Combating Extremist Ideologies: Measuring Effectiveness—Considerations for Public Diplomacy

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Combating terrorist ideology receives high (if not top) policy emphasis in the Bush Administration's September 2006 *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*.[1] This article addresses issues posed by the challenge of measuring effectiveness in combating extremist ideology. In particular, it examines the case of Islamist extremism, which is the primary terrorism-related threat currently faced by a growing number of nations. It offers some thoughts on potential measurement criteria and measurement techniques, and presents some options for consideration. Statements of personal opinion herein may reflect independent analysis, and are not necessarily the viewpoint of the U.S. Government.

Scattered or sporadic instances of terrorism by individuals or small groups have been occurring in various forms for centuries. These have historically been limited in scope. But when an extremist group develops a large enough cohort of adherents and supporters to reach a "tipping point" or "critical mass," it becomes a well-financed, ongoing process, the synergy of which is extremely difficult to disrupt. Benign neglect of such an environment that fosters extremism is a recipe for future violent conflict, an outcome that we have seen in several countries.[2]

When extremism becomes widely diffused in a country or society, the local government may be unable to effectively combat it, or indeed may share its extremist views. If one wishes to avoid the danger of armed conflict against that country, with its huge cost in money and human lives for all concerned, one might consider directing more resources early on towards mitigating extremist ideologies, rather than reacting to them after they have already taken hold. The concept of pre-emptive strikes against ter-

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[1] The September 2006 *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* states in its overview that: "Today, we face a global terrorist movement and must confront the radical ideology that justifies the use of violence against innocents in the name of religion" (available at www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nsct/2006/). The strategy aims to "advance effective democracies as the long-term antidote to the ideology of terrorism." One policy pitfall, however, may be an over-reliance on using elections as the litmus test for democracy, with some observers suggesting that the bottom-line test of democracy is not elections, but rather whether one can go to the town square, express one's views, and not be punished. See for example: Natan Sharansky, *Is Freedom for Everyone?* Heritage Foundation Lecture No. 960 (15 June 2006); available at www.heritage.org/Research/WorldwideFreedom/hl960.cfm.

[2] For a discussion of existing and emerging terrorist threats, see Raphael Perl, *Trends in Terrorism: 2006*, CRS Report RL33555 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2006); available at www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL33555.pdf.

rorism has been set forth by the Bush Administration. Arguably, a need exists for pre-emptive strikes in an ideological sense as well.

It is important to differentiate between efforts aimed at *behavioral* versus *ideological* mitigation of extremism. Increased security and harsh punishments help dissuade people from extremist behavior temporarily, but as long as attitudes remain unchanged, the potential for terrorism may fester unabated.

Measuring the effectiveness of public diplomacy programs requires a clearly enunciated strategy, with stated goals against which to measure progress.[3] It also requires ongoing measurement of available levels of resources and trained personnel.[4]

So where does one start? In my view, academic discussions concerning the nature of programs and measurements have gone on too long already. There is little benefit to further delay, and indeed every reason to forge ahead as soon as possible. The United States and like-minded governments can and should begin collecting data immediately.[5] Regardless of the specifics of any plan formulated to combat violent extremist ideologies, baseline data will be required to support such endeavors, so data collection efforts would not be wasted. How those descriptive data are organized and used can be decided later, while the program to combat extremism continues to take shape.

One set of measurements that can serve as initial indicators of effectiveness is a skills and resources inventory. Among government employees in the field, at the sharp end of the spear in combating extremist ideology, how many are fully fluent in the languages of their host countries? When I say "fluent," I mean as fluent in that foreign language as Adel Al Jubair, the Saudi political advisor, is in English: fluent enough to present or debate points of view on television against charismatic ideological adversaries. What are the numbers and grade levels of officers in the field who are specifically charged in their work requirements with the mission of ideological countermeasures? What are their funding and staff support levels? How many radio and television stations do we have that broadcast our message of freedom and tolerance, or which jam

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[3] On the issue of public diplomacy and anti-terrorism generally, see Susan B. Epstein, *U.S. Public Diplomacy: Background and 9/11 Commission Recommendations*, CRS Report RL32607 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2005); available at www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL32607.pdf.

[4] On the issue measuring the effectiveness of counter-terror efforts generally, see Raphael Perl, *Combating Terrorism: The Challenge of Measuring Effectiveness*, CRS Report RL33160 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2005); available at www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL33160.pdf. Note that when seeking to measure the effectiveness of efforts to counter radical extremism, it is important to recognize that, with some deeply indoctrinated groups, progress in combating radical extremism may not be achievable, and hence is not measurable. If so, perhaps we need to accept our losses and focus on the next generation of potential followers and leaders.

[5] Of central importance here is the need for enhanced data to facilitate understanding of the factors terrorists exploit to generate support and gain recruits.

the broadcasts of extremist stations?[6] These are obvious data which are readily available, and which will help us set a baseline for further measurements later.

It is important to evaluate how effectively national governments are recruiting talented officers, the best and the brightest, into government service. Are government agencies expanding the talents of recruited personnel subsequent to their being hired, or rather constricting them in a bureaucratic quagmire, where career success is often based on being cautious and not making mistakes rather than on taking risks and achieving greatness, with occasional failures? Since time and personnel are scarce resources in diplomacy efforts, do officers have enough administrative support and funding so that they can spend their time most effectively on their core duties?

Have our field officers, and those of allied nations, studied the doctrine of Islamist extremism to the same extent that such officers previously studied Communist ideology during the Cold War? The basis of the doctrine is readily available in the Koran, but more is available in the *Hadith*, the collected sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. Can our officers debate extremist views by quoting the Koran as easily as they quote sound bites from the press guidance, to question the adherence of Islamist extremists to false teachings or interpretations? For example, would officers think to question why Osama bin Laden has not paid blood money to the families of innocent Muslims he is responsible for killing by mistake, as required by the Koran (Sura 4, verse 92)?[7] Would officers speculate that a possible reason extremists refer to their enemies, including Muslim leaders, as "unbelievers" might be that this same verse prohibits believers from killing other believers, except by mistake?

Are our officers poised, proficient, and fully trained in public speaking techniques? Do they have inter-cultural sensitivity and extensive experience in communicating in Islamic societies? Clearly, major elements in any public diplomacy campaign are communication and understanding. If our officers do not have the necessary skills or experience, are there plans in place for additional training, recruitment, or replacement?

A need clearly exists for personnel fully skilled in public diplomacy, and also for people skilled in its less diplomatic counterpart, which is called "propaganda" when others do it, but lacks a suitable euphemism when we do it. The term "information war-

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[6] Note that the practice of "jamming" transmissions may be controversial, given the argument that jamming contravenes democratic principles. However, one might equally argue that nations have a responsibility to their citizenry to counter hate-based disinformation or incitements to violence.

[7] "It is not for a believer to kill a believer except [that it be] by mistake; and whosoever kills a believer by mistake, [it is ordained that] he must set free a believing slave and a compensation [blood-money, i.e. *Diya*] be given to the deceased's family unless they remit it. If the deceased belonged to a people at war with you and he was a believer, the freeing of a believing slave [is prescribed]; and if he belonged to a people with whom you have a treaty of mutual alliance, compensation [blood-money, or *Diya*] must be paid to his family, and a believing slave must be freed. And whoso finds this [the penance of freeing a slave] beyond his means, he must fast for two consecutive months in order to seek repentance from Allah. And Allah is Ever All-Knowing, All-Wise."

fare" could be appropriate, but that has already been taken to mean cyber-warfare. The term "deprogramming" is too specific, and is generally limited to small religious cults. A need exists for a name that sells itself to the public. For the moment, however, let's call this effort "counter-indoctrination," where one seeks to interdict, mitigate, and re-direct the behaviors and attitudes deriving from ideological doctrines with which one disagrees.

The Strategic Information Initiative (SII) was considered by many to be an excellent and timely counter-indoctrination program. Arguably however, it was not properly sold to the public or to the various agencies with which its mission competed. Had it been fully implemented, we would by now be in a position to measure its effectiveness over the past several years. For those unfamiliar with it, the SII involved, among other elements, sending skilled contractors to various American Embassies to explore, with a fresh view, how best to understand and influence our target audiences. This approach—together with data collection from attitude surveys—remains an essential step toward improving the effectiveness of public diplomacy efforts, and it is likely that some variant of the program may be reconstituted in the future.

Arguably, it would be beneficial to have a skills and resources inventory outside the federal government as well. There is a vast reservoir of skills especially suited to combating extremist ideology within academic circles, think tanks, private security firms, multinational companies, independent consulting groups, ecclesiastical organizations, retired government employees, and others. Political scientists, social psychologists and psychiatrists, police "profilers," pollsters, psychological operations (Psy Ops) officers, and similar experts could contribute greatly to our efforts.

However, caution is warranted regarding the efficacy of a private-sector skills inventory, since many of the individuals identified will not have security clearances and may lack access to relevant information. To permit in-depth discussion by a broadened range of participants, one might wish to arrange clearances for many individuals who are not government employees but who have essential expertise. Otherwise, the interchange of ideas would be extremely limited.

Another set of measurements that is not difficult to make would be simply to begin quantifying the number and intensity of extremist statements in mass media channels and in sermons at selected mosques. Although these measurements are partially subjective, they provide data to work with. If nations lack the staffing even to make these measurements due to the existing workload, this is a clear indication at the outset of a resource shortage.

Collection of data is important. Without it, measuring effectiveness is largely an exercise in conjecture. There are a great many data sets currently available, and we should start to gather and use them selectively.

When assessing the effectiveness of public diplomacy measures in combating ideological support for terrorism, one might begin with some basic questions as a first step in establishing measurement criteria.

1. To what extent is there already an existing strategy in place, supported by adequately trained personnel and sufficient funding? Does the nation have sufficient

will to implement it? A strategy without these elements will not produce much in the way of results.

2. To what extent is the strategy in question coordinated with those of similarly threatened, like-minded nations? Islamist extremism is a global phenomenon. Thus, a response without international coordination will at best produce limited progress to measure.

3. How does one define or characterize the ideology or ideologies one seeks to combat? What are the central or core components one needs to address?

4. How should indicators and factors of success be selected or defined? In other words, what should one be measuring?

5. How does the way one views success mesh with how our opponents may view their own success? For instance, does more visible ideological discussion and debate fuel recruitment by extremist groups?

6. How sympathetic to terrorist goals or tactics is the general public of a particular country?

7. To what extent does the media in various countries portray terrorist groups or actions in a favorable light?

8. Is the number of hatred-preaching mosques increasing or decreasing? Likewise, is the number of students enrolled or graduating from radical *madrasas* on an upswing or downswing?

9. Who should measure effectiveness? Should it be pollsters, academics, private think tanks, military analysts, the United Nations, or national governments?

10. What skills—especially skills from the social sciences—should governments bring to bear on their measurement efforts?

11. And finally, is it perhaps somewhat premature to attempt to measure the effectiveness of our efforts to combat Islamist extremist ideology at this juncture? Changing attitudes is often a lengthy process, and arguably the United States and allied nations are only in a startup mode.

Target evaluation and selection is an extremely important component of an effective strategy to combat extremist ideologies. If one has a poorly selected target audience, money may be spent needlessly without achieving the desired goals. Measuring effectiveness therefore also encompasses the valuation of one's targets.

For example, it is widely known that many *madrasas*—Islamic religious schools—teach extremism.[8] Should the vast number of students receiving this extremist indoctrination be a major focus of efforts to combat the spread of radical extremist ideology, or should one instead use limited resources to target the extremist professors,

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[8] See Riaz Khan, "Pakistani Religious Schools Face Scrutiny," Associated Press, 19 July 2005; available at www.lasvegassun.com/sunbin/stories/w-asia/2005/jul/19/071903563.html.

or the extremist clerics who hire them, or the wealthy businessmen who fund the clerics, or the government officials who permit the clerics to operate?

To develop meaningful criteria for measuring effectiveness, input would be welcome from students, scholars, political scientists, psychologists, economists, military personnel, religious leaders, and others who have had a "total immersion" experience in Islamic culture and who can help structure public diplomacy and counter-indoctrination programs. One of the first requirements in a struggle of ideologies is to know the enemy. What are the cultural parallels and differences?

When evaluating the effectiveness of efforts to combat extremist Islamist ideology, one needs to understand how ideological support is generated. What factors, agents, and vehicles facilitate or enable ideological support? These need to be engaged and countered.[9] One then needs to identify the groups or institutions susceptible to such enablers. These should be targeted as well.

"Enablers" for the growth of extremist Islamist ideology arguably include:

- Mosques and/or *madrasas* preaching radical Islamist extremism

- Governments actively supporting terrorism or countenancing its ideological incitement

- Extremist Internet sites and TV stations and the size of their audiences

- Foreign policy actions by the United States and anti-terror allies that may mobilize potential recruits to radical extremist ideologies

- Groups, channels, or mechanisms facilitating funding of radical Islamist extremist organizations

- Loopholes in law or policy facilitating the spread of Islamist extremism.

Ideological extremism takes years to develop and can take generations to quell.[10] If young people grow up with a rigid ideological framework, it is very difficult to change their minds later. In the United States, segregation and severe racial bigotry continued until the mid-1950s, and although the undesirable behavior was mitigated through new laws, it has taken at least two generations for society to internalize the change. It took enough time so that children attending integrated schools grew up and had children of their own, for whom integration was "normal." Youth enrolled in the Palestinian education system, daily being taught hatred for Israel and Jews, are another example of ongoing indoctrination. Consequently, counter-indoctrination is not a short-term solution, but rather a long-term investment in the future.

It is important to recognize from the outset that it will be impossible in practical terms to counter the vast funding that currently supports Islamist extremism. The com-

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[9] See generally Glenn and Carolyn Schweitzer, *America on Notice: Stemming the Tide of Anti-Americanism* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2006).

[10] See Anne Gearan, "Hughes: Fixing U.S. Image May Take Years," Associated Press (28 September 2006); available at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/28/AR2006092801185_pf.html.

bination of enormous oil wealth in countries with large Muslim populations, the Islamic religious imperative to contribute to charity, and the large number of entrenched and pervasive extremist organizations all serve to generate a huge cash flow.

In general, United States public diplomacy and counter-indoctrination resources appear to be consolidating, not expanding.[11] Within such a framework it becomes all the more important to choose wisely among the various strategies available, and to set funding levels so that chosen strategies can be successful. Given the large funding shortfalls, it may prove necessary to measure effectiveness in terms of acceptable losses. Moreover, it is unlikely during the next generation, or probably longer, that United States and allied efforts, regardless of their scope, will completely rob the wind from the sails of terrorism. Hatred and fanaticism are simply too strongly entrenched in certain population segments.

To be successful at public diplomacy, one needs to offer a "competitive product." In the past, particularly during the Cold War, some people were willing to risk their lives to get to the West, not just for the economic opportunity, but for freedom, a freedom they could never have in their own countries. The West was united in opposition to totalitarian oppression. The United States had a strong national identity, and people did not ask what it meant to be an American, or how democracy compared to other political ideologies. Being American was enough, because it meant that one loved freedom and the opportunity for individual development.

Today the enemy is different. Islamist extremism is an evangelical—some might say imperialistic—worldview that is intolerant of any other perspectives, and that often promotes terrorism as a means of achieving political or ideological goals. Its adherents are generally not disenchanted with their political situations, as many citizens of Eastern Bloc nations were during the Cold War, and abhor rather than admire Western culture and morals (which, admittedly, have changed over the past half-century).[12]

One powerful and often-overlooked tool in combating radical Islamist ideology is Islamic law. Application and interpretation of Islamic law are often the subjects of widespread interest and discussion in both popular and intellectual circles in societies with large Muslim populations. Hence, a critical component of any strategy is to encourage debate within Islam itself and within the intellectual communities in Islamic

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[11] The United States Information Agency has been subsumed into the Department of State. See also the discussion of public diplomacy issues in Raphael Perl, *International Terrorism: Threat, Policy, and Response,* CRS Report RL33600 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, updated 2007), available at www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL33600.pdf; Susan B. Epstein and Lisa Mages, *Public Diplomacy: A Review of Past Recommendations*, CRS Report RL33062 (2005), available at www.opencrs.com/rpts/RL33062_20050902.pdf; and Raphael Perl, *Terrorism, the Media, and the Government: Perspectives. Trends, and Options for Policymakers*, CRS Report 97-960 (1997), available at www.globalsecurity.org/intell/library/reports/crs/crs-terror.htm.

[12] See Christopher M. Blanchard, *Al Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology,* CRS Report RL 32759 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, updated 2007); available at www.fas.org/sgp/crs/terror/RL32759.pdf.

populations against violent ideologies that claim to be based in religion. The need for such an approach is gaining increasing recognition in policy circles.

The five pillars of public diplomacy effectiveness might arguably include credibility, truthfulness, policy consistency, encouragement of mutual understanding, and development of shared goals supported by adequate funding. These have traditionally been our strengths. Other forms of information countermeasures, such as deceit and disinformation, which fall outside the domain of public diplomacy, will involve different approaches.

To launch an effective public diplomacy campaign, one needs a vision and a clear national identity. It is not enough to say to the extremists, "Live and let live," because we, ourselves, are not isolationist. Based on both shared interests and the considerations of *realpolitik*, the United States often finds itself supporting regimes whose track record in human rights and distribution of wealth is dismal. An overall foreign policy that demonstrates both strength and consistency is important. It is widely acknowledged that uncertainty can often lead to aggression, and to the extent that our foreign policy is uncertain, the likelihood of aggression by others—and, at least in theory, by ourselves—increases.

One challenge of public diplomacy that one cannot emphasize enough is the limited funding of America's embassies abroad. This is not unique to American Embassies, but is a nearly ubiquitous problem for the international diplomatic community. As technology improves and communications become faster and more reliable, and as people travel more, embassy workloads increase, but there is no concomitant increase in budget.

Moreover, when one beefs up embassy security through enormously expensive infrastructure upgrades, budgets for other activities shrink. Among the first line items to be cut are representational and travel funds, so that official interactions between embassy staff and local government officials may diminish. All too often, embassy officials have limited skills in the languages used by countries with large Muslim populations. They do not have enough opportunities to obtain in-depth language training, because their absence from duty would mean critical staffing shortages in operational slots. This confluence of limitations—funding and staffing—is at odds with the imperative to expand public diplomacy efforts.

When addressing the issue of combating extremist ideologies, one would be remiss not to mention that, because of the tensions generated by the conflict between curbing the expression of radical Islamist ideological viewpoints and protecting civil liberties, democratic nations have often been reluctant to confront the issue of incitement to terrorism, especially when religion is involved. Although there is a fine line between religious freedom of speech and incitement to terrorism, a nation cannot shirk its obligation to protect itself from violence generated under the banner of religious freedom, just as it protects itself from speeches or sermons inciting racial violence generated under the banner of freedom of speech.

Some have suggested convening a high-level interagency group, to include representatives from both academia and the private sector in a retreat-like setting where ideas could be exchanged freely concerning strategies and measurement criteria. The

overall goal of such a group would be to formulate a public diplomacy and counter-indoctrination strategy to combat radical extremist ideology and to outline a methodology for evaluating its effectiveness. A shortcoming of past meetings of this sort, however, is that their findings have frequently not been accepted at higher levels. Notwithstanding, given the gravity and pressing nature of the threat of extremist ideologies, such a proposal may indeed merit active implementation.

The world today may well be at a major crossroads in history, where the effectiveness of Western and allied efforts in combating extremist ideologies may to a large extent shape the future political and economic landscape of the globe, either in favor of the West or dramatically against it. If a coalition of like-minded nations fails to confront and contain the threat that presently endangers the global economic system and our overall way of life, a new intolerant, radical, violence-prone political order may become the democratically-elected norm in many important countries around the world.