategy to fight these terrorists must be based on understanding their radicalization, the process of transformation of ordinary people into extremists using violence for political means. This process consists of four prongs: a sense of moral outrage, a specific interpretation of the world, resonance with personal experiences, and mobilization through networks. These four factors are not stages in a process, nor do they occur sequentially; they are simply four recurrent phases in this process. As mentioned earlier, this process is driven by young Muslims chasing dreams of glory by fighting for justice and fairness as they define it. They are enthusiastic volunteers, trying to impress their friends with their heroism and sacrifice. Suicide bombers, or shahids as they call themselves, have become the rock stars of young Muslim militants.

One of the major themes expressed by Islamist radicals conveys a sense of moral outrage, a reaction to perceived major moral violations, like killings, rapes, or local police actions. Before 2003, the major source of such outrage was the killings of Muslims in Bosnia, Chechnya, the second Palestinian intifada, and Kashmir. Since 2003, the war in Iraq is definitely fueling this process of radicalization. Considering that the attacks of 9/11 occurred before the invasion of Iraq, it could not be said that the war in Iraq caused this social movement, but it has since served as a focal point for moral outrage in Muslims worldwide. In all my talks with Muslims, Iraq monopolizes the theme of any conversation about Islam and the West. More locally, many

Muslims also cite local law enforcement actions against Muslims, bridging the local and global in their worldview.

This sense of moral outrage must be interpreted in a certain way to foster radicalization. The common interpretation is that all these global and local moral violations are examples of a unified Western global strategy, namely, a war against Islam. It is important to realize that this worldview is deliberately vague. In trying to understand radicalization, experts have focused far too much on ideology. The defendants at the Madrid bombing trial, at the Operation Crevice trial in London, at the Operation Pendennis litigation in Australia, or at the various Hofstad Group trials in Holland are far from being Islamic scholars. The perpetrators of 9/11 and those indicted in Miami, New York, New Jersey, and Toronto for attempted terrorist operations are not intellectuals who decide what to do after careful deliberation. The explanation for their behavior is not found in how they think, but rather in how they feel. All these perpetrators dream about becoming Islamic heroes in this war against Islam, modeling themselves on the seventh-century warriors who conquered half the world and on the mujahedin who defeated the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Many hope to emulate their predecessors now by fighting in Iraq against coalition forces.

The interpretation of a war against Islam occurs within a cultural tradition, however, and this is where Europe and the United States differ. In Europe, nations may be said to have been founded on the basis of the myth of a certain essence, what might be called Frenchness or Englishness. In the United States and other countries built on successive modern waves of immigration, the founding myth is more of a melting pot. The myth of a national essence excludes non-European immigrants, while that of a melting pot facilitates their inclusion into the host society. Second, the notion of the American dream, the land of opportunity, partially protects the United States from this form of terrorism. A recent poll found that 71 percent of Muslim Americans believe in the American dream (Pew Research Center 2007, 30). This is not the case in Europe, where Muslims complain about discrimination in the labor market. In the United States, the inclusiveness and equal opportunity of the American dream are not consistent with the belief that this is a war against Islam, thus making homegrown terrorism less likely within the United States than in Europe. A threat to the U.S. homeland may well still come from Europe.

The interpretation that the West is engaged in a war against Islam also resonates more with Muslim Europeans than Muslim Americans because of differences in their personal everyday experiences. On a socioeconomic scale, European and American Muslims comprise very different communities. The United States largely allowed Muslim engineers, physicians, university professors, and businessmen to immigrate; therefore, the Muslim American community is solidly middle class, with a higher average income than the typical American family (Sageman 2008, 100). In contrast, Europe imported unskilled labor to reconstruct communities devastated by World War II (Sageman 2008, 100). The unemployment rate for male Muslims is much higher than the average rate in the rest of society; Muslim Europeans strongly believe they are facing discrimination because they are Muslim.

Differences in welfare policy also distinguish Europe from the United States. Many Muslim Europeans, because they are unemployed, are on the welfare payroll. Many do not feel the urgency to get a job, and a few spend their idle moments talking about jihad. In essence,

European nations contribute to the funding of terrorist operations through welfare payments, allowing young Muslims to seek the thrill of participating in clandestine operations to escape the boredom of idleness.

These factors, taken together, influence some young Muslims to become angry; network mobilization allows a very small number of them to become terrorists. Until a few years ago, these networks operated face-to-face. Young immigrant cliques and members of student associations and study groups at some radical mosques became radicalized together. Their groups acted as echo chambers, amplifying their grievances, intensifying the members' bonds to each other, generating local values different from their host society's values, and facilitating a gradual separation from their host society. These natural group dynamics resulted in a spiral of mutual encouragement and escalation, transforming a few young Muslims into dedicated terrorists, willing to follow the model of their heroes and sacrifice themselves for comrades and the cause. Their turn to violence and the terrorist movement was a collective decision, not an individual one.

Over the past two or three years, face-to-face radicalization is being replaced by online radicalization. The interactivity of the group changes people's beliefs, and such interaction is found in Islamist extremist forums on the Internet. The same support and validation that young people used to derive from face-to-face peer groups are now found worldwide in online forums, which promote the image of terrorist heroes, promote extremist ideas, link users to the virtual social movement, give them guidance, and instruct them in tactics (see Kohlmann 2008 [this volume]). The true "leader" of this violent social movement is the collective discourse on half a dozen influential forums. The forums are transforming the terrorist movement, recruiting ever younger members and--more prominently--women to participate in the discussions.

It is important to recognize that the nature of the terrorist threat has evolved over time. The first wave of young Muslims who joined the terrorist social movement consisted of some "Afghan Arabs," the companions in arms of Osama bin Laden, who had come to Pakistan to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s. They were predominantly Egyptian and well educated and tended to have joined al Qaeda around the age of thirty. While these individuals still form the core of al Qaeda Central leadership, at most only a few dozen of these terrorists remain. The second wave was composed of still fairly well-educated young Muslims who came to Afghanistan in the 1990s for training. Many were expatriates who had come to the West for education and joined the social movement around the age of twenty-five. They were incorporated into al Qaeda Central; at most about a hundred individuals currently remain. The third wave consists mainly of those who aspire to be terrorists or what might be called "terrorist wannabes." Fueled by anger at the invasion of Iraq, these young people aspire to join the social movement but cannot link up to al Qaeda Central, whose members had to go into hiding after the post-9/11 invasion of Afghanistan. These newcomers are generally poorly educated, homegrown, and tend to join the movement around the age of twenty. They form fluid, self-financed, self-trained, informal networks. The process of radicalization is ongoing, but it takes place in a very hostile post-9/11 habitat. It thus has resulted in a scattered, decentralized social structure without formal command and control. It might be viewed as a "leaderless jihad," with Internet communication providing a semblance of unity and guidance. This portrait of the terrorists suggests that the threat to the West, far from being an inevitable "clash of civilizations" or a "long war," is

actually self-limiting. At present, al Qaeda Central cannot impose discipline on the third-wave "wannabes" mainly because it does not know who they are. Without this command and control, each disconnected network acts according to its own understanding and capability, with the collective actions failing to amount to any unified long-term goal or strategy. These separate groups cannot coalesce into a physical political party, because it would then become a vulnerable target for Western military or law enforcement power. Without the possibility of a physical presence or ability to negotiate with its enemies, the social movement is condemned to stay a leaderless jihad, an aspiration, but not a physical reality. Finally, al Qaeda has not been able to forge any state allies that might protect it against Western aggression. Without a viable and effective sanctuary, it cannot fully regroup and consolidate into a physical power capable of capturing some territory in order to establish its utopia.

While some experts talk of an al Qaeda resurgence, hardcore al Qaeda members of the first and second waves are dwindling in numbers and are not being replaced (Sageman 2008, 131). The few members of the third wave who succeed in making contact with al Qaeda Central in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in Pakistan are being turned around to conduct operations in their respective countries and are not being incorporated into al Qaeda Central. The survival of this terrorist social movement depends on the continued inflow of new members of the third wave, which in turn depends on young Muslims being attracted to this violent social movement. Here, again, the appeal of the al Qaeda social movement is limited.

First, although the Salafi utopia appeals in an abstract way to those seeking justice and fairness, its instantiation in reality--the actions of the Taliban and the radical Salafi violence in the Algerian civil war--were particularly repulsive to most Muslims. Second, as each generation tries to define itself in contrast to its predecessor, what appeals to the present generation of young Muslims might not appeal to their successors. Third, this appeal for the third wave is fueled by the sense of moral outrage caused by the invasion of Iraq. As the Western footprint there fades and the fighting appears to be more Muslim on Muslim, the appeal will disappear. And finally, new hotheads in the movement will always push the envelope and cause ever more atrocities to make a name for themselves. The magnitude of these atrocities is likely to turn young people off.

This analysis suggests that the logical strategy to ensure national security should be one of containment while waiting for the threat to disintegrate for internal reasons. The key is to accelerate this process of internal decay and not to slow it down or stop it. Nothing should be done that will make the Western threat appear to grow and encompass almost all Muslims, an escalation that could become a genuine threat to the United States.

Within this strategy of containment, it is important to neutralize the main drivers of the radicalization process: a search for glory and thrills. Terrorist acts must be stripped of glory and reduced to common criminality. Nothing is more glorious to terrorists than to go against uniformed men and women from the only remaining superpower. The fight against these terrorists must be demilitarized and turned over to law enforcement.

It is also important not to allocate too much importance to the terrorists who are arrested or killed. Leaders must resist the temptation to hold press conferences to publicize another "major victory" in the war on terror. These events have the undesired effect of elevating the status of

terrorist criminals to that of heroes. Low-key arrests and prosecution should degrade the status of the terrorists. Military action should be limited to denying sanctuary, either directly or through the training of allied forces. Unchecked sanctuaries have the potential to transform local terrorist activities into transnational coordinated plots.

A strategy of containment of the terrorist threat is not a passive strategy. It relies on U.S. technical capability to detect terrorist activities worldwide and relies on a strong international alliance against specific terrorists to disrupt and eliminate international plots. It must disrupt the path of radicalization, ensuring that new members do not join this terrorist social movement. Using the proposed radicalization framework, it is important to reduce the potential for moral outrage by diminishing the foreign footprint in Iraq as soon as possible. The foreign and especially American presence in Iraq has become the main source of inspiration for the third wave of terrorists.

In the West, the Muslim community is very sensitive to the activities of local state presence, namely, local law enforcement agencies. If it perceives them to be acting against its members, it will assume that the state is also against it. In a sense, this is what happened in many European countries, where white policemen patrol immigrant neighborhoods. Local police forces need to be seen as part of the community at large, and their makeup needs to reflect the composition of their communities. It is not enough to have regular meetings with Muslim community leaders, whom the younger generation may not respect. If they recruit young Muslims, police forces would have an ongoing daily relationship with young people in the community. Furthermore, it is important to engender hope in the Muslim community and explain police actions to them. This strategy is problematic in England because of the legal ban on commenting on criminal cases in litigation (Sageman 2008, 167). The opposite--making exaggerated claims of threat for short-term political benefits--will alienate the Muslim community. So far, Muslim Americans have shown themselves to be very patriotic; it is important to trust them to continue in this path and not to alienate them.

Regarding the second aspect of the radicalization process, it is crucial to show that our counterterrorism efforts are not part of a war on Islam. Government officials should actively challenge those who question the loyalty of Muslim Americans. The fact that the American dream is alive and well among Muslim Americans should be publicized more. Muslim-American success stories could serve as sources of inspiration and hopes for young Muslims, encouraging them to emulate these positive role models rather than those of Islamist terrorists. The "war of ideas" or the search for a "counternarrative" as presently conceived by the [\*230] U.S. government is generally misguided: terrorists are not intellectuals. They do what they do because of vague images of glory, not out of well-thought-out positions derived from scripture. The "war of ideas" should be replaced by the inspiration of new dreams and hopes for young Muslims. We should recall our own experience with the civil rights movement and inspiring leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr.

On the third prong, the United States is doing much better than Europe. The United States should continue to be fair and fight any discrimination in the labor market, at airports, and through law enforcement. The United States should advertise its successes in integrating its immigrant communities. It could do so through programs sending successful Muslim Americans abroad to

talk about their life in our country. Muslims should also be encouraged to enter into the realm of politics and show that they can influence their environment peacefully. Outside of the United States, the government's power is of course limited. The threat to the continental United States may still come from Europe, as it did for the 9/11 plot, whose leaders were radicalized in Hamburg. However, the United States can set an example of how domestic policies might mitigate social and economic discrimination of local immigrant communities.

On the fourth point, it is imperative to disrupt and when possible destroy the networks that threaten the United States, Europe, or any population. Terrorists who threaten the United States must be eliminated and brought to justice. This should be done quietly, however, so as not to elevate common criminals to the status of heroes. This effort should be a police rather than a military mission, relying on international allies aided by U.S. technical means through proper training and sharing of electronic intercepts. The arrest and prosecution of terrorists must be done with transparency and complete fairness. This is very much a battle for the hearts and minds of people with the potential to join the third wave of terrorists: any appearance of persecution and discrimination will be a strategic blow for short-term tactical gains in this battlefield. The point is to regain the international moral high ground that served the United States so well during the cold war. The alliance with local police must be carefully monitored; local tyrants would like to eliminate any internal opposition in the name of the "war on terror." The United States must be very careful in its choice of alliances so as not to be inadvertently dragged into local persecution of legitimate dissent against tyranny.

The advent of the Internet has gradually shifted offline to online networks, centered on Internet forums, where young Muslims share their dreams, hopes, and grievances. The United States must ensure that the voices of young Muslims who reject violence are heard in these discussions, by actively challenging the various calls to violence emerging from them. The focus must shift from a celebration of terrorist actions to reflections on the attacks' devastation and victims. Young people must understand that terrorism is about death and destruction, not about virtual self-glorification. It is necessary to reframe the whole debate about terrorism from imagined glory to very real horror. The voices of the victims and their relatives must be heard over the cacophony of bragging and pretending in the chat rooms.

The strategy to fight this terrorist threat must be based on an accurate empirical assessment of the threat. Such an assessment requires appropriate funding of scientific, evidence-based research on all forms of political violence and may be fostered by the loosening of secrecy requirements that prevent academic researchers from acquiring accurate data that no longer require classification.

The possibility of terrorists acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMD) must receive special consideration. So far, the scenarios scrutinized by the U.S. government are overly focused on terrorists gaining WMD from rogue states to the neglect of the possibility that terrorists could acquire them without relying on a state sponsor. The empirical record on terrorist groups trying to obtain or use WMD shows that they are not connected to any state (Sageman 2007). The odds are that a WMD attack on the United States might come, not from any of the well-known terrorist groups already monitored by law enforcement authorities, but from an informal group that is not yet on anybody's radar. The National Strategy for Combating Terrorism may prove

ineffective against such an informal group. Detection will instead come from local police forces, which may not have the kind of expertise now present in federal agencies to recognize and correctly interpret what they see on the ground. To protect against this threat, federal experts and local police must coordinate much more closely. In addition, immediate and transparent international cooperation is required to avert an even greater tragedy (see Fischhoff, Atran, and Sageman 2008 [this volume]).

The Muslim community in Western countries is relatively young, with most members having immigrated in the past half century. This generation is searching for its identity and trying to define its role with respect to the rest of Western society. It is important for the rest of Western society to welcome Muslims and help them integrate better into the fabric of Western nations and continue to promote core Western values of justice and fairness.

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