

# **THE DIFFUSION OF IDEAS IN THE WAR ON TERROR**

by

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## **Introduction**

The term “war on terror” was first used by US President George W Bush just days after the September 11 2001 terrorist attack on US soil.<sup>1</sup> Since then, the Bush administration has realized that the war is not a conventional one to be fought solely on a military battleground; rather it is a war of ideas against a global, diffused and radical Islamic insurgency driven by religious ideology. President George W. Bush has said *“We actually misnamed the war on terror. It ought to be [called] the struggle against ideological extremists who do not believe in free societies and who happen to use terror as a weapon to try to shake the conscience of the free world.”* As a religious ideology, Al-Qaeda and its affiliates have attained a surprisingly wide base of support throughout the Muslim world. Hence, to win this war entails not just winning on the ground or in the air but more importantly, to successfully engage a free flow and exchange of ideas and information to refute the dogma of these radical Islamic clerics. This paper examines the various theories of diffusion of ideas and norms through the international system in an attempt to answer the following questions: How do terrorist norms/ideas emerge and become institutionalized? In this war on ideas, how do we effectively compete with these ideas and norms presented by the terrorists? Once these norms are identified, how do we sustain norm compliance?

## **Diffusion of Norms in International Politics**

For the (neo) realist, the diffusion of norms throughout the international system is due to the dominance of powerful democracies that force weaker countries to adopt their own domestic standards. In the absence of overriding security or economic motives, realists conclude that any change within the issue area “is a function of the extent to

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<sup>1</sup> Accessed from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>

which more powerful states in the system are willing to enforce the principles and norms of the regime.”<sup>2</sup> The stronger and the more assertive the democratic camp of states within the international system, the more likely it is that the norms become established. For the realist, coercive practices such as sanctions are the preferred means of enforcement.

Liberal international relations theory places an emphasis on the domestic sources of state preferences as the determinant of outcomes in international politics.<sup>3</sup> Hence, it accepts a limited independent role for international institutions in promoting norms and cooperation previously agreed upon by state actors. The diffusion of norms is expected to be strongest within the context of a liberal community of states, rather than between liberal and non-liberal states. The success of diffusion is built into the definition of the participating units. In the later case, liberal theory takes a more traditional view of sovereign states negotiating to maximize their self-interests.

While some constructivist hold a worldview dominated by state actors, others have introduced non-state actors along with norms and ideas into the study of international relations. Differences between the state-centric and non-state centric worldview is also reflected in the each preferred process of norms diffusion. While state-centrists have broadly adopted the language of sociological institutionalism<sup>4</sup>, non-state centric perspectives have sought to show a process of normative socialization.<sup>5</sup>

### **Al-Qaeda: The Spread of a Poisonous Worldview**

Terrorists’ networks like Al-Qaeda represents a shift in the way terrorists operate, a shift made largely possible by the changing rules of the New World Order. Al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden once claimed that the collapse of the Soviet Union has led the US to assume the role of “a master of this world and establishing what it calls the New

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<sup>2</sup> Krasner Stephen D 1993 “Sovereignty, Regimes and Human Rights” in Regime Theory and International Relations

<sup>3</sup> Moravcsik 1997

<sup>4</sup> Thomas et al 1987 Institutional Structure: Constituting State, Society and Individual

<sup>5</sup> Risse Thomas et al 1999 The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change

World Order.”<sup>6</sup> Ironically, it is precisely the end of the Cold War that brought more open borders, thus enabling al-Qaeda to flourish.

Al-Qaeda’s successfully disseminated its ideas by capitalizing on the open, global society in the post Cold War era. Over the last ten years, a sophisticated public relations and media communication campaign was conducted using a series of faxed statements, audio recordings, video appearances, and internet postings.<sup>7</sup> These ideas in the form of hate speech and conspiracy theories directed at America and its allies spread globally throughout innumerable newspaper articles, books and publications, websites and homepages, cartoons, crossword puzzles, TV news items, educational broadcasts and music videos. The ideas were not only communicated through certain mosques or Islamic schools but also via independent satellite television networks like Al-Jazeera. In an increasingly globalized culture, Osama’s ideas are influencing the beliefs and actions of militants from Yemen to Kenya to England with a speed and reach unimaginable two decades ago.

These messages have been well-designed to elicit desired psychological impact and to communicate complex political messages to a global audience as well as to specific populations in the Islamic world, the United States and Asia. Bin Laden has personally stated his belief in the importance of harnessing the power of international and regional media for Al-Qaeda’s benefit, and Al-Qaeda’s central leadership structure has featured a dedicated media and communications committee tasked with issuing reports and statements in support of the group’s operations. Analysts believe that Al-Qaeda’s messages contain signals that inform and instruct operatives to prepare for and carry out new attacks. Bin Laden has referred to his public statements as important primary sources for parties seeking to understand Al-Qaeda’s ideology and political demands. Through his public statements over the last ten years, Bin Laden has portrayed himself both as the

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<sup>6</sup> Prologue Pg 20 Holy War Inc Peter L Bergen

<sup>7</sup> Compilation of Usama Bin Laden Statements 1994 – January 2004

leader of a consistent ideological program and a strategic commander willing to tailor his violent messages and acts to specific circumstances and audiences.<sup>8</sup>

Al-Qaeda is also believed to have more sophisticated communication and transfer technology than the US, according to the head of US National Security.<sup>9</sup> The Saudi militant's followers communicate by fax, satellite phone and e-mail. Al-Qaeda members have taught individuals from other groups how to use the internet to send messages and how to encrypt those communications to avoid detection. Bomb and chemical-making techniques have been passed around. Investigators have found the same kind of fuse being used on different continents. In the mid 1990s, members of Al-Qaeda made a CD-ROM containing hundreds of pages of information about various kind of weaponry, as well as instructions on how to build bombs and conduct terrorist and paramilitary operations.

### **Countering Terror Ideas and Norms**

Norms are generally defined as “a standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given identity. In the context of the war on terrorism, norms are not simply moral guidelines but powerful ordering principles with very practical implications.<sup>10</sup> A consensus among states is emerging that terrorism is of universal concern and in direct violation of the principles of international community. This convergence in strategic interests has helped to bridge the divide between the west and the developing world.

In the war of ideas, it is equally important understand the terrorists other target audience; that of the group of aggrieved populations they claim to represent. This group extends to a broader, less radicalized population that has the power to confer a degree of legitimacy on the terrorists, simply by responding positively to their tactics. In the case of al-Qaeda, this group consists of diffuse or loosely aligned supporters who welcome the

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<sup>8</sup> Al-Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology, CRS Report for Congress, November 16 2004

<sup>9</sup> General Mike Hayden, Interview with 60 minutes II, CBS, aired February 2001

<sup>10</sup> Steven Simon and Jeff Martini Terrorism: Denying Al-Qaeda its Popular Support accessed from [http://www.twq.com/05winter/docs/05winter\\_simon.pdf](http://www.twq.com/05winter/docs/05winter_simon.pdf).

news of a terrorist attack or do not object to Al-Qaeda's claim to represent them. One of the main strategies to deny the terrorists these supporters is to marshal international norms that would stigmatize terrorism and push the terrorists further towards the fringes of community.

In effect, acts of terrorism violate two fundamental prohibitions. Firstly, violence is not a legitimate means of solving political disputes particularly when the actors are non-state actors. This is antagonistic to Max Weber's well known formulation that states have a monopoly over the legitimate use of force. A critical legitimizing condition when considering the use of force is that the agent in question is a sovereign power. Even in the language of those who assert Muslims fundamental right to military jihad, historical precedents suggest that the resorting to force requires authorization from some higher authority.

The second norm essential to delegitimize the strategy of terrorism is the belief that non-combatants are entitled to immunity and should not be subject to attack. Islamic tradition has a parallel definition of just war. In the Koran, overriding themes emerge regulating force based on obligations both to God and to fellow men, Muslims or otherwise. There are examples of injunctions not only against killing women, children and other non-combatants during war but also to not destroy trees and pollute the environment. A search for a mechanism to institutionalize these restrictions at the state and community level would significantly undermine popular support for terrorist organizations.

It should be understood that while many analysts on terrorism and political violence have discovered that Bin Laden is attacking the U.S. because of a specific set of US policies, Al-Qaeda's real war is not primarily against America, but a struggle for the soul of Islam within the Muslim world. Hence, the battle for the hearts and minds of Muslims is paramount to dry up the pool of potential recruits to extremism. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's said in an interview with The Washington Times that to win the war on terror, we must also win the war of ideas – the battle for the minds of

those who are being recruited by terrorist networks across the globe ... The task is to stop terrorists before they can terrorize. And even better, we must lean forward and stop them from becoming terrorists in the first place.<sup>11</sup>

Winning the hearts and minds of the Muslims cannot be achieved by western-style television or radio stations, which appeal to only tiny, secular, westernized minorities. It can only be done through the authority and legitimacy of Islam itself. In that respect, The International Islamic Conference held in Amman in July this year was a historic event and a step in the right direction.<sup>12</sup> In the final statement issued by the conference, it seeks to reinforce the traditional checks and balances on the interpretation of the Koran and other texts which in effect interpret it. The Amman initiative also nullified all fatwas or religious rulings permitting or commending terror acts. This will be of utmost importance to the war on terrorism.

### **Enforcing Norm Compliance**

Once the norms are defined and recognized, the second step is to enforce adherence to a norm. In essence, the propagation of a norm is not an exercise in consensus building; rather it is a state-driven initiative that utilizes the coercion of weak states to follow the norms of stronger states. Washington has sought to enforce international norms by publishing its list of active state sponsors of terrorism while The Financial Aid Task Force (FATF), publish a list of Non-Cooperative Countries and Territories against money laundering and terrorist financiers.

However, while enforcing the norm against state-supported terrorism has been largely successful, the top down approach questions the extent to which these norms have diffused to the general population. This is critical as Al-Qaeda and its affiliates have attained a surprisingly wide base of support throughout the Muslim world. Indeed, a

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<sup>11</sup> War of Ideas by Frank Gaffney Jr, The Washington Times  
<http://www.washtimes.com/commentary/20031027-083105-4333r.htm>

<sup>12</sup> The Amman Initiative: A Theological Counter Attack against Terrorism Islamica Magazine Issue 14 2005

study by the Pew research Institute in June 2003 found that “solid majorities in the Palestinian Authority, Indonesia and Jordan and nearly half of those in Morocco and Pakistan say they have some confidence in Osama “to do the right thing regarding world affairs.”<sup>13</sup>

To tackle violence at the grassroots level, a parallel bottoms-up approach should compliment the state-driven initiatives. This is necessary as top down initiatives are limited because state diplomacy is often at odds with the value systems of a states’ citizenry. For instance, while a number of states have chartered a decidedly pro-Western course (Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey), significant segments of their populations hold very different political and cultural sensibilities. In addition, bottoms up approach will circumvent the assumptions of complete state sovereignty as well as states unhindered ability to project their authority.

However, the bottoms-up approach is more difficult to implement compared to the state-driven initiatives. This is because while a process of coercion whereby the strong can compel the weak state to submit to their will can expedite the propagation of norms in the international system, norm creation at the subnational level will have to appeal to the community’s self interest or to the inherent legitimacy of the norms themselves. Hence, to expedite the emergence of norms against violence at the community level, the US should find creative means to support the effort of local norm entrepreneurs. For instance, the US could contribute to the development of local institutions that promote norm convergence with Western values. Another way is to bring scholars and students to the West to be groomed as norm entrepreneurs in the form of intellectuals and activists.

The US also needs to improve its public diplomacy, specifically by communicating the compatibility of US policy and values with the aspirations of those

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<sup>13</sup> Pew Global Attitudes Project, “Views of a Changing World,” June 2003, p. 3.

living in the Muslim world.<sup>14</sup> This does not imply a foreign policy based on popular global opinion but the United States should clearly explain the rationale behind its decision, which in turn, should be carried out in a manner that demonstrates respect for the sensibilities and cultural sensitivities of others. The goal is not so much to indoctrinate but rather to engage dissenters and provoke introspection among those prone to supporting terrorism.

Finally, a corresponding effort must be made to address the material conditions like poverty, lack of social mobility, poor educational infrastructure and the denial of basic human rights that terrorists exploit. Attempting to win hearts and minds while skirting the root causes will lead to failure. Progress in addressing these root causes will help pave the way for broader acceptance of norms against terrorism at the subnational level.

## **Conclusion**

Al-Qaeda's ideology has taken on a life of its own. What is unknown is the extent to which Al-Qaeda's radicalism has taken hold throughout the Muslim world, but certainly the U.S. preoccupation with Iraq for more than three years after the September 11 attacks has given time and space for the cancer to spread, as well as rallying cry to recruit more Muslims to Al-Qaeda's radical cause. In this war of ideas, the independent roles of norms are seen to affect international and domestic policy outcomes, a belief adopted by the constructivists' school of thought in international relations. The US should realize that the war of ideas is largely a struggle within the Muslim world and the best chances for winning the war lies in supporting and aligning with the true religious authority and legitimacy of Islam itself.

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Satloff The Battle of Ideas in the War on Terror:Essays on US Public Diplomacy in the Middle East 2004

