

Winning the War of Ideas

Marc Sageman

War of Ideas

- To win the war on terror, first win the war of ideas
- Military solutions needed against specific hard targets:
 - formal organizations with well defined boundaries
 - Destroyed Afghan camps
 - 2/3 of 2001 leadership
- Idea-based solution needed against fuzzy idea-based networks
 - Threat: violent Islamist revivalist social movement
 - Common element is idea (global Salafi jihad)
 - Loose network with fuzzy boundaries
 - Self organized, bottom up, local initiative, uncoordinated
 - No fixed number of terrorists
 - Number fluctuates according to local grievance & international situation
 - New 2004 leaders, self selection for aggressiveness

Waging the war of Ideas

- Goal: elimination & prevention of the immediate and specific threat to the U.S. & the West
 - Containment of realistic threat
 - Engagement of Muslim population
 - Specific: global Salafi jihad, not internal opposition
- Strategy: alter Muslims' perception that their interests are hostile to the West: two prongs
 - Negative: De-legitimize terrorist ideas
 - Positive: Promote alternative inspiring vision consistent with collaboration with the West
- Must be fought with ideas
 - War of narratives, fought on the battlefield of interpretations

How do ideas influence terrorists?

- No idea is intrinsically persuasive
- How do ideas influence terrorists?
 1. How did terrorist ideas evolve?
 2. How do terrorist leaders generate ideas?
 3. How do ideas mobilize people to join the jihad?
 4. What gives ideas credibility?
- Method: evidence-based terrorism research
 - If it ever hopes to reach status of empirical science, it must become a quantitative science, not anecdotal
 - Must dispose of common misconceptions:
 - Mass appeal theory
 - Brainwashing

How did al Qaeda ideas evolve?

- Answer to Islamic decadence: vision of a just Islamic state, emulating the companions of the Prophet (**Salaf**)
- Decadence & unfairness due to **crisis of values** (*Jahiliyya*) requires overthrow of apostate “Muslim” ruler to return to Salafi values (Qutb)
- The 3 phases of the global Salafi Jihad
 - The forgotten duty, against the **near enemy** (Faraj)
 - Expand the defensive **jihad** globally (Azzam)
 - Make the global Salafi jihad offensive
 - Switches priority against the **far enemy**, which supports the “near enemy” (al-Zawahiri & bin Laden, but not the EIG)
 - The use of violence against non-Muslim government or population in furtherance of Salafi objectives

How do terrorist leaders generate ideas?

- Very contentious internal process
- Ideas are weapons for leaders to promote themselves, leading to splits & alliances
 - Make sense of the world to inspire & legitimate specific strategy and tactics
 - What is the problem? Who is to blame? What's the solution?
- **Waging the War of Ideas (WoI):**
 - Encourage doctrinal disputes to discredit leaders
 - Discredit dangerous ideas: distortion of the Quran
 - Encourage & amplify non-threatening ones

Joining the Jihad: The conventional wisdom

- Do ideas cause people to join the jihad?
- People join terrorist organizations because they are:
 - Poor
 - Broken family background
 - Ignorant (uneducated)
 - Immature young men
 - No skills
 - No family or job responsibility
 - Weak minds, vulnerable to brainwashing (madrassas, family or direct appeal)
 - Mentally ill
 - Criminals
 - Religious fanatics
 - Evil

Joining the Jihad: The evidence

- Based on 400 subjects:
 - 2/3 from solid upper or middle class background
 - Vast majority from intact caring family
 - 60% had some college education
 - Average age was 26 years
 - 3/4 were professional or semi-professional
 - 3/4 were married & most had children
 - Half were religious children, only 13% were madrassa educated
 - Only 1% had thought disorder (global base rate). Very little evidence of personality disorder.
 - Only European 2nd generation, immigrants & converts were petty criminal
 - The vast majority was not religious in early adulthood.

Joining the jihad: What really counts

- Alienated from society
 - 70% expatriates
 - 10% excluded second generation or immigrants
- Pre-existing social bonds
 - Friendship: 68% “bunch of guys” making alienated young Muslims into fanatics joining together
 - Kinship: 20%
 - Worship: 10%
 - Discipleship: 8%
- Bottom up activity: no top down recruitment program

Becoming an Islamist terrorist

- Upwardly & geographically mobile people
- Mostly from religious caring & middle class families
- International people, conversant in 3 or 4 languages
- Skilled in computer technology
- Separated from traditional bonds & culture
- Homesick, lonely, marginalized → sought new friends
- Drifted to mosques for companionship, not religion
- Moved in together, formed cliques (“Bunch of Guys”)
- Terrorist script rare: 10 mosques → 50% of the sample

Salafi ideas appeal to the Alienated

- Ideas alone do not mobilize people into terrorism
 - Social bonds precede ideological commitments
 - Cultural legitimate script (global Salafi jihad)
- Ideas must “resonate” with the everyday life grievance of the recruits
 - Exclusion & injustice → resentment
 - Crisis of values: unfairness & corruption due to greed (capitalism) & decadence (Western values)
 - Democracy is sham; economic development simple greed; freedom a sad joke; women’s rights invitation to depravity
 - Appeal of Salafi Myth: spontaneous just & fair community
 - Appeal of ideas supported by group dynamics (cliques & women), transforming alienated Muslims into fanatic terrorists
 - Once in cliques, too loyal to abandon & betray friends’ ideas

Disrupt Mobilization Process (1)

- Changing the social environment
- Welcome gifted students living abroad
- Make Halal food & social activities available
- Help new immigrants adapt to host country
- Discourage communal Muslim housing

Break up Mobilization Process (2)

- Challenging the message
- Discredit Salafi Myth:
 - Impossible due to fallibility of man: only God is perfect
 - Publicize the disaster of the Taliban, GIA & ASG
 - Encourage archaeological research into the Salaf
 - Its apocalyptic vision drives wedge with the West → war with West
 - It precludes eliciting Western help for social & economic progress
- Portray terrorists as sincere but misguided people
 - Credible: friends, kin & disciples most likely to join
 - Although not personally evil, their acts are

How to promote a credible message

- Credibility as willingness to sacrifice for God & comrades
 - Wealth: bin Laden
 - Prestige: al Zawahiri
 - Believers despite personal tragedies: Abu Hamza al Masri, Sheikh Omar
 - Willingness to die: Qutb, Faraj & Shahid videos
 - Challenge the legitimacy of credible sources
- Lack of U.S. credibility: big hypocritical bully
 - Run-up to Iraq intervention (WMD, link to 9/11, unilateral)
 - Occupation of Iraq (lack of security, Abu Ghraib)
 - Blind support for unfair Israeli policies toward Palestine
 - Must rebuild trust:
 - “First, do no harm:” stop shooting ourselves in the foot
 - Use of third parties in pursuit of two-prong strategy
 - Regain trust of the Muslim world: need eyes & ears collaboration

Partnership for Justice & Fairness

- Promote positive vision of a just & fair world, where people live in prosperity & harmony
- Justice & Fairness:
 - Freedom & responsive representative government
 - Curb pervasive corruption stymies economic growth
 - Improve social & economic status of women
- Harmony: partnership engaging Muslim community
 - Collaboration & peace rather than war
- Clash of strategy rather than civilization
 - Terrorism v. peaceful evolution (fallibility of man)

Challenging toxic ideas

- Country by country campaigns (specific cultural, historical & social contexts)
 - Encourage & amplify non-threatening local voices
 - Ideas mostly spread by trusted friends: Encourage humanitarian organizations with collaborative vision with the West
 - Encourage political Parties for Justice (alternatives to Salafis)
 - Stay focused on specific threat: avoid complicity with general local repression

Washington Politics

- To wage of the War of Ideas, we must first win the war in Washington
- Domestic obstacles:
 - Cultural: transparency
 - truth is self-evident & will prevail
 - Political: two audiences problem
 - Domestic agenda will always trump foreign concerns
 - Chaos in Washington
 - Lack of funds, political support, staff, coordination or assigned responsibilities

Winning the War of Idea

- Military operation denying refuge to terrorists
- Coherent & comprehensive strategy:
 - Discredit legitimacy of leaders & ideas
 - Disrupt formation of loose terrorist networks by changing social conditions & challenging message promoting mobilization
 - Promote vision of just & fair partnership with Islam
 - Regain trust & credibility by matching words with deeds
- Pro-active national center: control, coordinate & able to contract out projects
- Dedicated budget: strong bipartisan backing in Congress
- Needs a Charlie Wilson: without a champion, it will suffer the same fate as the War on Poverty & the War on Drugs