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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
Newport, RI**

UNDERSTANDING AND DEFEATING ISLAMIC EXTREMISTS

By

**Brent J. Griffin
Commander, USN**

A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: _____

17 May 2005

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses some fundamental, yet unresolved, questions concerning the nature and scope of America's Global War on Terrorism (GWOT); including: Is the GWOT a subset of a much larger "clash of civilizations?" What is the definition of terrorism? Who or what is the enemy in the GWOT—is it terrorism, a radical ideology, or Islamic extremists? What is the proper role of the military? What is the enemy's center-of-gravity? What is our friendly center-of-gravity? What are the best strategies to achieve victory? How will we know we are winning, or when we have "won"?

The author puts these questions into a historical and social context and presents several findings, including: This is not a "clash of civilizations;" our war is against extremist elements who espouse a radical ideology and the use of terrorism; American foreign policy is seen by many as anti-Muslim; we are not engaged in a "war on terrorism"—terrorism is a tactic; we must undermine the legitimacy of bin Laden's jihad; the enemy's center-of-gravity is their radical ideology; we attack their center-of-gravity by de-legitimizing their ideology; we will be unable to completely attrite the enemy or eliminate their radical beliefs; we can, however, isolate and contain them; our greatest potential asset in this endeavor is the silent majority of moderate Muslims; they are a critical—yet unrealized—friendly center-of-gravity; this is a war of alliances; America's most credible alliance has yet to form; we cannot "win" this war in the classical military sense; the military has a role, but is not the sole focus of effort; and the definition of success for the GWOT will remain elusive.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	1
TABLE OF CONTENTS	2
INTRODUCTION	3
UNDERSTANDING ISLAM AND THE EXTREMIST THREAT	4
Clash of Civilizations	4
Relationships between the Government, Religion, and Society	5
Islamic History and Revivalism	7
Jihad	9
Muslim Grievances and American Foreign Policy	10
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COMMANDER	13
Defining the War	13
Identifying the Enemy	13
Identifying Centers-of-Gravity	15
Strategies and Military Utilization	17
Are We Winning?	19
CONCLUSION	20
BIBLIOGRAPHY	23

“The gravest danger our Nation faces lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology.”

—George W. Bush¹

INTRODUCTION

Since 9/11, America’s Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) has included the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; a sweeping reorganization of our national security apparatus and intelligence community; and a shift in focus for the U.S. military. Yet despite these watershed events, many policymakers and military leaders have difficulty describing the exact nature and scope of the GWOT. Lively debate, without real consensus, continues over fundamental questions, such as: Is the GWOT a subset of a much larger “clash of civilizations?”² What does a GWOT constitute? Is one of our objectives to eliminate the use of terrorism as a tactic? What exactly is the definition of terrorism? Who or what is the enemy in the GWOT—is it terrorism, a radical ideology, or Islamic extremists? What is the proper role of the military? What is the enemy’s center-of-gravity? What is our friendly center-of-gravity? What are the best strategies to achieve victory? How will we know we are winning, or when we have “won”?

The answers to these questions, as well as the associated debates, will continue to influence America’s national security strategy for the foreseeable future. They will also impact military planning and operations. Operational planning assumptions will be made—sometimes by others—based on how the above questions have been answered. ***Military leaders must fundamentally wrestle with these issues for themselves—and understand the operational implications of their conclusions.***

¹ The White House, The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, (Washington, DC: 2002), ii.

² See: Samuel P. Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order, (NY: Simon & Schuster 1996).

UNDERSTANDING ISLAM AND THE EXTREMIST THREAT

Clash of Civilizations

For many Americans, the Bush Administration's insistence that our war on terrorism "is not a war against Islam" seems trite, laced with political correctness, and simply wrong. Samuel Huntington, a well-respected Harvard scholar, stated: "*The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power.*"³ Others however, including columnist Daniel Pipes, agree with the President: "Americans are *not* involved in a battle royal between Islam and the West, or what has been called a 'clash of civilizations.'"⁴ This distinction is critical to U.S. decision-makers and those engaged in the GWOT. Is it a "clash of civilizations" or not? American foreign policy, and our subsequent interaction with over 1.3 billion Muslims, depends on the answer. The worldwide military implications are staggering. There are many professional and sincere military officers who staunchly support both views. What view an operational commander adopts may advertently—or inadvertently—influence their or their subordinate's actions.

A review and understanding of Islamic history and beliefs reveals that our confrontation is not—and should not be—with Islam. Islam is a religion based on peaceful interaction and mutual respect. Our war is against extremist elements within Islam; elements that espouse a radical ideology and the use of terrorism. This war will be a protracted war that must be waged with all instruments of national and international power, and one waged side-by-side with moderate Muslims and our Allies. To place the current confrontation into

³ Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order, 217. Emphasis added.

⁴ Daniel Pipes, "Who Is The Enemy?", Commentary, (January 2002), 24.

a “*clash of civilizations*” context constitutes failure—a failure to understand Islamic history and practices, as well as the real enemy.

Relationships between the Government, Religion, and Society

One of the most common misunderstandings between Islamic and Western societies is the concept of secularism. *Both societies differ in their views on proper relationships between the government, religion, and society.* For Muslims, Muhammad became the all-encompassing spiritual, political, and military leader from the beginning. The Islamic community did not fear tyrannical rule. Why? Because of the fundamental premise of Islam: Allah is the one and only true God and Sovereign. Men, including Muhammad, had no authority over Him. Consequently, there was no “legal” separation between church and state. Bernard Lewis, a Middle Eastern scholar, states that from Islam’s inception “religious truth and political power were indissolubly associated: the first sanctified the second, the second sustained the first.” Furthermore, the rules for “acquisition and exercise of power, the nature of legitimacy and authority, [and] the duties of ruler and subject” were outlined in the holy law (sharia). Muslim “public and social lives were guided by a universally acceptable set of rules and principles.” Since the seventh century, all spheres of Muslim interaction have been interwoven with the religion. Muslims strive to abide by Allah’s will in all aspects of their lives; this concept remains the oldest and truest definition of jihad.⁵

Christians, on the other hand, have been guided by Jesus’ declaration to “render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things which are God’s.” Many Western governments have adopted this secular stance. Lewis summarizes the dichotomy:

⁵ Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror*, (NY: Random House, 2003), 5-8, 13, 17.

In pagan Rome, Caesar was God. For Christians, there is a choice between God and Caesar, and endless generations of Christians have been ensnared in that choice. In Islam, there is no such painful choice. In the universal Islamic polity as conceived by Muslims, there is no Caesar but only God, who is the sole sovereign and the sole source of law.⁶

Why is this concept so important in understanding the GWOT? Because extremists are fighting both the West and other Muslims over this issue. Today's moderate Muslims believe that there can be an acceptable quasi-separation between temporal and spiritual matters. They believe democracy is compatible with Islam. Since Muhammad's time, decisions—including selecting a Caliph—were based on consultation and discussion. *Islamic fundamentalists, on the other hand, view democratic governance as evil. Why? Because they believe the will of the people supercedes the will of God in democracies.* They accuse those opposed to their point of view of apostasy, labeling them as traitors to Islam. According to the sharia, apostasy is punishable by death; and neither man nor governments have the authority to commute the sentence.

The difference between an Islamic fundamentalist and an Islamic extremist is defined by their actions, not their beliefs. A fundamentalist becomes an extremist when they resort to terrorism to achieve their goals. Usama bin Laden epitomizes Islamic extremism. His ideas are not the issue; fundamentalist Muslims have existed since the beginning of Islam. In many instances, their intent was pure—to bring the Muslim community back to “the straight path,” and in harmony with Allah's will. *It is bin Laden's violent strategy to destroy America and perceived Muslim apostates that is the issue.* For bin Laden, all Muslims must totally submit to the will of Allah, as outlined in the Quran, Hadith (traditions of Muhammad), sharia—and *bin Laden's interpretation of right and wrong.* Concepts such as democracy, secularism, and individualism have no place in Islam according to him. Bin

⁶ Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, 6-7.

Laden, and other extremists, have chosen terrorism to make their point. *Today's tension between Muslim fundamentalists and moderates, however, is not new.* There have been numerous spikes in fundamentalism and revivalism throughout Islamic history.

Islamic History and Revivalism

There are two key points that must be made about Islamic history. First, *Muslims revere history.* For them, past and present are inextricably linked. When bin Laden evokes names and events of the past, it is not for pedantic reasons. He knows it will resonate with the Muslim populace. Karen Armstrong, a religious scholar, states: “An account of the external history of the Muslim people cannot, therefore, be of mere secondary interest, since one of the chief characteristics of Islam has been its sacralization of history.”⁷ Second, *there are historical fundamentalist figures that are well-respected by many Muslims, including Ibn Taymiyya, al-Wahhabi, and Qutb.* Why? Because they are viewed as “defending” Islam during times of crises. Many Muslims argue that is exactly what bin Laden is doing today.

Revivalist movements⁸ have emerged throughout Islamic history in response to real or perceived threats. Threats can be external, referred to as the “far enemy,” or internal, referred to as the “near enemy.” Ibn Taymiyya, a thirteenth century theologian, was concerned with internal matters. He “focused on the issues of statecraft and good governance,” and believed a ruler’s legitimacy was based on his piety and enforcement of sharia.⁹ Abd al-Wahhab, an eighteenth century Arabian, is the father of today’s extremist ideology. Al-Wahhab’s wrath and fiery rhetoric were directed at both external and internal enemies. His intolerant, maniacal behavior is legendary. According to Bernard Lewis:

⁷ Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History*, (NY: Modern Library, 2002), xii.

⁸ Other terms also have been used to describe these movements, including: fundamentalist, reform, and radical.

⁹ Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Age of Sacred Terror*, (NY: Random House, 2003), 52.

Arabia was briefly threatened by the Crusaders in the twelfth century C.E. After their defeat and eviction, the next perceived infidel threat to Arabia began in the eighteenth century, with the consolidation of European power in South Asia and the appearance of European, in other words, Christian, ships off the Arabian shores. The resulting sense of outrage was at least one of the elements in the religious revival that was inspired in Arabia by the Wahhabi movement and led by the house of Saud.¹⁰

Internally, al-Wahhabi was consumed by apostasy:

The ire of the Wahhabis was directed not primarily against outsiders but against those whom they saw as betraying and degrading Islam from within: on the one hand those who attempted any kind of modernizing reform; and on the other—and this was the more immediate target—those whom the Wahhabis saw as corrupting and debasing the true Islamic heritage of the Prophet and his Companions.¹¹

Another fundamentalist was Sayyid Qutb. Qutb, an Egyptian, was a founding member of the Muslim brotherhood in 1928. His stinging critique of Western society was based on his experiences living in America. He believed “that the unity of God and His sovereignty meant that human rule—government that legislates its own behavior—is illegitimate.”¹²

Like many Muslims, Qutb could not reconcile secularism with the supreme rule of Allah.

Today’s revivalist movement is closely related to those of the past. Bin Laden’s philosophy and ideas have been heavily influenced by both al-Wahhabi and Qutb. The key distinction, however, is his global use of indiscriminate violence. According to Daniel Pipes:

This radicalism is today’s enraged answer to question that has bedeviled Muslims for 200 years, as the power and wealth that once blessed the world of Islam dribbled away over the five centuries before 1800 and other peoples and nations surged ahead. What went wrong? If Islam brings God’s grace, as was widely assumed, why do Muslims fare so poorly? Muslims turned to a number of extremist ideologies in the modern period—from fascism and Leninism to pan-Arabism and pan-Syrianism—all in an attempt to answer that question by almost any means other than introspection, moderation, and self-help. Militant Islam has turned out to be the most popular, the most deluded, and the most disastrous of these ideologies.¹³

¹⁰ Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, xxx-xxxii.

¹¹ Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, 122.

¹² Benjamin and Simon, *The Age of Sacred Terror*, 62.

¹³ Pipes, “Who Is The Enemy?”, 25.

One important linkage between revivalist movements and violence concerns jihad. This concept is one of the most misunderstood and misapplied aspects of Islam. All Muslims have a religious obligation to defend Islam if it is threatened. The Islamic community historically has been divided over what constitutes a threat. For many, like bin Laden, America is the ultimate threat to Islam today; not all Muslims share that belief.

Jihad

Jihad, in its purest form, is an individual's internal struggle to abide by Allah's will. Jihad also takes an external, physical form when it comes to defending Islam. Jihad is a religious duty when combating infidels (non-believers) and apostates. The crime of apostasy is by far the worst. There also is a difference between offensive and defensive jihad. Offensive jihad is non-obligatory, and can be conducted by volunteers (e.g., fighting to expand the Muslim empire). *Defensive jihad is conducted to defend the faith (e.g., against the Crusaders), and is a religious duty of all Muslims.* Bin Laden cited this obligation in his call for jihad: "to kill Americans and their allies, both civil and military, is an individual duty of every Muslim who is able, in any country where this is possible."¹⁴

Extremist Sunnis, however, are not the only ones calling for jihad. Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, a Iraqi Shiite, also called for jihad against the West: "The world as it is today is how others shaped it. We have two choices: either accept it with submission, which means letting Islam die, or to destroy it, so that we can construct the world as Islam requires."¹⁵ Why do many Muslims feel a defensive jihad against the West, particularly

¹⁴ Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, xxvii.

¹⁵ Yossef Bodansky, *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America*, (Roseville, CA: Prima Publishing, 2001), xiv.

America, is necessary? Because they have a ready litany of real and perceived grievances to justify their beliefs—and actions.

Muslim Grievances and American Foreign Policy

There are many internal and external factors that have contributed to the destabilization of Muslim societies over the past few centuries, including: the negative effects of Western imperialism and colonization; unsettling effects of nationalism, pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism, and democratization movements; poor self-governance and repressive rulers; inadequate educational and social support systems; a sudden influx of oil wealth; high birth rates, rapid population growth, and youth bulges; urbanization; economic stagnation and high unemployment; and the disrupting effects of modernization and globalization. These factors have caused significant turmoil to their traditional way of life.

A significant percentage of Muslims blame the West for many of their problems; some claims are valid, others are not. For them, today's radicalism is a justified backlash for years of Western transgression. According to one Middle Eastern expert:

the Islamic Resurgence is both a product of and an effort to come to grips with modernization. Its underlying causes are those generally responsible for indigenization trends in non-Western societies: urbanization, social mobilization, higher levels of literacy and education, intensified communication and media consumption, and expanded interaction with Western and other cultures. These developments undermine traditional village and clan ties and create alienation and an identity crisis.¹⁶

Furthermore, *American foreign policy is seen by many, including moderate Muslims, as divisive and anti-Muslim.* A former U.S. intelligence official stated: “The United States is

¹⁶ Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, ed., “Islamic Resurgence in the Arab World,” (NY: Praeger, 1982), 23. Quoted in Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order, 116.

hated across the Islamic world because of specific U.S. government policies and actions.”

He cited six offending policies:

- U.S. support for Israel that keeps Palestinians in the Israelis’ thrall;
- U.S. and other Western troops on the Arabian Peninsula;
- U.S. occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan;
- U.S. support for Russia, India, and China against their Muslim militants;
- U.S. pressure on Arab energy producers to keep prices low;
- U.S. support for apostate, corrupt, and tyrannical Muslim governments.¹⁷

Moreover, he contends that U.S. GWOT efforts will fail unless we change our policies. Many moderate Muslims concur with his assessment. *But is American foreign policy really the cause of such hatred? Or is it our beliefs and way of life that are so distasteful to many Muslims? Bernard Lewis reportedly has swayed both President Bush and Vice President Cheney in his belief that “this hatred goes beyond the level of hostility to specific interests or actions or policies or even countries, and becomes a rejection of Western civilization as such, not so much for what it does as for what it is, and for the principles and values that it practices and professes.” According to Lewis, changing our policies will not appease the extremists: “What we confront now is not just a complaint about one or another American policy but rather a rejection and condemnation, at once angry and contemptuous, of all that America is seen to represent in the modern world.”*¹⁸ The “policy-versus-ideals” debate continues unabated. It is an important for interested parties to understand both views.

Bin Laden’s specific grievances against U.S. policies were outlined in his infamous 1998 “Declaration of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders.” He primarily focused on three areas: U.S. military occupation of Arabia; U.S. aggression in Iraq; and U.S. support for Israel. The declaration reads in part:

¹⁷ Anonomous, *Imperial Hubris*, (Washington, D.C.: Brassey’s Inc., 2004), 240-241.

¹⁸ Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, 26, 76.

First—For more than seven years the United States is occupying the lands of Islam in the holiest of its territories, Arabia, plundering its riches, over-whelming its rulers, humiliating its people, threatening its neighbors, and using its bases in the peninsula as a spearhead to fight against the neighboring Islamic peoples. Though some in the past have disputed the true nature of this occupation, the people of Arabia in the entirety have now recognized it. There is no better proof of this than the continuing American aggression against the Iraqi people, launched from the Arabia despite its rulers, who all oppose the use of their territories for this purpose but are subjugated.

Second—Despite the immense destruction inflicted on the Iraqi people at the hands of the Crusader Jewish alliance, and in spite of the appalling number of the dead, exceeding a million, the Americans nevertheless, in spite of all this, are trying once more to repeat this dreadful slaughter. It seems that the long blockade following after a fierce war, the dismemberment and the destruction are not enough for them. So they come again today to destroy what remains of this people and to humiliate their Muslim neighbors.

Third—While the purposes of the Americans in these wars are religious and economic, they also serve the petty state of the Jews, to divert attention from their occupation of Jerusalem and their killing of Muslims in it. There is no better proof of all this than their eagerness to destroy Iraq, the strongest of the neighboring Arab states, and their attempt to dismember all the states of the region, such as Iraq and Saudi Arabia and Egypt and Sudan, into petty states, whose division and weakness would ensure the survival of Israel and continuation of the calamitous Crusader occupation of the lands of Arabia.¹⁹

For many Muslims, his call for jihad resonated with truth and justice. But for others, it was a “grotesque travesty of the nature of Islam, and even of its doctrine of jihad.”²⁰

Why is it important for military commanders to understand Muslim grievances and perceptions of U.S. foreign policy? Because it helps us frame the issue; better understand the extremist threat; and provides insight into the thoughts of *moderate Muslims—a yet untapped critical friendly center-of-gravity*.

Understanding Muslim perceptions would have helped predict the worldwide rise in anti-American sentiment following the invasion of Iraq. Some experts believe the attack was a significant set-back for our overall GWOT efforts, ultimately boosting the extremists’

¹⁹ Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, xxv-xxvi. Complete text of Fatwa can be found at: <http://www.ict.org.il/articles/fatwah.htm>.

²⁰ Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, xxxii.

cause and recruitment base. Others believe democratization of Middle Eastern countries, including Iraq, is a key measure of effectiveness in assessing our overall success or failure in this campaign. Military commanders must be familiar with these causal relationships; and understand the risks inherent in their decisions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COMMANDER

Defining the War

American leaders must better define the nature and scope of the current conflict to ensure understanding and garner further domestic and international support. *It must be clarified that we are not engaged in a “war on terrorism.”*²¹ Terrorism is a tactic; it is not “the enemy.” *It is an illegal method of indiscriminate violence directed at non-combatants to advance a weaker group’s political, social, economic, ethnic, or religious cause. America cannot wage war on a method. We wage war on an enemy.* Identifying and understanding the “right” enemy are key enablers for success.

Identifying the Enemy

According to the Director, Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA):

The primary threat for the foreseeable future is a network of *Islamic extremists* hostile to the United States and our interests. The network is transnational and has a broad range of capabilities, to include mass-casualty attacks. The most dangerous and immediate threat is *Sunni Islamic terrorists* that form the ‘al-Qaeda associated movement.’²²

²¹ For an excellent argument for better defining the nature and scope of the war see: Jeffrey Record, Bounding the Global War on Terrorism, (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2003).

²² Lowell E. Jacoby, “Statement,” U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Current and Projected National Security Threats to the United States, 17 March 2005, 2-3. Emphasis added.

The 9/11 Commission Report also addressed the threat: “the enemy is not just ‘terrorism,’ some generic evil. This vagueness blurs the strategy. The catastrophic threat at this moment in history is more specific. It is the threat posed by Islamist terrorism—especially the al Qaeda network, its affiliates, and its ideology.”²³ Bin Laden views this as “a religious war, a war for Islam against infidels, and therefore, inevitably, against the United States, the greatest power in the world of infidels.”²⁴ Furthermore, *he believes that there has been a “clear declaration of war by the Americans against God, His Prophet, and the Muslims.”*²⁵ Accordingly, he has called on all Muslims to conduct jihad to defend Islam. Bruce Hoffman, a terrorism expert, testified that “for the religious terrorist, violence first and foremost is a sacramental act or a divine duty.”²⁶ *Islamic extremists truly believe they are acting in accordance with Allah’s will. They will not stop until they have defeated the U.S.; overthrown apostate rulers; and reestablished the caliphate—or until they have been captured or killed. Every instrument of national and international power must be used to stop them.*

Our enemy is Islamic extremists. It is not Islam, terrorism, or a radical ideology.

According to the Director, DIA: “We now face an ‘al-Qaeda associated movement’ of like-minded groups who interact, share resources, and work to achieve shared goals.”²⁷ It is this “like-mindedness” that creates a self-replicating organization. Cutting-off the head will not kill the extremist snake. Their common, radical ideology allows for decentralized command and control, as well as operations. Terrorist operatives have fully accepted and internalized their extremist version of the “commander’s intent and guidance.”

²³ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, (NY, London: 2004), 362.

²⁴ Lewis, The Crisis of Islam, xv.

²⁵ Lewis, The Crisis of Islam, xxvi.

²⁶ Steven Strasser, ed., The 9/11 Investigations, (NY: Public Affairs, 2004), 425.

²⁷ Jacoby, “Statement,” 3.

Identifying Enemy and Friendly Centers-of-Gravity

The extremists' center-of-gravity is not a tangible entity; it is not their leadership, their cadre of suicide bombers, or their support base. *Their center-of-gravity is their radical Islamic ideology.* An ideology poignantly shaped by sweeping historical events and societal disruptions. It is their litany of grievances against the West that feeds the hatred and fuels the ideology. Many Muslims sincerely believe that America is attacking their faith. Bin Laden eloquently argues that Islam has been humiliated and disgraced for “more than eighty years;”²⁸ a timeframe coinciding with the downfall of the Ottoman Empire. This theme resonates with many disenfranchised Muslims. Bernard Lewis describes the appeal of an Islamic-based solution:

In a time of intensifying strains, of faltering ideologies, jaded loyalties, and crumbling institutions, an ideology expressed in Islamic terms offered several advantages: an emotionally familiar basis of group identity, solidarity, and exclusion; an acceptable basis of legitimacy and authority; and immediately intelligible formulation of principles for both a critique of the present and a program for the future.²⁹

One of America's greatest—and most formidable—tasks is to counter the charges of being “anti-Muslim.” *We must undermine the legitimacy of, and perceived need for, a worldwide defensive jihad against America.* We must effectively convey that we are not a threat to Islam. The U.S. military plays a supporting—not lead—role in this effort. In fact, many argue the less armed aggression, the better. We must win the diplomatic and humanitarian war of words and deeds. *Only then can we attack the extremists' center-of-gravity by de-legitimizing their ideology. This will sever their support base, and lead to their*

²⁸ Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, xv.

²⁹ Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam*, 22.

marginalization. We will never be able to completely attrite the enemy or eliminate their radical beliefs. We can, however, isolate and contain them.

One of our greatest potential assets in this endeavor is the silent majority of moderate Muslims. *They are a critical—yet unrealized—friendly center-of-gravity.* We must focus on gaining their support. Our efforts to address and assuage their concerns have thus far failed. According to the Director, DIA: *“Multiple polls show favorable ratings for the United States in the Muslim world at all-time lows. Across the Middle East, surveys report suspicion over U.S. motivation for the War on Terrorism. Overwhelming majorities in Morocco, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia believe the U.S. has a negative policy toward the Arab world.”*³⁰ Fortunately, however, America is still capable of turning the tide of public opinion. Akbar Ahmed, an Islamic religious scholar, summed-up the Muslim majority view during a recent British Broadcasting Company interview:

At the moment there is still time. Muslims are not extremists but ordinary people wanting to live peaceful lives. If non-Muslim governments understand Muslim aspirations, respect Muslim sensitivities, show compassion for Muslim sufferings, then there is no reason why differences in faith, in themselves, should be a cause of conflict. What is needed, easy to say, difficult to achieve, is mutual understanding.³¹

America cannot wage this battle alone. *This war is an alliance-versus-alliance undertaking.* The enemy is a loosely-affiliated network of highly-dedicated transnational terrorists fueled by a radical Sunni ideology. According to terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna: “Al Qaeda is responding by building a multinational alliance of terrorist groups. Advancing the concept of the universality of the battle, it is seeking to widen the conflict from the territorial to the global.”³² Their ideological-based alliance is tight; and unlikely to be broken. *America’s most credible alliance has yet to form. Until moderate Muslims are*

³⁰ Jacoby, “Statement,” 17 March 2005, 4. Emphasis added.

³¹ Eerdmans’ Publishing Co., *The World’s Religions*, (Grand Rapids, MI: 1994), 342.

³² Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror*, (NY: Berkley Books, 2003), 297.

persuaded, cajoled, or otherwise drawn into the fray on our side, the war will not end—nor can we “win” in the classical military sense. Fellow Muslims are the only ones that can delegitimize, marginalize, and isolate the extremists. U.S. diplomatic, economic, and military power alone cannot achieve our desired endstate. Military aggression—although sometimes warranted—can lead to strategic setbacks. What then, is our current strategy to win this war?

Strategies and Military Utilization

There are several strategy-related documents relating to the GWOT, including: the *National Security Strategy*; *National Defense Strategy*; *National Military Strategy*; and *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*. Their outlined objectives are similar; however, their terminology is somewhat different. Common objectives include: (1) protecting the homeland; (2) attacking terrorists and sponsors; and (3) preventing recruitment and the spread of their ideology. The *National Security Strategy* outlines a multi-dimensional approach to the war:

To defeat this threat we must make use of every tool in our arsenal—military power, better homeland defenses, law enforcement, intelligence, and vigorous efforts to cut off terrorist financing. The war against terrorists of global reach is a global enterprise of uncertain duration. America will help nations that need our assistance in combating terror.³³

The national strategy also highlights the importance of an effective alliance; one that includes moderate Muslims:

We will also wage a war of ideas to win the battle of international terrorism. This includes: supporting moderate and modern government, especially in the Muslim world, to ensure that the conditions and ideologies that promote terrorism do not find fertile ground in any nation; diminishing the underlying conditions that spawn terrorism by enlisting the international community to focus its efforts and resources on areas most at risk; and using effective public diplomacy to promote the free flow

³³ The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, i.

of information and ideas to kindle the hope and aspirations of freedom of those societies ruled by the sponsors of global terrorism.³⁴

The *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* outlines four goals: *Defeat* terrorists and their organizations; *Deny* sponsorship, support, and sanctuary to terrorists; *Diminish* the underlying conditions that terrorists seek to exploit; and *Defend* U.S. citizens and interests at home and abroad.³⁵ Similarly, the *National Defense Strategy* identifies three elements: *Protecting* the homeland; *countering* ideological support for terrorism; and *disrupting and attacking* terrorist networks.³⁶ *They all emphasize a coordinated domestic and international response to the threat. The military has a prominent role, but is not the sole focus of effort.*

What then, is the military's role? The military will remain a key player in punishing state-sponsors of terrorism if required, and capturing and killing terrorists. Joint forces also can assist in forward-deployed homeland defense, as well as working with other agencies within the continental U.S. This includes preemptive operations to neutralize emerging overseas threats. Furthermore, we can assist other nations in bolstering their military and intelligence capabilities to combat internal or regional threats. This includes security assistance; bilateral and multilateral training; exercises; educational programs; and other traditional theater security cooperation activities. According to the Deputy Commander, U.S. European Command: "The impact of these programs on an underdeveloped country with a struggling military or law enforcement component can be immense."³⁷

We must, however, be cognizant of second-and third-order effects of our military actions. *Some have argued that there is a direct correlation between military action and*

³⁴ Ibid., 6.

³⁵ U.S. Government, *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, (Washington, D.C., 2003), 11-12.

³⁶ Department of Defense, *The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, (Washington, D.C., 2005), 8-9.

³⁷ Charles F. Wald, "U.S. European Command and Transformation," *Joint Force Quarterly*, (2nd Quarter, 2005): 22.

terrorist recruitment—the more we attack, the more they are able to recruit. A delicate balance must be achieved. For the military commander, it is important to understand that for every offensive action, there may be an equally aggressive reaction. Their response may not even occur in the same region. An American-led action in Europe for instance, may provoke an asymmetrical terrorist response in the Pacific. Nevertheless, direct action military missions will remain a key component of our nation’s overall GWOT effort.

Are We Winning?

Two years following 9/11, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld asked the combatant commanders a fundamental question: “Are we winning or losing the Global War on Terror?” He stated: “Today, we lack metrics to know if we are winning or losing the global war on terror. Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us?”³⁸ The questions were difficult to answer. The 9/11 Commission Report subsequently reiterated the importance of such an assessment, with the caveat that: “measurements do not need to be quantitative: government cannot measure success in the ways that private firms can. But the targets should be specific enough so that reasonable observers—in the White House, the Congress, the media, or the general public—can judge whether or not the objectives have been obtained.”³⁹

The definition of success for the GWOT, however, remains elusive. It is—and will remain—difficult to measure. Eighteen months after the Secretary asked the question, the

³⁸ Donald Rumsfeld, “Global War on Terrorism,” memo to Gen. Dick Myers, Paul Wolfowitz, Gen. Pete Pace, Doug Feith, 16 October 2003. Found at: www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/dod/rumsfeld-d20031016sdmemo.htm

³⁹ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks, The 9/11 Commission Report, 364.

Pentagon continues to struggle with specific, quantitative measures of effectiveness.

According to one report:

They [senior Pentagon officials] have come to see the war on terrorism as one of ideas as much as of kinetics, in which changing minds and managing perceptions is as important as killing or capturing terrorists. Success must be measured not by body counts and arrests but by democracy in the region, a steady decline in hateful rhetoric, and a sharp drop in the effectiveness of terrorist attacks.⁴⁰

A more fundamental question is whether or not the war on terrorism can actually be won? *The answer is no; not in a classical military sense.* Our alliance can succeed only by isolating and marginalizing the current group of extremists. Ideologies and beliefs are extremely difficult to kill, especially by physical means. The spread of Christianity is just one historical example. Persecuted Christians were not driven into extinction; just the opposite occurred, they flourished. Islamic fundamentalism has repeatedly emerged throughout Muslim history—and it will continue to do so.

As outlined in our *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*: “Victory against terrorism will not occur as a single, defining moment. It will not be marked by the likes of the surrender ceremony on the deck of the USS Missouri that ended World War II.”⁴¹

Traditional wars also provided clear standards of measuring success in the form of territory gained and enemy forces destroyed or otherwise removed from combat. But these standards were always of limited utility against irregular enemies that fought to different standards of success, and they are of practically no use in gauging success against terrorist threat like al-Qaeda.⁴²

Gauging success or failure will remain one of the most difficult and elusive aspects of the GWOT. Commanders must recognize this, and remain engaged in the assessment process.

CONCLUSION

⁴⁰ Christian Lowe, “Is United States winning anti-terrorism campaign?”, *Navy Times*, 04 April 2005, 26.

⁴¹ U.S. Government, *The National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, 12.

⁴² Record, *Bounding the Global War on Terrorism*, 4.

The U.S. military will continue to be an integral component of America's GWOT. Yet despite more than three years of effort, fundamental questions remain concerning the nature and scope of the conflict. Debates over these issues will impact our national security and military strategies for the foreseeable future. This paper makes the following arguments:

- *This is not a “clash of civilizations.” Our confrontation is not with Islam.*
- *Our war is against extremist elements within Islam; elements who espouse a radical ideology and the use of terrorism.*
- *Tension between Muslim fundamentalists and moderates is not new. Revivalist movements have emerged throughout Islamic history in response to real or perceived threats. Today's movement is closely related to those of the past.*
- *Muslim and Western societies differ in their views on relationships between the government, religion, and society. Secularism will remain a contentious issue.*
- *Many Islamic fundamentalists view democratic governance as evil because they believe the will of the people supercedes the will of God in democracies.*
- *The difference between an Islamic fundamentalist and an Islamic extremist is defined by their actions, not their beliefs. A fundamentalist becomes an extremist when they resort to terrorism to achieve their goals.*
- *Muslim societies have been destabilized, leading to many grievances.*
- *American foreign policy is seen by many, including moderate Muslims, as anti-Muslim. Others believe we will be hated for our values regardless of our policies.*
- *We are not engaged in a “war on terrorism.” Terrorism is a tactic. Terrorism is an illegal method of indiscriminate violence directed at non-combatants to advance a weaker group's political, social, economic, ethnic, or religious cause.*

- *We wage war on an enemy. Our enemy is Islamic extremists. It is not Islam, terrorism, or a radical ideology.*
- *Defensive jihad is conducted to defend the faith, and is a religious duty of all Muslims. Bin Laden believes America is a threat to Islam, and has called for jihad. Extremists truly believe they are acting in accordance with Allah's will.*
- *We must undermine the legitimacy of, and perceived need for, jihad. We must effectively convey that we are not a threat to Islam.*
- *The enemy's center-of-gravity is their radical Islamic ideology.*
- *We must win the diplomatic war of words and deeds. Only then can we attack the extremists' center-of-gravity by de-legitimizing their ideology. This will sever their support base, and lead to their marginalization.*
- *We will never be able to completely attrite the enemy or eliminate their radical beliefs. We can, however, isolate and contain them.*
- *Our greatest potential asset in this endeavor is the silent majority of moderate Muslims. They are a critical—yet unrealized—friendly center-of-gravity.*
- *This is a war of alliances. America's most credible alliance has yet to form. Until moderate Muslims join our side, the war will not end. We cannot "win" this war in the classical military sense. Fellow Muslims are the only ones that can de-legitimize, marginalize, and isolate the extremists.*
- *Our national strategies emphasize a coordinated domestic and international response to the threat. The military has a role, but is not the sole focus of effort.*
- *Military actions must be balanced. There is a correlation between military action and terrorist recruitment—the more we attack, the more they are able to recruit.*

- *The definition of success for the GWOT will remain elusive.*

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