
INNOVATIONS IN STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS: A NEW APPROACH

Andrew Brian S. Sullivan

Despite the numerous and devastating attacks claimed by Islamist terrorists, individual acts of terrorism are still not the greatest threat posed by these extremists. Rather, it is the ideology, which is their strategic centre of gravity and which allows them to continually recruit, finance and expand, that poses the greatest obstacle to successfully countering this threat. Failing to effectively and proactively counter the spread of the ideology that facilitates the expansion of religious-based terrorism gives the extremist elements of these groups the initiative to develop however and wherever they please. That initiative then reduces one's own options to those of a reactive nature only.

This is not to argue that all current counter-terrorism options have failed, rather that the list of options available remains incomplete to effectively deter and contain organizations such as Al Qaeda and similar affiliated groups. Militarily, Canada and her allies in Afghanistan can succeed in any battle with the Taliban. Socially and economically, significant steps have been taken towards addressing the 'root causes' of terrorism both in Afghanistan and elsewhere. However, it seems little is being done to directly confront the spread of the extremist ideology that lays the groundwork for new terrorist organizations to form in theatres of operations where such groups have not previously existed.

Fortunately, with the release of the Reports of the Defense Science Board (DSB) Task Force on Strategic Communication in 2004 and 2008,¹ the U.S. Departments of State and Defense began to re-imagine information operations as a means to influence how civilians in Middle Eastern conflict zones perceive the West. This represents a concerted effort towards curbing the spread of this extremist ideology. While much credit must be given to the authors of these Strategic Communication reports for recognizing the central role of ideological competition in the War on Terror, there remains some room for improving their findings. Disappointingly, the focus of the reports is solely on the role of broadcasting and the internet in expanding U.S. influence around the world, without also elaborating on a low-technology option. This singular approach is likely to blunt the potential positive outcomes of any Strategic Communication initiative.

The Limitations of Broadcasting

While the Reports of the DSB Task Force on Strategic Communication correctly note that U.S. Broadcasting Board of Governors' (BBG) operations reach more than 155 million people each week, they neglect to mention specifics. For example, Radios Sawa and Farda² broadcast to 15 million listeners, but these listeners reportedly only tune in for the music portion of the programming.³ Consequently, these stations continue to "have little influence on either governments or the 'Arab Street'."⁴ This lack of impact is largely because

Muslims generally and Islamists specifically do not lack for reliable information; much less do they... prefer Western sources of information to their own. To the contrary, many indicators suggest Muslims favour tuning in or reading reports prepared by their co-religionists, trusting these more than what comes from non-Muslims.⁵

Furthermore, there are a wide range of reports prepared by the Muslim community. U.S. broadcasting efforts must compete with *As Sahab*, the Al Qaeda media wing, Hezbollah's newspaper *Al-Ahed* ("The Pledge"), radio station *Al-Nour* ("The Light"), TV station *Al-Manar* ("The Beacon"), and approximately "200 other stations [that] beam Arabic-language programming to satellite dishes reaching even the poorest neighborhoods in the Middle East and North Africa."⁶

In addition to an abundance of satellite television and radio options, targeted audiences with internet access are free to choose from a variety of new media forms.⁷ Internet blogs, videos, and websites have added to the spectrum of, and complicated control over, available sources for information. As the 2008 DSB report notes, "People are free to choose content that closely matches their own interests and biases."⁸ This level of information saturation means that "attention, not information, becomes a scarce resource."⁹ As a result, the U.S. is now faced with the dilemma of continuing current broadcasting efforts in the Middle East, which have proven largely unsuccessful, or identifying a new niche to exploit.



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A significant non-technological niche, currently unexploited by Western forces, is the human community. Specifically, person-to-person communication stands as one of the most fundamental and universally trusted realms of information in contemporary societies. This article will illustrate a framework for how introduced ideas might be effectively employed in a counter-ideological strategy to confront Islamist ideology within the communities from which terrorist organizations recruit. This strategy will be presented not as a competing counter-terror option to replace those that are currently in use, but as an additional tool designed to confront the spread of the ideology that facilitates and motivates individuals to carry out terrorist acts. The framework will outline three elements, including the method by which ideas transmit through a population, a mechanism by which ideas may be inserted into a given community, and a suitable idea as the means to obliquely confront Islamist extremist ideology. The purpose of this approach is to 'inoculate' a target audience against an extremist doctrine by inserting an acceptable idea whose presence limits or prohibits subsequent acquiescence to Islamic ideology. While not a 'hearts and minds' strategy, this framework provides the first stratagem of its kind to engage in the counter-ideological conflict that is the 'War of Ideas'.

Weaponizing Ideas: A New Niche?

Memetics, the study of memes, is concerned with how ideas can spread through a population to create a "social contagion epidemic,"¹⁰ much like a virus transmits between bodies. It is also concerned with how established concepts presently accepted within a community are occasionally replaced by subsequent ideas. The application of memetics to counterterrorism is concerned with creating an artificial, directed social epidemic to counter or replace the extremist ideology within a given community or group. An epidemic of this

type would be designed to elicit specific behavioural or attitudinal responses from the target audience. Memes are spread by word of mouth interactions, thereby negating reliance on modern communication technology such as the internet, radio, and television. Memes have been used to explain a variety of social learning phenomena, and as a whole, include attitudes, behaviours and beliefs, such as religious convictions.¹¹ Religious ideology is itself an example of this third type of meme.

Functionally, successful memes progress through four stages of replication. First, memes are assimilated and internalized by the new host. In the second stage the internalized meme is embedded in the host's memory where it is retained for future expression. The longer it is retained, and the greater accuracy with which it is retained, the better its ability to be spread. Third, the meme is made apparent to other potential hosts through its expression. The expression will generally take the form of linguistic or behavioural articulation, but is by no means limited to these possibilities. Fourth, when the expressed meme is passed to a receptive host it is then transmitted again, thus completing the cycle from expression to assimilation.¹²

Memes are self-replicating and omnipresent in all cultures, existing in the subconscious background, or 'socio-structural white noise', that is the basis of every society. They act as a subconscious influence on a person's decision-making process by establishing the subliminal parameters within which conscious decisions are made. As such, they remain present within each member of a population, guiding their choices and actions. Due to the ubiquitous nature of memes, as well as general reliance on oral transmission of information in the cultures where the West is currently facing the threat of Islamic-driven terrorism or insurgency, the ability to insert a specific message into the social network of a given group would be a non-technological-dependent means of spreading anti-jihadist messages. Relying on personal communication, such as gossip and rumors, instead of technology or literacy-dependent options, will insure deeper social penetration with less traceability. Through the manipulation of memes, the West may directly influence the interpretation of perceptions in the War of Ideas.¹³ In this context, the objective will be to insert parasitic memes into the natural flow of ideas within a specific community to create directed attitudes and behaviours that contradict or deflect the messages sent by Islamist extremists.

Tipping Points: Creating Social Epidemics

It is not enough to simply introduce an idea and hope that it alters a population's perception. Certain factors must be reached to produce the necessary 'tipping point' where a new social epidemic is created.

Social epidemics are idea-based social movements that spread through a population by exponential, rather than geometric, growth. While not every individual will be 'infected' by the idea contained within the movement, exponential growth means that virtually no one is left unexposed. The key to the shift between an idea that exists within a population and a full-blown epidemic is the tipping point, the moment at which a noticeable change occurs within the behaviour or perspective of a population. These points can best be thought of as a snow fall. The degree difference between having snow and not having snow may be only a few degrees, but the functional difference is green grass versus white snow.¹⁴ In a social epidemic, the difference in behaviour associated with the spread of the idea may be unobservable until the tipping point is reached. At this point, the change in behaviour becomes evident. This unquantifiable characteristic of tipping points has led to many failures in attempts to force, direct, and measure social epidemics. These three elements—that ideas spread through a population exponentially, that little causes can have significant effects, and that "change happens not gradually but at one dramatic moment"—are the identifying characteristics of social epidemics.¹⁵

To counter an ideology that is spreading through a population like a contagion, a means of 'inoculating' the 'uninfected' population must be found. The key to a successful memetic counter-ideological strategy will depend on its depth of penetration in that population. To

maximize the depth of penetration of the counter-ideology, the insertion will have to come from several different directions simultaneously, mimicking a network or swarm attack. It will have to expand from both the centre to the edges and the edges to the centre. Memes provide the best heuristic model because they are “self-replicating concepts that move through time and space without support from the source.”¹⁶ Additionally, they are communicated along pre-existing social networks, meaning that they directly access an established, multi-directional communication net, enabling memetic messages to be sent in several directions simultaneously.



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Insertion: CAPs as the Mechanism

If word of mouth is to be the method of initiating a social contagion epidemic, then the issue of establishing credibility with the target audience is crucial. One proven method of building exceptionally strong psychological bonds of trust is through the sharing of intense personal experiences. In a combat setting, these types of experiences can best be forged through the deployment of military forces already in theatre in a Combined Action Platoon (CAP) operation, similar to that employed by the U.S. Marines in the early part of the Vietnam War.¹⁷

Historically, CAPs were an innovative approach to troop deployment designed to overcome the growing problem of an increasing manpower shortage coupled with an expanding tactical area of operations.¹⁸ To solve this problem, the USMC conceived of combining “a squad of marines with local Popular Forces (PFs) and assigning them a village to protect [which] proved to be a force multiplier.”¹⁹ This almost accidental “bottom-up strategy”²⁰ saw squads of “little more than a dozen Marines in villages, to support, train, and fight with existing Vietnamese units defending their own homes.”²¹ Both the long-term and proximate nature of the Marine deployment to the people they fought with presented an inadvertent, but mutually beneficial, opportunity to engage in the War of Ideas that lay at the heart of the insurgency in the Vietnam War.²²

CAP deployment provided multifaceted opportunities for the Marines. These opportunities included destroying the networks of social and physical infrastructure that supported the insurgency; maintaining consistent, local, and direct security and law

enforcement in the village; protecting friendly infrastructure, thus allowing NGOs to safely operate in civic action programs; and organizing successful intelligence nets by accessing pre-existing social networks.²³ In combination, this effort effectively provided better service and protection to the population than was offered by the insurgents.²⁴ Each of these factors assisted in developing a high level of trust between the Marines and their hosts.

Furthermore, by posting the same Marines in one location for an extended period, the villagers came to know that “the Marines were committed to them, and trust developed from the personal contact of living, fighting, and dying together.”²⁵ As Marcus Corbin notes, “Living near the people in the villages engendered the trust of the locals. That trust yielded the most important ingredient of fighting a guerilla war—intelligence.”²⁶ The ensuing psychological bonds and mutual trust manifested itself in the form of shared intelligence. It is not difficult to imagine how sharing information leads to the mutual sharing and reinforcement of ideas, perceptions and attitudes. This real world model illustrates the practicality of deploying a CAP-style program in the current War of Ideas.

Auspiciously, there are grounds for assuming that a CAP deployment would be well-accepted in Afghanistan, and potentially by other populations under threat from Islamic extremism. According to the 2008 DSB report, a 2005 survey of 2,089 Afghans found that “81 percent held a negative view of Al-Qaeda’s [sic] influence in the world,” “88 percent held a negative view of the Taliban,” and “90 percent held an unfavourable (75% very unfavourable) view of Osama bin Laden.” Additionally, the same survey found an “83 percent favourable (39% very favourable) rating” of U.S. forces in Afghanistan.²⁷ In spite of these attitudes (or perhaps because of), these people remain under threat from Islamists, such as the Taliban. A CAP deployment by Western forces could provide the basis for securing threatened populations, while simultaneously establishing the trust relationships that are needed to permit new ideas and perspectives to be shared across cultures.

The model provided by the CAP deployment stands as an example of how human relations, regardless of cultural idiosyncrasies, can be used to promote specific psychological bonds that may influence cultural perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs. Although CAPs were initially created to provide physical security, their presence allowed a unique opportunity to engage in the War of Ideas. While the ideas in Vietnam were socio-economic rather than religious in nature, the CAP framework is applicable to the Long War against Islamist extremists.

The Necessity of Oblique Memetic Attacks

Where new memes compete successfully, they will replace a target’s previously held beliefs or ideas, yielding new paradigms. Where they fail to compete, they are simply not re-transmitted and the tipping point is never reached. This is why newly inserted memes have the best chance of survival if they are inserted in such a manner that they do not compete directly with pre-existing memes. This oblique attack prevents the new meme from being rejected before it has a chance to influence the host’s perspectives and be passed on. An oblique memetic attack achieves its success by attaching itself to another similar meme already held by the host that is also more powerful than the meme it is attacking. For example, in a memeplex²⁸ as complex as religious beliefs, there are a core set of memes that are fundamental to the entire paradigm.²⁹ Each of these is supported by co-memes that reinforce the core and other co-memes. A new idea that attacks the core meme directly will be automatically rejected by the various co-memes that are designed, or have evolved, to protect the core meme. This is a direct attack and it will fail. However, a new idea that attaches itself to a core meme, and reinforces it while simultaneously attacking and replacing the pre-existing co-memes with its own co-memes, will create a strong sense of cognitive dissonance within the host’s mind.³⁰ If the new meme successfully reinforces the existing core meme while redefining the previous co-memes, a new paradigm will take root in the mind of the host.

Ijtihad—The Means

A significant obstacle to introducing new ideas lies in finding a concept which the host is able and willing to internalize. Regardless of the level of trust established between two parties, new ideas that directly contradict a host's previously held beliefs will be quickly rejected. As such, a subtle, indirect, or piecemeal introduction of new ideas, that also support aspects of the host's pre-existing perspectives, will be far more effective than wholesale direct attacks on one's beliefs. For example, proposing the dominion of a secular society over religiosity to a devout Muslim will likely enjoy a spectacular rate of failure. Instead, any message to be introduced must be carefully crafted to support the core beliefs of the target audience while simultaneously undercutting, in this case, the Islamic extremist ideology that has attached itself to the host's religious and cultural worldview.

Current extremists have connected much of their ideology to the Muslim faithful by employing their status as religious scholars, calling on Muslims to reject all non-Islamic ideology.³¹ Their fundamentalist authority is perceived as an extension of the Koran, which is considered the literal word of God. This ideological centre of gravity begs the question: could the Koran and other fundamentalist structures be used to drive the target audience to question the extremist interpretation of Islam, and by extension, the authority of its promulgators?

Specifically, the history of Islamic scholarship has been marked by changes in its interpretation by religious scholars. The current extremist reconfiguration of the Muslim faith has required a nearly wholesale rejection of the Islam of the past. As Daniel Pipes notes:

In rejecting a whole millennium, the fundamentalists throw out a great deal of their own legacy, from the great corpus of Qur'anic scholarship to the finely worked interpretations of [Islamic] law.³²

The past century of ever growing extremist analysis has meant that "many fundamentalists are ignorant of their own history and traditions."³³ However, those traditions have not been lost by the wider Muslim community, and may be used to reintroduce concepts from the past that would challenge the extremist perspective.



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Derk Kinnane has identified three core concepts central to re-shaping the War of Ideas to weaken extremist ideology, as follows: properly defining, or re-defining, *jihad* and its role in holy war; Sharia law as derived from the Koran, the Prophet, and established custom; and *ijtihad*, an Islamic concept that means thinking afresh about Islamic doctrine.³⁴ The purpose of *ijtihad* is to introduce critical thinking about the state of Islam within Muslim communities. By dismissing the previous 1200

years of Islamic scholarship, extremists protect themselves by also rejecting this core cultural tenet of Islam. While Kinnane's first two concepts can be extensions of the third, it is the memetic promotion of the concept of *ijtihad* that will be the key to obliquely attacking the Islamists and blocking the spread of their ideology.

Ijtihad Explained

Ijtihad is a complex concept steeped in Islamic law. Islamic law (Shari'a) is derived from the Koran, the book of God's laws as revealed to the Prophet Mohammed in the seventh century, and the Sunna, which are the legal traditions established by the Prophet

in light of God's laws. However, the Koran itself is more a book of customs or guidance than codified law. It contains three different types of instruction: articles of faith, articles relating to ethics, and regulations for society and the state. Yet no more than ten percent of the Koran can be considered to constitute actual legal prescriptions. Rather than a book of actual laws, the Koran and Sunna function, relative to Shari'a law, in the same way as a constitution functions relative to a nation's laws. The Koran and Sunna make clear "the essential origin of legislation and prescription of law," rather than dictating the actual practice of those laws.³⁵ These specifics are left to Islamic jurists to deduce. The mechanism for deducing these legal particulars is the function of *ijtihad*.³⁶

The process of *ijtihad* has been defined as being:

practiced by a jurisprudent to discover secondary divine legislation (laws) regarding the organizing of human life and its diverse relations or endeavouring to discover and deduce the Islamic laws and regulations from their sources.³⁷

In essence, *ijtihad* is the effort to derive societal laws from the Koran and Sunna that are acceptable to God.³⁸ Due to the ever-changing needs of society, *ijtihad* is also responsible for interpreting and changing these laws as the context of the Muslim community evolves over time.³⁹ As new contexts emerge, these laws must then be re-thought.⁴⁰

While it may be assumed that the degree to which Islamic law is debated would be minimal, this assumption does not hold. Radwan Masmoudi, president of the Centre for the Study of Islam and Democracy, acknowledges that although the Koran is universally seen as the literal word of God,⁴¹ "there has been and continues to be substantial disagreement about the meanings of certain verses and their application to different situations."⁴² Indeed, for the first eight to nine centuries after the death of the Prophet Mohammed in 632, *ijtihad* was "developed by Muslim scholars in order to understand and apply the message of the Koran to varying societal needs and conditions."⁴³ It was held that "without the process of *ijtihad*, many human activities are difficult to develop in the sphere of an Islamic life."⁴⁴

Interestingly, extremists such as those found in contemporary movements argue that *ijtihad* has not been practiced since the late ninth century.⁴⁵ The basis for this argument is that certain classical jurists of that period argued that all laws that could be derived from the Koran and Sunna had been written in their perfect form and no further interpretation was required. This argument has been called the "closing of the gate of *Ijtihad*."⁴⁶ In the absence of *ijtihad*, these jurists instituted the practice of *taqlid*. *Taqlid* is the imitation of established traditions without relation to context. The belief that all Islamic laws exist in perfection, and that no further interpretations are necessary is prevalent today, as "most countries in the Muslim world prefer to practice *taqlid* using *Ijtihad* only when the practice of *taqlid* cannot bring about the desired reforms."⁴⁷ While not commonly accepted as fact by conservative Islamic governments, as well as those infected with Islamist ideology, there is ample evidence that *ijtihad* had been practiced before, during, and long after the supposed "closing of the gate" and has not been entirely replaced with *taqlid* either in theory or in practice.⁴⁸

Historical Evidence for Ijtihad

History abounds with examples of *ijtihad* in practice from the time of the Prophet to the present day. For example, fifteen years after the death of Mohammed, the second Caliph, Omar ibn-al-Khattab (reigned 634-644), today considered as one of the "Four Righteously Guided Caliphs," stopped cutting off the hands of thieves who were stealing out of the necessity of hunger. Despite directly contradicting the Koran, which prescribes this exact punishment, the change was deemed just and the Caliph held that justice was "supreme."⁴⁹ Caliph Ali bin Abi Talib, who was the fourth of the "Four Righteously Guided Caliphs," argued that as men and women speak for the Koran, interpretation of its dictates "is an essential part of applying [Koranic] injunctions to the lives of Muslims."⁵⁰ It is also said that Imam Muhamma Ibn Idris al-Shafi'i (767-820), a founding leader of the Shafi'i school of Islamic jurisprudence, once gave a certain legal opinion in Baghdad. After moving to Cairo the next year, he gave a very different opinion to the same issue. When questioned over his

inconsistency, he replied "That was in Baghdad and this is in Cairo. That was last year and this is now."⁵¹

These classic jurists, among others, recognized the need for legal change as a social context evolves. As Wael Hallaq argues, the practice of *ijtihad* continued unbroken during the formative first five hundred years after the death of the Prophet. This is due to the persistent "differences among jurists, encouraged by ambiguities in legal terminology" which made any consensus on the end of *ijtihad* "impossible to reach."⁵²

There appears to be little emphasis on legal reflection between the 13th and 18th centuries. This is probably due to the retreat of Islam from Europe and the colonization of Muslim countries by Europeans in the latter half of this period. However, Muslim revivalists of the 18th and 19th centuries renewed the practice of *ijtihad*.⁵³ By the late 19th century, the role of *ijtihad* had expanded, and was seen less as a "legal tool and more the key to an Islamic *weltanschauung* based on rational thought."⁵⁴ The movement to restore the practice gained such strength that in 1898, Mohammed Abduh, considered the founder of Islamic Modernism, advocated the:

fresh interpretation of the principles found in the divine revelation as the basis of legal reforms. Abduh also argued that *ijtihad* was not only the right of modern day jurists but the only way by which Islam could adapt itself to the needs of today's society.⁵⁵

Ijtihad continued to play a role in legal reforms across the Middle East and North Africa during the 20th century.⁵⁶ Most notably, in 1960 Pakistani High Court judge Mohammed Shafi stated that "Reading and understanding the [Koran] implies the interpretation of it which must be in the light of the existing circumstances and the changing needs of the world."⁵⁷ As late as the year 2000, the council of Muslim *ulamas* (religious scholars) in Europe and the United States "decreed that it was permissible for Muslims residing in the West to buy houses with mortgages and to pay interest on these loans." Despite the fact that this ruling directly contravenes the Koranic prohibitions on charging or paying interest, it was justified on the grounds that Muslims in the West had particular financial and social needs that had to be met in this context.⁵⁸ The overwhelming evidence that *ijtihad* has been practiced almost continuously since the death of the Prophet, and the lack of consensus that it had been completely replaced by *taqlid*, is strong evidence that this cultural norm still exists in the Muslim world today.

Re-establishing Ijtihad

Even in those areas where *ijtihad* has been more or less replaced by *taqlid*, it may still be possible to reawaken the people to its practice. As *taqlid* is the direct imitation of classical practices, such as those found in the Koran, a Koranic basis for *ijtihad* needs to be found to be imitated through *taqlid*. Fortunately, Koran 21:78-79 illustrates that *ijtihad* not only has a basis in the Koran itself, but the verses cite its usage "by the prophets themselves."⁵⁹ Additionally, Koran 2:149, which speaks to the common practice of facing Mecca when praying, cites God as having said "Wherever you are, face the sacred mosque [in Mecca], and wherever you are, turn your face towards it." In this passage "God Himself indirectly encourages us to exercise our faculty of reasoning... to derive a logical conclusion on certain matters." This divine requirement elevates the practice of *ijtihad* to "the most important source of Islamic law next to the [Koran] and the Sunna."⁶⁰



Koran Cover

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Furthermore, the practice of *ijtihad* is sanctified within the Sunna as well, where it is directly prescribed by the Prophet. This tradition states that during Mohammed's lifetime he appointed Mu'adh Ibn Jabal as a judge in Yemen. According to the Sunna, the night before the judge departed for his new post,

The Prophet asked him: "According to what shall thou judge"? He replied: "According to the Book of God." "And if thou findest naught therein?" "According to the Sunna of the Prophet of God." "And if thou findest naught therein?" *Then I will exert myself to form my*

own judgment. And thereupon the Prophet said: "Praise to God who has guided the messenger of his Prophet to that which pleases his Prophet."⁶¹

This is direct recognition and approval of the practice of *ijtihad* in situations not specifically covered by the Koran or Sunna. Consequently, whether from the Koran, the Sunna, or *ijtihad*, legal theory is sanctioned by God as it is revealed in divine sources.

In Islam, as it is man's duty to worship God, it becomes incumbent on mankind to produce qualified jurists who will interpret the law as a means of worshipping God through this creation. According to Wael Hallaq this obligation is such that "Until *Ijtihad* is performed by at least one *mujtahid*,⁶² the Muslim community remains under the spell of this unfulfilled duty."⁶³ Moreover, laws that are uncovered by *mujtahids* "are only estimated" and not considered final, not even those laws that were "perfectly" formulated around the ninth century. Therefore it is required that existing laws be scrutinized. This scrutiny should be "pure and free from any fanaticism or internal or external factors such as political and sectarian tendencies."⁶⁴ Thus, "it is the duty of a rightly guided *mujtahid*... [to] cancel in all periods any of these sources which contradict the [Koran] and the Sunna or hold no water before a scientific justification."⁶⁵

That the practice of *ijtihad* is sanctioned by the Sunna and the Koran, prescribed by the Prophet, and required by God should be evidence enough to convince any Muslim of the duty of this practice. It remains incompatible to have a religion based on the Koran and Sunna without the mechanism of *ijtihad* to interpret which derived laws are acceptable to God in a given context. It is the religiously-immutable quality of *ijtihad* that makes it the strongest candidate upon which to base a counter-Islamist meme.

Similar Programs at Work

Although the insertion of an oblique, religiously-derived, memetic attack by Western military forces may appear radical, it should be noted that similar efforts have already been employed in other contexts. Rejecting a reliance on the internet and other forms of broadcasting to spread anti-extremist messages, Major General Douglas M. Stone, USMC, recent commander of U.S. detention facilities in Iraq, "introduced 'religious enlightenment' and other education programs" for his detainees.⁶⁶ The courses offered were taught by moderate Muslim clerics who teach based on a moderate doctrine. According to Stone, "Such schooling 'tears apart' the arguments of al-Qaeda."⁶⁷ These efforts are "part of waging a war in what he called 'the battlefield of the mind'."⁶⁸ Although it is not clear whether Stone directly intended to employ concepts from the field of memetics to counter the willingness of an audience to accept an extremist paradigm, it is clear that his efforts to insert an alternative ideology has enjoyed some significant success.⁶⁹

Stone's program has a latent function as well. By offering an alternative ideology, the detainees self-divide into those who accept the new perspective and those who flatly reject it. In Stone's words, this process "helps U.S. forces pinpoint the hard-core extremists."⁷⁰ Programs similar to Stone's model are also being employed in Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and elsewhere.⁷¹ These initiatives have been successful in large part because they are able to bypass the competitive nature of the broadcasting market, and tap directly into the individual minds of their audience, thereby precluding the 'information saturation' obstacle inherent in the DSB's current recommendations.

Yet a significant problem remains if Stone's approach is to be used to counter terrorism more broadly. Specifically, his program is designed for prisoners. It is focused on those individuals who have already committed, or attempted to commit, a terrorist act. Stone's initiative fails to reach outside of the confines of his prison, ahead of the decision by a given individual to undertake a terrorist operation.

What is needed is a means to overcome this limitation and spread a similar counter-ideology outside of the prison camp and into the community as a whole. By introducing an effective alternative to Islamist ideology, those individuals who are not already committed



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to the Islamist course could be 'inoculated' against the extremist message. Conversely, the hard-core Islamists who reject any alternative view could be readily identified by their opposition to the new paradigm. Those individuals could then be identified as the most likely to commit a terrorist act before an attack is launched. Building on Stone's innovative circumvention to the limitations of mass media broadcasts, memetics can be used to generate an effective response to Islamist ideology in real world communities. A memetic attack, designed from the positive experiences of the CAP operations from the Vietnam era, would be an ideal means of countering modern extremist Islam.

Conclusion

Due to the nature and goals of Islamic-based terrorism, chiefly its need to replace its dead recruits and its desire to expand across the Southern Eurasian continent, it relies heavily on the spread of its ideology. Since ideas cannot be destroyed with munitions, a new means of attacking this threat must be found. Yet there is an inherent flaw in the expectation that broadcasting measures will have the desired propaganda effect of countering either the negative perceptions of the United States or the extremist ideology. The passive nature of a broadcasting strategy requires an active element within the community to encourage people to tune in. This is especially true in markets with fierce media competition, such as those in the Middle East. Fortunately, there are two possible means of overcoming this difficulty.

The first is to concentrate on the broadcaster. That is, increase the number of stations carrying your message, increase advertising for the stations, and increase the number of incentives used to draw in listeners. In short, these are all standard promotional strategies used in modern Western media. Certainly, this would require a huge influx of money and other resources to have even the potential to succeed. Additionally, a successful station must still establish and maintain its credibility among the population.⁷² This task may prove insurmountable in areas where American credibility is at its lowest, and therefore where such messages are needed most.

The second option is to identify, target, and dominate a niche that has not already been exploited. Regardless of whether or not an individual tunes in to a radio program,

virtually everyone in a given community is tuned into a social network. By 'broadcasting' a message along existing Muslim familial and social network lines the West may be able to 'inoculate' a given population against the spread of extremist ideology. The key to successfully immunizing that population depends on the depth and breadth of penetration of a given counter-meme. By basing the counter-ideology on a central component of the Islamic faith such as *ijtihad*, which is ordained by the Koran and the Sunna, the meme will not be a foreign construct; as its tenets will be more or less pre-internalized by the Muslim faithful. Thus, the inserted meme's main function will be to draw this concept to the surface of the target's thinking. The pre-positioned nature of this concept will ease the insertion and saturation of that meme. Furthermore, its penetration will be maximized by having the insertion come from several different directions simultaneously, mimicking a network or swarm attack. This networked attack will expand from both the centre to the edges, and the edges to the centre, and may best be deployed via a CAP-style military operation.

The dissemination of information from the West may begin and continue with radio broadcasts, and spread through newspapers, television, the internet, and cell phones, but it must always be recognized that we should:

not overlook the fact that throughout history informal methods of communication such as the gossip of the taverns, streets and marketplaces have been the standard local media for transmitting information, and these informal channels coexist with all the latest multimedia technology in contemporary societies.⁷³

A memetic attack on an extremist ideology through community-insertion techniques, combined with increased efforts in broadcast media, could result in a combined high-tech/no-tech 'pincer' attack, leaving the Islamists no other avenue to spread their message. No longer able to expand, current Islamists could be identified and detained before more attacks take place. Fortunately, the message that the West should promote already exists within the population. If it did not, many more Muslims would likely be extremists. Currently, Islamists are trying to tip the balance on moderate viewpoints in their favour. The West's counterstrategy must be to tip it back.

About the author ...

Andrew Sullivan completed his second undergraduate degree, in military history, in 2005, focusing on low-intensity conflicts during the Cold War. Recently he graduated from the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies, where his research focused on developing innovative strategies in contemporary counterterrorism and counter-insurgency operations. He has applied to pursue his PhD in the psychology of terrorism at the Department of War Studies, Royal Military College of Canada, in September 2009.

Endnotes

1. *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication*, (Washington DC: Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, 2004), and *Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication*, (Washington, DC: Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics, 2008). Hereafter cited as *Report 2004* and *Report 2008*.
2. Radio *Farda* (Radio Tomorrow) and Radio *Sawa* (Radio Together) are two BBG radio stations broadcasting into the Middle East. Other BBG operations include the radio, television, and internet of Voice of America (VOA); Al Hurra, an Arabic-language television news source; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL); Radio Free Asia; and Radio and TV Marti. Together the BBG absorbs approximately \$1.2 billion of the State Department's annual budget, an amount equivalent to one-quarter-of-one-percent of the annual budget for the Department of Defense. See *Report 2008*, 67-68, and *Report 2004*, 28.
3. Derk Kinnane, "Winning Over the Muslim Mind," in "Outmaneuvering Terror," *National Interest*, (Spring, 2004), 94.

4. Ibid.

5. Daniel Pipes, "Winning the Propaganda War [Versus Radical Islam]," *New York Sun*, (December 27, 2005): 1.

6. Craig Whitlock, "U.S. Network Falts in Mideast Mission," *The Washington Post*, (June 23, 2008): A01.

7. Interestingly, the authors of the report admit that although internet use is expanding in the Middle East, its current penetration "is estimated at only 10 percent" of the total population. See *Report 2008*, 44. The number of Internet hosts per 1,000 people is lower in the region than in any other area of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa. According to Robert Stevens, "UN Report on Middle East Catalogues Widening Inequality," (September, 12, 2002), although 5 percent of the world's population live in the Middle East, the region accounts for just 0.5 percent of Internet users. This situation makes devoting significant resources to internet-based Strategic Communication the least penetrative method to actually influencing peoples' attitudes. Furthermore, this says nothing of the illiteracy rates in the region and how that will affect the targeted audiences' ability to receive messages sent over the internet, even as internet usage expands. According to the United Nations, the "overall adult literacy rate in the region is 62 percent compared to a global average of 79 percent".

8. *Report 2008*, 25 and 40.

9. *Report 2004*, 20.

10. Paul Marsden, "Memetics and Social Contagion: Two Sides of the Same Coin?", *Journal of Memetics: Evolutionary Models of Information Transmission*, (12:2, 1998): 8.

11. In memetics, religions are considered "memeplexes". They are a complex mass of core memes, which are those ideas central to the belief system, and co-memes, which are those beliefs that support, and are supported by, the core memes.

12. Ben McConnell, and Jackie Huba, "Book Excerpt: Giving Up Control and Other Scary Lessons", *Brandweek*, (47:44, December 4, 2006): 21.

13. Social scientific research has largely confirmed that affects, attitudes, beliefs and behaviour can indeed spread through populations as if they were somehow infectious. Simple exposure sometimes appears to be a sufficient condition for social transmission to occur. See Marsden, 2.

14. Gladwell, Tipping, 13.

15. Ibid., 9.

16. Betsy D. Gelb, "Creating 'Memes' While Creating Advertising", *Journal of Advertising Research*, (37:6, November–December 1997): 57.

17. In "Counterinsurgency Field Manual: Afghanistan Edition," Nathaniel Fick and John Nagl argue that the only way to disconnect the enemy from civilians is through persistent presence, i.e. "living among the population in small groups, staying in villages overnight for months at a time", as the only way to protect the population. This deployment strategy is exactly that employed by CAPs in Vietnam. See Nathaniel A. Fick and John A. Nagl, "Counterinsurgency Field Manual: Afghanistan Edition", *Foreign Policy*, (January/February, 2009), and at www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=4587&print=1.

18. Of course, the same problem remains a significant obstacle in the Long War today, particularly in Afghanistan where recommended troop levels are between one half and one third of the necessary levels. See Fick and Nagl, *Paradox 2-3 and 3-2*.

19. Major Brooks R. Brewington, "Combined Action Platoons: A Strategy for Peace Enforcement", *USMC Command and Staff College* (Quantico Va., 1996): 1.

20. Brewington, 15.

21. Marcus Corbin, "Revive Combined Action Platoons for Iraq", *Centre for Defense Information (CDI): Straus Military Reform Project*, (October 13, 2004): 1.

22. As both wars relied on ideas to spread their respective insurgencies and to gain the necessary strength to achieve their ultimate objectives, the critical similarity lies in how these ideas are spread, and how they might be opposed most effectively. While it is certain that the content of the ideas were distinctly different in Vietnam as in the Long War, the processes by which they were spread were sufficiently similar that any mechanism that successfully countered this process in Vietnam could be adapted for application in the Long War.

23. Brewington, 15. Italics added.

24. Ibid., 4.

25. Corbin, 2.

26. Ibid.

27. *Report 2008*, 36.

28. A memeplex is a group of mutually reinforcing ideas/memes. The most salient example of a memeplex is religion, where several (hundred or thousand) individual ideas interconnect for mutual reinforcement. The core ideas that are fundamental to the memeplex are known as core memes, while the lesser supporting ideas are co-memes. For example, a core meme in Christianity is that there is a kind and loving God who watches over each believer. A co-meme in this paradigm is that going to church on Sundays is an acceptable means of worship. The co-meme is not necessarily a

requirement in all forms of Christian worship, but without the presence of the core meme the impetus for the co-meme is lost.

29. A memplex is a collection of mutually self-reinforcing memes made up of a single, or single group, of core memes, supported by numerous co-memes all centered around promoting an action or collection of actions. Memplexes are extremely difficult to attack or dislodge, but they can be altered.
30. Cognitive dissonance is a psychological condition that occurs when two or more competing cognitions are held simultaneously by the same person. The resulting tension yields changes in behaviour. This concept will be discussed in detail below.
31. As evidenced by Osama bin Laden issuing fatwas in the late 1990s.
32. Daniel Pipes, "The Western Mind of Radical Islam", *First Things*, (December 1995), at www.danielpipes.org/article/273, 4.
33. *Ibid.*, 3.
34. Kinnane, 98.
35. For example, the Koran makes the duty of paying charity to support the poor an explicit obligation, but does not clarify the amounts nor on what grounds it should be paid. Unknown, *Ijtihad*, 2. See also Hasbullah Abdul Rahman, "The Origin and Development of *Ijtihad* to Solve Modern Complex Legal Problems", *The Islamic Quarterly*, (43:2, 1999): 77.
36. Rahman, 77.
37. *Ijtihad*, 1.
38. Wael B. Hallaq, "Was the Gate of *Ijtihad* Closed?", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, (16:1, March, 1984): 33.
39. David Smock, "*Ijtihad*: Reinterpreting Islamic Principles for the Twenty-First Century", *United States Institute of Peace, Special Report No. 125*, (August 2004): 2. One main reason that laws derived from an infallible source may be subject to reinterpretation and change is that different perceptions of grammar, meaning, or initial interpretation of the Koran and Sunna may lead to differences in understanding and formulating laws.
40. *Ijtihad*, 5.
41. Despite the critical nature of *ijtihad* in understanding how mankind should behave in the eyes of God, *ijtihad* must never be applied to debate the existence of God, the validity of Mohammed as the Prophet of God, or the authenticity of the Koran. These are accepted as facts that are not open to interpretation. See Rahman, 75.
42. Smock, 2.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ijtihad*, 1.
45. Hallaq, 7-8.
46. See *Ibid.* for more detail.
47. Rachel Anne Codd, "A Critical Analysis of the Role of *Ijtihad* in Legal Reforms in the Muslim World", *Arab Law Quarterly*, (14:2, 1999): 124.
48. Even amongst those who argue that the gate to *ijtihad* was closed, there is little agreement on the timing of the closure. Following the death of the Prophet, several different schools of Islamic jurisprudence came into being, each with their own analysis of what constituted a perfect interpretation of the law, although the common view is that, if the gate was closed, it occurred at the end of the ninth century. However, others place its occurrence anywhere between the ninth and thirteenth centuries. This variance depends on the school of thought in question. See Hallaq, 3-4.
49. Smock, 2. See also Codd, 114.
50. Codd, 114.
51. Smock, 2.
52. Hallaq, 33.
53. Syed Farid Alatas, "Contemporary Muslim Revival: The Case of 'Protestant Islam'", *The Muslim World*, (97:3, July, 2007): 513.
54. Muneer Fareed, "Against *Ijtihad*", *The Muslim World*, (91, Fall, 2001): 357.
55. Codd, 121-122.
56. For example in Egypt in 1946, Syria in 1953, Tunisia in 1957 and Morocco in 1958. For details on each of these cases and others, see Codd, 122-126.
57. See *Begum v. Din, High Court Decision*, in *Pakistan Legal Decisions*, (Lahore: 1960, vol. XII, 1153), as cited in Codd, 112.
58. Smock, 2.
59. See Hamid Algar, "Q. 21:78-9: A Qur'anic Basis for *Ijtihad*?", *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*, (4:2, 2002): 1-22, in Colin Turner, ed., *The Koran: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies: Vol. II: Themes and Doctrines*, (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004): 376-379, for a thorough consideration of four different accounts of the use of *ijtihad* by Sulaymān against the decisions of his father Dā'ūd.
60. Rahman, 74.
61. See Muslim, *Sahih Muslim*, (English Trans.), (3:976, 930), as cited in Rahman, 74.

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62. A mujtahid is a jurist capable of practicing *ijtihad*. See Smock, 4.
63. Hallaq, 5. See also *Ijtihad*, 3.
64. *Ijtihad*, 8.
65. Here the use of the term “scientific” refers to an emotionally and politically objective approach, free from internal or external political considerations, or personal desires. See also *Ijtihad*, 3.
66. Walter Pincus, “U.S. Working to Reshape Iraqi Detainees: Moderate Muslims Enlisted to Steer Adults and Children Away From Insurgency,” *The Washington Post*, (September 19, 2007): A01. see also Walter Pincus, Transcript of “Bloggers’ Roundtable With Gen. Douglas M. Stone,” interview with Major General Douglas M. Stone, USMC, *The Washington Post*, Federal News Service, September 18, 2007. Accessed 30 April 2008.
67. Pincus, “Reshape,” 1.
68. Pincus, “Roundtable,” 3.
69. Pincus, “Reshape,” 1.
70. Ibid.
71. Nancy Durham, “Can Therapy ‘Cure’ Terrorism? Saudi Arabia Uses Creative Approach to Reform Junior Jihadis”, *CBC News*, January 14, 2008, 1.
72. Edward Kaufman, “A Broadcasting Strategy to Win Media Wars.” in Alexander T. J. Lennon, ed., *The Battle for Hearts and Minds: Using Soft Power to Undermine Terrorist Networks*, (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2003): 310.
73. Paul Wilkinson, “The Media and Terrorism: A Reassessment”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, (9:2, Summer, 1997): 51.



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