

Confronting Religion in the U.S. War of Ideas

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30 April 2008

QUESTION: Is the United States in a position to promote a foreign policy which moderates political Islam, and if so, how can it be accomplished?

The United States's war against terrorism has evolved into a war of ideas and has provided the framework with which to view twenty-first century world politics. The Bush Administration failed to recognize that the War on Terror was rooted in a much deeper ideological conflict between Islam and modernity. U.S. strategy to date has been much like treating the symptoms instead of the ailment, where Al Qaeda is the sore throat, and the cultural division between Western Christian democracy and political Islam is the malady.

Underlying Causes

The religious dimensions of the human experience have been excluded from the study and practice of governance in the West as a consequence of the European Enlightenment and its endorsement of autonomous reason and the separation of church and state. Religious differences were considered counterproductive to the development of good governance and democracy. As a result, the modern international environment, shaped by secular world institutions like the UN and WTO and Western liberal democracies, formed without an embodiment of the religious dimension of the human experience. These institutions have been unable to deal with what Richard Falk cites as four adverse normative effects that have led to instances of inhumane governance:

- 1) Widening income, wealth, and skill gaps;
- 2) Neglect of human suffering and world poverty;
- 3) The undermining of global public goods; and
- 4) Menacing technological horizons, such as human cloning, and super-intelligent machines

Globalization has been perceived as the American economic penetration of the Middle East, and the United States has consistently supported Middle East dictators who serve its foreign policy purposes—both during the Cold War and afterwards. The United States's continued presence and support of tyrants in sacred Islamic territory—in Saudi Arabia and Iraq—has been one of Al Qaeda's greatest grievances and call to arms. While Osama Bin Laden's tactics may not represent Islam, Al Qaeda views their struggle as a religious war, an ideological battle to convince the Islamic world to repel the United States and to prevent the exploitation of Arab territory at the expense of globalization. However, religion as a component of political conflict in the Middle East is not a new phenomenon. Religion was a key issue in the Iranian revolution in 1979, and still is a key issue in the ongoing Israel-Palestinian conflict, the ability of Lebanon

to create a stable government, and the ability of Indonesia and Turkey to create stable democratic institutions.

The United States has been averse to recognizing the war on terror as a religious conflict, even though Al Qaeda framed it so, namely because of long-standing values regarding the separation of church and state. While the Cold War was a war of ideas over a godless political ideology, fighting Al Qaeda required a religious component, and manipulating a religious movement meant possible conflict with the establishment clause of the Constitution that provided for freedom of religion and separated church from state.

Evolution of U.S. Strategy regarding the War on Terror

The 2002 *U.S. National Security Strategy* (NSS) defined terrorism as not being of a particular regime, religion, or ideology, but as politically motivated violence against innocents. To fight the War on Terror, the Bush Administration's National Security Strategy articulated a policy of disrupting and destroying terrorist organization through military action and political pressure against state sponsors, as well as waging a war of ideas to stop the root causes of international terrorism.

The 2003 *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (NSCT) continued to define the global terrorist enemy as not a single political regime or religion. However, unlike the 2002 NSS, this policy document did not exclude the enemy from being an ideological one, and acknowledged a religious component of global terrorism, "Those who employ terrorism, regardless of the specific secular or religious objective, strive to subvert the rule of law and effect change through violence and fear." U.S. strategy still focused primarily on direct and continuous action against terrorist groups, targeting the organizational structures of terrorism with the 4D policy (Defeat, Deny, Diminish, and Defend), rather than attacking the ideologies that linked global terrorist and Islamic fundamentalism together.

The 2006 *National Security Strategy* acknowledged that the War on Terror had been "both a battle of arms and a battle of ideas—a fight against terrorists and against their murderous ideology." Interestingly, the document steps back from labeling the long term struggle against terror as a war, but as a battle. This NSS continued to emphasize utilizing instruments of national power to kill and capture terrorists, but further acknowledged that winning the war on terror in the long run means winning the war of ideas. The document further stated that the war of ideas was not a war of religions, arguing that transnational terrorist exploit Islam to achieve political visions.

The 2006 *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* is the most recent articulation of the President's vision for the War on Terror and the battle of ideas, and it showed the increased understanding of the enemy and its ideology, and offers the clearest articulation of counter-strategies. The strategy recognized that the War of Terror comprises a battle of arms—short term action against existing terrorist—and a battle of ideas—in the long run, a strategy against an ideology that fosters terrorism. In addition to reiterating the sources of terrorism, the strategy prescribed what it called *effective democracies* as the "long-term antidote of terrorism today."

Constraints on Religion and U.S. National Security

In *The War of Ideas* (2007), Walid Phares argues that the War of Ideas is a confrontation between Jihadism and democracy, with democracy reaching towards the future, and jihadists rejecting the integration of views and values within the modern world. In order for the United States to create an effective environment for Islamic democracy, it is useful to understand the ideological and institutional constraints the U.S. has in creating a strategy to moderate a global religion, which I have identified as the following:

- Discrediting competing ideologies does not come easy to liberal democracies.
- The manipulation of religion is counter to a liberal democratic philosophy.
- The preference of one religion to another by the United States is unconstitutional
- The United States has failed to recognize the religious nature of much of the political violence in the world.
- The decentralized federal governmental structure of the United States makes it difficult to create a unified counter-ideology strategy.
- The U.S. media has made it difficult to engage in effective psychological campaigns.

Recommendations

In order to win the War of Ideas, the United States not only needs to win the battle of public opinion at home, but especially in the Muslim world. Today, in excess of 50 percent of total U.S. foreign assistance abroad goes to countries with Muslim majority populations, and over 50 percent of total U.S. foreign assistance managed by USAID goes to countries with Muslim majority populations (Hughes and Kunder, 2007). However, according to Van Ham (2005), the United States' current practice of public diplomacy underestimates the central role of extremist Islam. The United States can, with an understanding of its constraints in battling a religious ideology, make further effective headway in countering Islamic extremism, by creating a policy that addresses the following.

- Foreign assistance to Islamic centers that promote moderate Islam should be increased and funded with a light footprint.
- More needs to be done to moderate Saudi Arabia's funding of Wahhabist madrasahs, mosques, and social centers in the Muslim world.
- Cultural exchanges should be expanded in addition to visa, green card programs, and educational exchange programs.
- Significant headway must to be made in the Israel-Palestine conflict.
- The United States should promote moderate options within Arab media.
- The United States should open dialogues with Islamic organization that promote violence.
- Include regional studies and Islamic history courses in the U.S. public education system.
- The domestic Muslim U.S. population should be encouraged to promote Islam and fund development and educational programs, both in the United States and overseas.
- Iraq should be recognized as an opportunity to create a government where Islam can be a unifying factor rather than a divisive one.

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