

*Thee propaganda of al-Qaeda versus
the public diplomacy of the West, 1-0?*

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The magnitude of the problem

A few months ago, on 26 November 2007, American Defense minister and former CIA-chief Robert Gates held a speech in which he stated that the American armed forces are not sufficiently equipped to protect and promote the American interests throughout the world. According to him diplomacy would be a better arm in this regard. Consequently he made, what he himself called, a ‘blasphemous’ plea for a raise not of the budget of his own ministry but of that of the State Department. Gates called it ‘just plain embarrassing that al-Qaeda is better at communicating its message on the internet than America. As one foreign diplomat asked a couple of years ago, “How has one man in a cave managed to out-communicate the world’s greatest communication society?” Speed, agility, and cultural relevance are not terms that come readily to mind when discussing U.S. strategic communications.’¹ It is in ‘the War of Ideas’ that the United States government has performed the poorest, according to Robert Grenier, former chief of the CIA’s Counter Terrorism Center.² He noted little coherence, realistic or effective efforts at winning this war in Washington D.C. This brings me right to the kernel of my presentation: the

¹ Landon Lecture (Kansas State University) by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, Manhattan, Kansas, Monday, November 26, 2007, <http://www.defenselink.mil/utility/printitem.aspx?print=http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1199>, consulted 26 April 2008.

² M. Korade, ‘U.S., West Need to Fight the “Stealth Jihad”, Terrorism Experts Tell Intelligence Panel’, *CQ Politics*, 9 April 2008.

West has been losing the psychological war against the jihadists. So, you think it is 1-0 for the jihadists now? You must be kidding.

One of best intelligence experts on al-Qaeda, former CIA-analyst Michael Scheuer, says that this movement and in particular its press-office al-Sahab have succeeded in defeating the West on one of the main fields of military doctrine, i.e. information dominance.³ Therefore, although President Bush has described the ‘war on terror’ as ‘a long-lasting ideological struggle’,⁴ many have established that the West, and in particular the American administration have failed so far in their campaign of counter-ideology. Even in Iraq they did not get their message across in the local media, if only because of a lack of linguistic abilities.⁵ But elsewhere in the (Arab) world such a campaign fails as well because of a lack of ideas and of efforts. In the cynical words of one American author: ideological warfare ‘is today simply not a significant part of the “global war on terrorism”. Or rather, it is a part of that war – but it is being employed effectively only by our adversaries.’⁶ And as Moroccan authorities told an American mission preparing an advice on public diplomacy: ‘If you do not define yourself [...], the extremists will define you.’⁷

In the years since 9/11 the American authorities received bad grades from public opinion, both inside and outside the Middle East. The famous international polling organization Pew therefore reported that ‘the bottom has fallen out of Arab and Muslim support for the United States’.⁸ In Egypt 21 per cent of the

³ M. Scheuer, ‘Al-Qaeda’s Media Doctrine: Evolution from Cheerleader to Opinion-Shaper’, *Terrorism Focus*, vol. 4 # 15 (22 mei 2007).

⁴ W. Rosenau, ‘Waging the “War of Ideas”’, D. Kamien (ed.), *The McGraw-Hill Homeland Security Handbook*, New York 2006, p. 1138.

⁵ E.P. Djerejian, *Changing Minds Winning Peace a New Strategic Direction for U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim World*, Report of the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, Washington D.C. 2003, p. 68.

⁶ E.g. W. Rosenau, ‘Waging’, pp. 1132-1133.

⁷ Djerejian, *Changing Minds*, p. 16.

⁸ Djerejian, *Changing Minds*, p. 15.

population still had a positive impression of the US, but in Pakistan it is only 15 and in Turkey even less than ten percent.⁹

However, this is not solely an American problem. Recently the former British politician Paddy Ashdown, now heading a special commission on fighting terrorism, said about the 'war on terrorism': 'Our problem is that we have chosen the wrong mindset, the wrong battlefield, the wrong weapons and the wrong strategy to win this campaign. We have chosen to fight an idea, primarily with force.'¹⁰ According to him that is the reason why jihadists have won so far, especially amongst the group which really matters, that of the moderate Muslims. These are serious conclusions if one is convinced, as many are, that the only way to defeat the jihadists is by winning the ideological battle.¹¹

In the remainder of my presentation I will address the following topics: the *capabilities* of the jihadistis propagandamachine; the failings of especially the West's public diplomacy in countering this propaganda; the weak spots of al-Qaeda that can still be detected; and on the basis of this some opportunities for the West's public diplomacy.

Before I do so I should give my definition of public diplomacy: viz. the promotion of national and alliance interests by informing and engaging populations all around the world through dialogues over norms, values and ideas; it is therefore essentially a form of soft power diplomacy and differentiates itself from traditional interstate diplomacy. Public diplomacy demands that ministries of Foreign Affairs and diplomats act as facilitators rather than as the persons who are in charge.

⁹ Waleed Aly, 'Battle of hypocrisies', *The Age*, 4 July 2007

¹⁰ P. Wintour, 'West's strategy on terrorism all wrong, says Ashdown', *The Guardian*, 19 September 2007.

¹¹ E.g. Aly, 'Battle'.

The jihadistisch propagandamachine

Current jihadism, such as manifested by al-Qaeda, can be described as an ‘idea-based network, self-organizing from below, inspired by postings on the Internet’,¹² as ‘a virtual caliphate in cyberspace’.¹³

Right from the beginning Osama bin Laden has been aware of the value of propaganda. Already in the early nineties he sold a quarter of a million cassettes with his speeches against the First Gulfwar and the presence of American troops on Saudi soil.¹⁴ Already in its early stages al-Qaeda had a media committee and it attracted Egyptian IT-specialists to enable optimal communication via the Internet.¹⁵ The organization has its own news agency,¹⁶ its own production companies for films and videos¹⁷ and its own Internet organizations for distributing their audiovisual messages. Through these channels they motivate audiences, legitimate their own acts, recruit new followers, raise new funds and intimidate their opponents. Worldwide there are thousands of sites on which their videomaterials can be seen.¹⁸

All experts agree that the media techniques of al-Qaeda and related groups have advanced to a stage where they are only weeks behind the newest developments in the West.¹⁹ The Internet has become a virtual sanctuary for the jihadists where they can spread their ideas and teach their fighting methods: both *madrassa* and terrorism-university.

¹² J. Mackinlay, *Globalisation and Insurgency*, Adelphi Papers 352, Oxford 2002, p. 79. Cf. substitute CIA-head John McLaughlin, quoted in S. Coll and S.B. Glasser, ‘Terrorists Turn to the Web as Base of Operations’, *Washington Post*, 7 August 2005.

¹³ A. de Borchgrave and Th. Sanderson, ‘Force Multiplier for Intelligence: Collaborative Open Sources Networks’, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington D.C., 30 July 2007.

¹⁴ R.A. Hudson, ‘The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism: Who Becomes a Terrorist and Why?’, Washington D.C. 1999, <http://ftp.fas.org/irp/threat/frd.html>, consulted on 9 December 2007.

¹⁵ B. Hoffman, ‘A Form of Psychological Warfare’, *eJournal USA*, May 2007.

¹⁶ As Sahab.

¹⁷ Such as As-Sahab en de Al-Furqan Foundation.

¹⁸ G. Weimann, *Terror on the Internet. The New Arena, The New Challenges*, Washington D.C. 2006, p. 15;

‘What to Do About Pixels of Hate’, *The New York Times*, 21 oktober 2007; Coll and Glasser, ‘Terrorists’.

¹⁹ M. Moss and S. Mekhennet, ‘An Internet Jihad Aims at U.S. Viewers’, *The New York Times*, 15 October 2007.

A relatively new development is that al-Qaeda tries to broaden its recruiting potential. Added to the fight between Muslims and non-Muslims is a struggle between have-nots and haves. It is almost as if one reads the pamphlets of the left-wing radicals of the 1970s when one hears al-Qaeda's second in command, al-Zawahiri, declare:²⁰

'(...) I want blacks in America, people of color, American Indians, Hispanics, and all the weak and oppressed in North and South America, in Africa and Asia, and all over the world, to know that when we wage jihad in Allah's path, we aren't waging jihad to lift oppression from Muslims only; we are waging jihad to lift oppression from *all* mankind, because Allah has ordered us never to accept oppression, whatever it may be (...) This is why I want every oppressed one on the face of the earth to know that our victory over America and the Crusading West — with Allah's permission — is a victory for them, because they shall be freed from the most powerful tyrannical force in the history of mankind.'²¹

There is thus logic behind the fact that al-Qaeda-video produced a special video entitled 'To Black Americans'. Al-Qaeda seems to be interested in even white, christian Americans as they disseminate messages about Rakan bin Williams, one or more American converts who are said to be ready to commit another attack on American soil at a certain point in time.²²

The ideological failings of the US

How could it occur that the United States, who surfaced from the Cold War as the sole remaining superpower, was caught by surprise by the ideological

²⁰ Cf. T. Quiggin, 'Jihad isn't about religion; If you cut out the Koranic quotes from jihadists' writing their views sound remarkably like political revolutionaries who have come before them', *Ottawa Citizen*, 20 September 2007.

²¹ R. Ibrahim, 'Seeking Sympathy from the Infidel. Zawahiri invokes the language of social justice', *National Review Online*, 16 May 2007.

²² E.g. Moss and Mekhennet, 'Internet Jihad'; 'Net savvy al Qaeda reaches out to youth with flashy websites', *The Press Trust of India*, 15 October 2007.

seductions of jihadism? Wasn't it true that they had an impressive system for public diplomacy at the time of the Cold War? Indeed, but they almost abolished it once that war was over. The American broadcasting stations that had been so important in their fight against the communist dictatorships were hit by budget cuts prior to 9/11 and thus the Voice of America had been reduced to a Whisper of America. The Arab language programs of this station were discontinued.²³ In 1999 the United States Information Agency had been abolished as an autonomous office. Student exchange programs, which had been most effective in changing people's opinions about the US, fell victim to economizing as well.²⁴ There was hardly any money left for public diplomacy. The amount of money the US administration still spent on it equaled .3 per cent of its defense spendings and strategical guidance was almost absent.²⁵

Of course the attacks of 9/11 led to efforts at renewal but they were of little avail. An early effort at psychological warfare from the Pentagon, the Office of Strategic Influence, was aborted when it appeared that it could be too easily detected as an effort at deception, which furthermore could also be directed against the US allies.²⁶ Radio Voice of America has only a very small audience in the Arab world. Radio Sawa, established in 2002 to play a similar role as the Voice of America in the Arab world and television station al-Hurrah failed to impress its intended audience. When the American State Department started a 'Shared Values'-campaign meant to be included in the programs of Arab broadcasting companies the latter refused to do so.²⁷ It turned out that public diplomacy was much more difficult in the war on terror than it had been during

²³ Rosenau, 'Waging', pp. 25 en 29.

²⁴ Djerejian, *Changing Minds*, pp. 35 en 46-48.

²⁵ Djerejian, *Changing Minds*, pp. 13, 25 en 57; Rosenau, 'Waging', p. 1138.

²⁶ Cf. Th. Shanker and E. Schmitt, 'Pentagon Weighs Use of Deception in a Broad Arena', *New York Times*, 13 December 2004.

²⁷ E.g. Djerejian, *Changing Minds*, pp. 30, -31, 72-73; The Heritage Foundation, 'Strengthening U.S. Public Diplomacy Requires Organization, Coordination, and Strategy', 5 August 2005, <http://www.heritage.org/Research/PublicDiplomacy/bg1875.cfm>; A.M. Baylouny, 'Countering Arab Television? Assessing the effect of Alhurra', Anne Aldis & Graeme P. Herd (eds.), *The ideological war on terror. Worldwide strategies for counter-terrorism*, London/New York 2007, pp. 68-80.

the Cold War, when most of the efforts had been directed towards Europe, that more or less shared the American pattern of values and furthermore remembered the Americans as their liberators. In the Islamic and Arab world, however, the Americans were primarily seen as imperialists, oppressors and exploiters.²⁸

American public diplomacy was also handicapped by the fact that American embassies in the Arab world (but outside of it as well) nowadays resemble more the fortresses of the Crusaders than meeting grounds where cultural boundaries are lowered. It was with some justification therefore that one of al-Qaeda's websites stated in November 2002 that 'America's means of propaganda are no longer influential in the same way they were for decades'.²⁹

And there has been little improvement since then. '[W]e 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', said Robert Gates in his aforementioned speech.

One of the reasons is exactly that the source of information could be portrayed as too clearly pro-American and anti-Islamic. Jihadists have armed themselves against Western campaigns directed towards moderation. Their websites inform their sympathizers how they should fight efforts at counterradicalization- and counterterrorism.³⁰ It makes little impression when western leaders say that Islam has been hijacked by jihadist terrorists. That is something Muslims will judge for themselves.

Another problem with which a western information campaign is confronted is the ambiguity of its own politics regarding the Middle East. The announcement that American troops would bring 'democracy' to the Middle East did little to improve democracy's record.

Neither did the way they implemented their policies. Collateral damage caused by western troops in Iraq and Afghanistan is grist to the jihadist

²⁸ Cf. Djerejian, *Changing Minds*, p. 15.

²⁹ Quoted in Rosenau, 'Waging', p. 1139.

³⁰ J. Groen, 'Knipselmap en internet als wapen in de jihad', *de Volkskrant*, 31 May 2005.

propagandamill.³¹ Just like the fact that the number of casualties on the side of the local population is never counted in opposition to that of fallen soldiers on the side of western troops, which seems to prove that the blood of Crusaders is more important for the West than that of Muslims.³²

Institutions and practices such as Guantánamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, rendition and the existence of secret places of detention are additional proof that the West uses a double standard. Terrorism almost always leads to an overreaction of the governments that are involved. This also happened in the West after 9/11 and the attacks of Madrid and London: civil rights in the West were thrown overboard at a frightening speed.³³ Not only did western authorities thereby play into the hands of terrorists who defy governments to show their ugliest face; they also lost the assets from which they could have profited in a struggle for hearts and minds. How can one maintain to export democracy and the rule of law to far-away places, if one simultaneously limits civil right at home? In the fight against terrorism the executive power in many western countries has been strengthened vis-à-vis parliament and the judicial system. Almost everywhere the timelimits for detention without bringing charges have been stretched; possibilities for observation and registration have been broadened, facilities for administrative measures have extended and so have the possibilities for tapping phones and electronic messages.

Quite often the accusing finger is pointed towards the US, but some European countries deserve close attention in this respect as well. The United Kingdom, the country where the idea and practice of habeas corpus originated, has according to its highest freedom of information official, Richard Thomas, sleepwalked into the stage of a surveillance state.³⁴ And according to the human rights organization Privacy International the UK has thus joined China and

³¹ E.g. C. Whitlock, 'On Tape, Bin Laden Warns of Long War', *Washington Post*, 24 April 2006.

³² Cf. 'Terminal Proclamation. Bin Laden Rallies Muslims While Alluding to his Demise', ABC News.com, 27 December 2001.

³³ E.g. D. Vlasblom, 'Ga gerust mijn gangen na', *NRC Handelsblad*, 8 December 2007.

³⁴ 'Watchdog's Big Brother UK Warning', *BBC News*, 16 August 2004.

Russia as an 'endemic surveillance state'.³⁵ Whereas fifty years ago President Eisenhower warned against the powers of a military-industrial-complex, one could do the same today against a security-industrial-complex.

In its fight against terrorism the West has undeniably given up some of its honesty and its transparency at the governmental level. In order to understand what happened behind the walls of the White House over the past seven years, one feels tempted to recur to former Kremlin studies. The names of America's highest authorities have been mentioned in relation with affairs like *Plame-gate* and the wiping of CIA-tapes that would have shown torturing. In the Netherlands a parliamentary inquiry into the reasons for Dutch participation in the war in Iraq is factually impossible.³⁶ The decision to prolong the Dutch military mission in Uruzgan, Afghanistan, raised new questions about the secrecy in which the decision-making process was shrouded.³⁷ It almost seems as if the more governmental leaders say their nations are defending freedoms, these nations lose their liberties. On 29th October 2004, shortly before the American presidential elections, Osama bin Laden sent a cynical message to the American electorate telling them that he understood their needs: after all the American government did not differ that much any longer from the autocrats and potentates to which the people in the Middle East were accustomed.³⁸ Another problem for a concerted western information campaign is that the Arab world has become much more diverse and dynamic than many policy-makers in Washington or other western capitals are willing to believe. If one wants to influence opinion in the Arab world, the efforts should be *tailor-made* for different countries and different convictions within Islam.³⁹ What was

³⁵ N. Anderson 'US and UK have become "endemic" surveillance societies', *Ars Technica*, 31 December 2007, <http://arstechnica.com/news.ars/post/20071231-us-and-uk-have-become-endemic-surveillance-societies.html>, consulted 26 April 2008.

³⁶ E.g. the former Dutch minister of Foreign Affairs Ben Bot in: J. Eijssvoogel, "' Het is zoals Amerika vindt dat het is'", *NRC Handelsblad*, 8 December 2007.

³⁷ E.g.. 'Openhartigheid over Afghanistan geboden', *NRC Handelsblad*, 1 december 2007

³⁸ D. Faisal, 'Osama bin Laden's message to the world', *Open Democracy*, 21 October 2005.

³⁹ Djerejian, *Changing Minds*, p. 5; E. Ahrari, 'Countering Ideological Support. The case of the Ferghana Valley', Aldis & Herd (eds.), *War*, p. 109; Baylouny, 'Countering'.

commonplace in the Arab world yesterday, e.g. the position of women, is now under debate.⁴⁰ And the debate in the Middle East becomes, in spite of everything, more democratized.⁴¹ There is more diversity on the television front. And Arab citizens outsmart government censorship regarding the Internet.⁴² A final problem under this heading concerns the interaction between domestic and foreign issues in a globalized world. On the one hand developments abroad can entail domestic radicalization and home-grown terrorism. On the other hand local events can be regarded as offenses both at home and abroad and consequently serve as trigger events for radicalization or terrorist attacks. This forces ministries of Foreign Affairs to occupy themselves much more than previously with affairs in their home countries and the effect they can have abroad. A separation between information activities at home and those abroad has become outdated.

What the West will have to accept on the other hand is that public diplomacy can only be based on reciprocity. Prior to the use of public diplomacy the West will have to address the question whether what it would like to undertake in this regard in the Middle East could also be allowed the other way around.

Which opportunities are there?

Despite the lead of al-Qaeda in psychological warfare and the tardy and sometimes counterproductive reactions by the West I still see opportunities for a counteroffensive.

One of al-Qaeda's major problems for instance is that Muslims reproach them for committing attacks in which other Muslims die. On Islamic websites

⁴⁰ M. Eltahawy, 'Saudi Girls Gone Wild', *Forbes.com*, 9 January 2008.

⁴¹ Oscar Garschagen, 'Horen zien en doorvertellen', *NRC Handelsblad*, 14 April 2007.

⁴² C. Roelants, 'Oorlog leidde in regio slechts tot democratische gebaren', *NRC Handelsblad*, 20 March 2008; O. van Ditzhuyzen, 'Wilders verklaard voor buitenlanders', *NRC Handelsblad*, 29 March 2008; T.C. Wittes, 'The Promise of Arab Liberation', *Policy Review*, July 2004; J. Cohen, *Kinderen van de Jihad. Ontmoetingen met jongeren in het Midden-Oosten*, Utrecht 2008, pp. 62-63, 70-71 .

discussing jihad and martyrdom through a suicide attack one does encounter a lot of understanding for armed resistance in the Palestinian areas and Iraq, but there is relatively little sympathy for the terrorist ideology of al-Qaeda, and especially their killings of innocent civilians is heavily criticized.⁴³ One can recognize a trend that support for terrorism subsides when people experience terrorist attacks in their own country, whether it is in Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi-Arabia or Pakistan.⁴⁴ Under Muslims in the West sympathy for terrorism is also falling back.⁴⁵

This shows that in spite of everything Al-Qaeda is vulnerable, precisely when it brings home its central message in the form of attacks to muslim areas themselves. That was the reason why Osama bin Laden felt himself urged to call upon the leaders of al-Qaeda in Iraq, al-Zarqawi and his successor, to mitigate their methods.⁴⁶ The same occurred with regard to al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, whose leader Abdelmalik Droukhal was apparently replaced because he was held responsible for too many civilian victims.⁴⁷ Even among Sunni Muslims in Iraq (or part of the Taleban in Afghanistan) the sympathy for al-Qaeda has considerably cooled down, even to such an extent that several of the Sunni tribes clamped down on them.⁴⁸

Western authorities should therefore magnify the attacks much more than they normally do. In comparison to the attacks in New York, Madrid and London attacks in Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Jordan and Iraq get considerably

⁴³ 'Heftige Debatte über Jihad und Märtyrertum', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 9 October 2007.

⁴⁴ J.S. Landay, 'Pakistan tribal area turns against al-Qaida', *sacbee.com*, 20 March 2008.

⁴⁵ E.g. 'Musharraf's Support Shrinks, Even As More Pakistanis Reject Terrorism... and the U.S.', 7 November 2007, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/561/pakistan-terrorism>; 'Islamic Extremism: Common Concern for Muslim and Western Publics', 14 July 2005, <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=248>; M. Azzam, *Al-Qaeda Five Years On: Threats and Challenges*, London 2006.

⁴⁶ 'Heftige Debatte über Jihad und Märtyrertum', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 9 October 2007.

⁴⁷ 'Al-Qa'idah in Maghreb Algerian leader "replaced"', *BBC Monitoring Service*, 3 October 2007.

⁴⁸ 'Iraq: Splits Among the Sunnis', *Stratfor Today*, 20 March 2008; 'Afghan daily sees growing disturbance between Afghan Taleban, Al Qa'idah', *BBC Monitoring*, 19 March 2008; F. Gardner, 'The global terror threat in 2008', *BBC News*, 3 January 2008; R. Springborg, 'Uncle Sam in Iraq: the war of narratives', *Open Democracy*, 19 March 2008; ' Hamas-Iraq: Al-Qaeda in Iraq is subservient to Iran', MEMRI Special Dispatch no. 1890, 8 April 2008; 'Al Arabiya discussion programme focuses on Iraqi Awakening Councils, Al Qa'idah', *BBC Monitoring*, 28 March 2008; M. Scheuer, 'Al-Qaeda in Iraq: Still Striving to Undo al-Zarqawi's Damage to Mujahideen Unity', *Terrorism Focus*, vol. 5, issue 17, 30 April 2008.

less attention from the western media. Once again this gives the impression that Muslim blood is less valuable than christian blood.

Western information campaign should stress that jihadists champion a culture of death and destruction – after all, terrorism kills - , whereas the West offers life.⁴⁹ Maybe a difficult task for a West that shows so much material wealth and that in the eyes of so many equates liberty with freedom of consumption. In this respect Osama bin Laden holds one of his strongest trump cards: after all he was the multibillionaire who chose to live in a cave. Therefore the West should not underline its material advantages which for some are so disgusting or threatening,⁵⁰ but instead it should emphasize the practice of democracy, offering hope to the men and women in the Arab street that their voices will finally be heard and their primary needs for jobs, food, education⁵¹ and health care will be really fulfilled. Those are genuine answers to the burning questions of ordinary Arabs.⁵²

Another burning issue is that of democratic reform of the autocratic regimes in the Middle East. Simultaneously with professional and moral support for groups in the Arab and Islamic world that turn against jihadi movements the West will have to pressurize the autocratic regimes to tolerate diversity within their own societies. Western governments should no longer hold themselves hostage by fear that democratization processes in the Middle East that are not supported by western troops will necessarily lead to more extremism.⁵³

It is this fear that creates a credibility gap between the words from the West and their actual policies.⁵⁴ Time and again polls show that ordinary Arabs appreciate western values like liberty, equality and the rule of law highly, but that at the

⁴⁹ Cf. Rosenau, 'Waging', p. 1141; M. Eltahawy, 'Our Own Worst Enemy', *Agence Global*, 12 March 2008.

⁵⁰ E. Jesse, 'Fraktionen und Strukturen von Feindbildern im politischen Extremismus', Bundesministerium des Innern, *Feindbilder und Radikalisierungsprozesse. Elemente und Instrumente im politischen Extremismus*, Berlin 2006, p. 8.

⁵¹ Djerejian, *Changing Minds*, pp. 14, 32-33 and 54.

⁵² Cf. Djerejian, *Changing Minds*, p. 39.

⁵³ Cf. Djerejian, *Changing Minds*, p. 23; Wittes, 'Promise'.

⁵⁴ Cf. Djerejian, *Changing Minds*, pp. 23-24; M. Eltahawy, 'Bush's Double-Talk Fits Mubarak's Egypt', *Agence Global*, 18 January 2008; Wittes, 'Promise'.

same time they object against western and particularly American policies concerning the Middle-East.⁵⁵ Early 2007 a poll showed for instance that over ninety per cent of Egyptians and Iranians longed for freedom of expression as the United States knows it.⁵⁶ At the same time two thirds of those polled in the Middle East maintained that the US was not really favoring democracy in their region.⁵⁷

This raises the question whether Europe and the US should combine their information campaigns in the Arab world. On good grounds there is a tendency to think that a new American presidency will offer new chances for transatlantic cooperation. On the other hand one should not overlook the fact that the name of the US has become contaminated in the Middle East, especially through its stand in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the presence of American troops in Saudi-Arabia and Iraq. Examples abound where American support or sympathy for something immediately led to popularity for its opposite.⁵⁸ This would be an argument in favor of some distancing from the American position.⁵⁹ Apart from that, the American and European strategic interests in the Middle-East do not fully coincide. And for the past years American policy regarding *public diplomacy* has been almost unilateral, aiming at spreading American values rather than western ones.

A second problem for al-Qa'ida is in fact the Internet. Although it is true that the Internet serves as a source for radicalization and as a virtual terrorist university, those in the Middle East who have access to Internet show a more positive attitude towards the West and the US than those who have not, and a further sign of hope is that they belong to younger age groups.⁶⁰ This certainly would justify

⁵⁵ Cf. Djerejian, *Changing Minds*, pp. 24, 33 en 39; 'Global Unease With Major World Powers', 27 June 2007, <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=256>; A.H. Cordesman, *Winning the "War on Terrorism": The Need for a Fundamentally Different Strategy*, Washington D.C. 2006, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Aly, 'Battle'.

⁵⁷ Aly, 'Battle'; 'Survey: Nasrallah is the most admired leader in the Arab world', *Haaretz*, 17 April 2008.

⁵⁸ E.g. Baylouny, 'Countering', pp. 68-69.

⁵⁹ Cf. Djerejian, *Changing Minds*, pp. 13, 18, 20, 22; Rosenau, 'Waging', pp. 1141 en 1144.

⁶⁰ Djerejian, *Changing Minds*, p. 41; Cohen, *Kinderen*, pp. 12, 54

an investment. Already for ten years the United States Institute of Peace champions virtual diplomacy, which would enable ministries of Foreign Affairs to reach out to much larger audiences than they use to do. What keeps western governments waiting in this regard, especially in relation with the Muslim world?

A third problem of al-Qa'ida is that it disseminates a cut-and-paste-belief, which attracts especially those who are relatively unknown with the islamic belief systems. It is, however, rather easy for real insiders to point out its weak spots.⁶¹ It is therefore no surprise that jihadist islam spreads most easily in those areas where traditional islam is relatively weak.⁶²

The West should not rest to encourage Muslim leaders inside and outside of the Arab world to fight extremism on their own. At the end of the day only the spiritual and political leaders in the Middle East themselves can decide the ideological battle in a way that really hurts the extremists.⁶³ And those new leaders do not necessarily have to be the cuddly toys of the West. They will pursue their own and their nations' own interests. However, pluralism is the best antidote to the one and only and absolute truth religious fundamentalists proclaim.⁶⁴

It is this type of considerations that led the Canadian counterterrorism expert Tom Quiggin to his recommendation that actually the ideas of al Qaeda should be disseminated among imams: 'Muslim community leaders should start learning more about the ideology of al-Qaeda'. 'Unless Muslims themselves grow to understand the twisted ideology that is undermining their community, it will be hard to stop this radicalization.'⁶⁵

⁶¹ M. Mow and S. Mekhennet, 'Rising Leader for Next Phase of Al Qaeda's War', *New York Times*, 4 April 2008.

⁶² M. Ranstorp & G.P. Herd, 'Approaches to Countering Terrorism and CIST', Aldis & Herd (eds.), *War*, p. 16; R. Azizian, 'Islamic Radicalism in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan', *ibidem*, p. 82.

⁶³ Cf. Cordesman, *Winning*, p. 6.

⁶⁴ Cf. K.R. Popper, *Auf der Suche nach einer besseren Welt. Vorträge und Aufsätze aus dreissig Jahren*, München 1984, p. 238.

⁶⁵ Quiggin, 'Jihad'.

Furthermore, the West should support international and local NGO's so that they can build a civil society.⁶⁶ And the West should ensure that its support for pluralism appears genuine; it should not look like traditional colonial divide-and-rule policy.⁶⁷ Besides, public diplomacy should not so much be result oriented as well process oriented: much is already won if diversity and dialogue are observed; 'the medium is the message'; to formulate exigencies as to the outcome would burden the process of diversification.

A final recommendation on my part would be that western information officers and diplomats should make clear distinctions between the different groups they try to encounter.

Those groups, which may sometimes overlap, are:

- terrorists
- their social environment or *Umfeld* as Germans would say
- moderate Muslims in general
- the population in areas where counterterrorism has taken on a military shape
- the western non-islamic homefronts.

I am not implying that western governments should tell one story to one group and another to the other. In a world in which news spreads within seconds contradictory and inconsistent information campaigns are worse than none at all. But it should not be overlooked that different audiences may need different angles or different perspectives from which the central narrative is told. Nevertheless, one central narrative and an overall strategy remain essential.

Returning to the question I began with: are western psychological warfare and public diplomacy lagging behind? The answer is: yes. Are they behind by one point? The answer is: no. They are behind by at least three or four points. Is it

⁶⁶ Cf. Djerejian, *Changing Minds*, p. 53.

⁶⁷ Cf. Rosenau, 'Waging', p. 1141.

still possible for the West to win the war? Sure, but whether the West will succeed in doing so, may depend on you too.