INFLUENCE WARFARE

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*How Terrorists and Governments Fight
to Shape Perceptions in a War of Ideas*

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Foreword

SEVEN YEARS INTO the war on terrorism, the United States stands at a crossroads. The sustained successes of the war's early phases now appear to be challenged by al-Qaida's acquisition of a new sanctuary in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and surrounding provinces;[1] the rising power of affiliated and associated groups, like al-Qaida in the Maghreb;[2] and, most important by the continued resonance of the movement's message and in turn its ability to ensure a flow of recruits into its ranks, money into its coffers, and support for its aims and objectives.

Although the United States has been tactically successful in killing or capturing key al-Qaida leaders and their foot soldiers, we have been less successful in strategically countering al-Qaida's ideological appeal, its ability to radicalize sympathizers, and its continued capacity to energize supporters and thereby sustain its struggle. *Influence Warfare: How Terrorists and Governments Fight to Shape Perceptions in a War of Ideas* is thus a timely addition to the literature on counterterrorism in general and especially to this often ignored but critical dimension of the war on terrorism.

U.S. strategy to date has largely assumed that America's contemporary enemies—whether al-Qaida or insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan—have a traditional center of gravity and that they can be defeated primarily by targeting individual bad guys. It assumes that these enemies simply need to be killed or imprisoned and that global terrorism and insurgency will end. Accordingly, the attention of the U.S. military and intelligence community for many years has been directed almost uniformly toward hunting down militant leaders or protecting U.S. forces—not toward understanding the enemy we now face. This is a monumental failing not only because decapitation strategies have rarely worked in countering mass mobilization terrorist or insurgent campaigns, but also because in al-Qaida's case its ability to prosecute this struggle is a direct reflection of its ability to promote and ensure its durability as an ideology and concept.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recently explained how "We can expect that asymmetric warfare will be the mainstay of the contemporary battlefield for some time. These conflicts will be fundamentally political in nature, and require the application of all elements of national power. Success will be less a matter of imposing one's will and more a function of shaping behavior—of friends, adversaries, and most importantly, the people in between."[3] Success will also depend on the ability of American strategy to adjust and adapt to changes we see in the nature and character of our adversaries as the contributors to this volume cogently argue. At the foundation of such a dynamic and adaptive policy must be the ineluctable axiom that successfully countering terrorism as well as insurgency is not exclusively a military endeavor but must also involve the fundamental parallel political, social, economic, ideological, and informational activities that Secretary Gates cites. The adversaries and the threats we face today, however, are much more elusive and complicated to be vanquished by mere decapitation. In so fluid an environment, our strategy must embrace influence operations with the same sense of priority and focus that our enemies have.

An effective response is thus one that effectively combines the tactical elements of systematically destroying and weakening enemy capabilities (the "kill or capture" approach) alongside the equally critical, broader strategic imperative of breaking the cycle of terrorist and insurgent recruitment and replenishment that has enabled al-Qaida to survive thus far and continue to marshal its resources and carry on their struggle. It reflects the importance accorded to influence warfare by Field Marshal Sir Gerald Templer in Malaya more than 50 years ago. "The shooting side of the business is only 25% of the trouble and the other 75% lies in getting the people of this country behind us," Templer famously wrote in November 1952, responding to a terrorist directive from the previous year that focused on increasing appreciably the "cajolery" of the population.[4]

"If you know the enemy and know yourself," Sun Tzu famously advised centuries ago, "you need not fear the results of a hundred battles." But if there has been one consistent theme in America's war on terrorism, it is a serial failure to fulfill the timeless admonition. The war on terrorism has now lasted longer than World War II. That we are still equally far from winning either cries out for precisely the knowledge that we have instead neglected and which is presented throughout the chapters that comprise this book.

Why is it so important to "know our enemy?" Simply, military tactics are doomed to failure when they are applied without a sophisticated knowledge of whom they are being applied against or an understanding of how the enemy thinks and therefore how he is likely to respond and, moreover, adapt or adjust to those tactics. Without knowing our enemy we cannot successfully penetrate their cells; we cannot knowledgeably sow discord and dissension in their ranks and thus weaken them from within; nor can we think like them in anticipation of how they may act in a variety of situations, aided by different resources; and overall, we cannot fulfill the most basic requirements of either an effective counterterrorist strategy—preempting and preventing terrorist operations and deterring their attacks—or of an effective counterinsurgency strategy—gaining the support of the population and through the dismantling of the insurgent infrastructure.

Until we recognize the importance of this vital prerequisite, America will remain perennially on the defensive: inherently reactive rather than proactive—deprived of the

capacity to recognize, much less anticipate, important changes in our enemy's modus operandi, recruitment and targeting. The key to success will ultimately be in harnessing the overwhelming kinetic force of the U.S. military as part of a comprehensive vision to transform capabilities in order to deal with irregular and unconventional threats. A successful strategy will therefore also be one that thinks and plans ahead with a view toward addressing the threats likely to be posed by the terrorist and insurgent generation beyond the current one. These efforts, however, will only succeed when we can credibly claim to know our enemy and thereby to have based our strategy on empirical knowledge and analysis and not conjecture or wishful thinking. The publication of *Influence Warfare* is an important step forward in effecting this process.

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Bruce Hoffman
Washington, DC

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NOTES

1. Mark Mazzetti and David Rhode, "Amid U.S. Policy Disputes, Qaeda Grows in Pakistan: Bin Laden's Network Successfully Relocates as American Frustration Mounts," *New York Times*, June 30, 2008.

2. Souad Mekhennet, Michael Moss, Eric Schmitt, and Elaine Sciolino, "A Ragtag Insurgency Gains a Qaeda Lifeline," *New York Times*, July 1, 2008.

3. Remarks as Delivered by Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates to the Association of the United States Army, Washington, DC, Wednesday, October 10, 2007 accessed at http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1181.

4. Quoted in John Cloake, *Templer: Tiger of Malaya—The Life of Field Marshal Sir Gerald Templer* (London: Harrap, 1985), p. 262.

Preface

THOUGHT TRANSCENDS MATTER, Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw once wrote. This is particularly true for terrorist and insurgent groups, who seek to mobilize a population toward some vision of the future that they believe cannot be achieved without the use of violence. Because these groups are weaker militarily than nation-states, their ability to recruit and mobilize the masses is a critical part of their asymmetric warfare strategy, and is simultaneously a fundamental vulnerability. Historically, most scholarly discussions of counterterrorism have focused on various strategies for the use of force, intelligence, and law enforcement, with only minor attention given to nonkinetic operations like information warfare or the projection of soft power. Counterinsurgency doctrines, on the other hand, have recognized and emphasized the importance of capturing "hearts and minds" when confronting a violent group seeking to overthrow a government. In both terrorism and insurgencies, states and nonstate actors compete against each other to gain influence among key public audiences—the center of gravity in virtually all contemporary conflicts. Recent events in Afghanistan and Iraq have brought new life to research in this area, and have spawned new studies of conflicts in which the combatants seek to convince a population that their vision of the future is more legitimate than any other.

Victory in this conceptual battlespace requires a sophisticated understanding of strategic communications and an ability to effectively utilize a broad range of technologies. Further, as demonstrated by the chapters in this volume, the global proliferation of information technology has provided new tools for influencing the perceptions of a population, empowering and emboldening terrorists and insurgencies like never before. The key challenge for governments today is thus finding ways to effectively confront its nonstate adversaries in all dimensions of the information domain. The collection of analytic essays and case studies in *Influence Warfare* contributes to this critical goal.

The volume begins with an introductory chapter that identifies and defines key terms used in subsequent chapters and offers a general overview of why and how states and violent nonstate actors engage in strategic communications. The remaining chapters are divided into three sections. The first part of the book provides critical analyses, thematic essays, and examples of how terrorists gain and lose strategic influence. In the next section of the book, authors focus on the counterterrorism aspects of influence warfare, particularly how governments gain and lose strategic influence. The final part of the book offers a diverse collection of strategic influence case studies. Each section and its chapters are briefly summarized here.

PART I: TERRORISM AND STRATEGIC INFLUENCE

In the first selection, Vera Zakem and Aidan Kirby describe how the recent revolution in communications technology driven by the Internet has created a new, more expansive market of ideas. Individuals are now empowered to reach massive audiences with unfiltered messages in increasingly compelling and provocative packaging, rendering the competition for mass influence more complex. The emergence of new means of communication and new styles of virtual social interaction have transformed the context for mass persuasion and have expanded opportunities for extremists to disseminate their message. For example, terrorists have begun using new online tools of social networking in their strategic influence efforts. This new environment makes the ideological battle for hearts and minds more complex. Zakem and Kirby explore the various ways in which this "next generation" of Internet use, and the new forms of social media—as they are sometimes referred to—have shaped the contemporary competition of ideas. Their analysis highlights implications for the ways in which the U.S. government should seek to communicate with the world and recommends strategies that are acutely aware of the significance of both medium and message.

In the next chapter, Gabriel Weimann notes that while there have been several recent studies on how modern terrorists use the Internet for recruitment, support, and operational transactions, less attention has been paid to the use of the Net as a medium for terrorist debates and disputes. He then provides examples of virtual debates among and within terrorist groups, demonstrating how this can tell us a great deal about the mindsets of terrorists, their motivations, and their doubts and fears. Further, he notes, by learning the inner cleavages and debates within a group or movement one can find practical ways to support the voices against terror, to broaden gaps within these dangerous communities and to channel the discourse to nonviolent forms of action. In sum, he illustrates how the Internet serves as a battlefield between and within terrorist organizations that use this platforms to conduct ideological debates or even personal disputes, as well as to bridge gaps, unite forces, and resolve disputes. Understanding these activities are fundamental to countering today's most sophisticated terrorist and insurgent groups.

Next, M. Karen Walker examines how the transmission of digital media adds three layers of complexity to our assessment of communicated threats. First, new media can act as an accelerant for communicated threats. Public awareness, interpretation, and

reaction to a specific threat can erupt in social networks before intelligence analysts and public officials have an opportunity to evaluate the threat or place it in context. The participatory nature of new media allows individuals to comment on, forward, and replicate messages anew, complicating public officials' efforts to source and authenticate the message. Second, instilling uncertainty and generating fear through the amplification of the threat across Web sites, news channels, and social networks may be the terrorist group's primary objective. Third, benefits and uncertainties of new media accrue to both perpetrators and the public. Taking these factors into account, an understanding of media effects and framing processes can supplement traditional methods of analysis and response to communicated threats. This comprehensive view of new media as a sphere of public discourse suggests that media literacy may be the most effective countermeasure to publicly communicated terrorist threats.

In the final chapter of this section, Cori Dauber examines the measurable amounts of press coverage a terrorist attack can receive and discusses the specific qualities and characteristics of attacks that appear to trip the threshold required by the press in order to be treated as a "spectacular" event. She then explores whether these metrics, which can be applied to terrorist attacks that occur around the world, also apply to those in Iraq, and what might explain any differences that do exist. Finally, some suggestions are offered for more responsible press coverage of terrorist violence. The goal, she argues, should be to balance what the terrorists and the public are both getting out of the story, and ensuring that the terrorists never get more out of a story than the public does.

PART II: IMPLICATIONS FOR COMBATING TERRORISM

In the first chapter of this section, Frank Jones seeks to advance a strategic theory of terrorism as it relates to all types of nonstate actors by using an interdisciplinary approach that integrates social science and the theory of war and strategy. In essence, he proposes a theory that terrorists make choices to attain a future state or condition. Those choices concern how they will use the coercive or persuasive power available to exercise control over circumstances or a population to achieve objectives in accordance with their policy. In posing such a theoretical framework for the study of terrorism, the inevitable question is, "What can a state, particularly a democratic state, offer as a counterstrategy?" The answer is more difficult to construct because of the dilemmas the state confronts in terms of political judgment, institutional response, and policy prescriptions. It must balance policy concerns with a number of other factors, including values, beliefs, the rule of law, and legitimacy, to name a few. Nonetheless, in responding to terrorism, countermeasures have both strategic and operational contexts and rely on the use of strategic appraisal, the relationship of political identity and discourse in a war of perceptions, and the integration of the instruments of power, with some taking precedence. There is no foolproof counterstrategy, however, and because of this, its guiding principles require a realistic understanding of the conditions of security.

Next, Max Abrahms examines how states can exploit the relative ineffectiveness of terrorist groups. Contrary to the prevailing view that terrorism is an effective means of

political coercion, his research suggests that, first, contemporary terrorist groups rarely achieve their policy objectives, and second, the poor success rate is inherent to the tactic of terrorism itself. For example, he notes that terrorist groups whose attacks on civilian targets outnumber attacks on military targets do not tend to achieve their policy objectives, regardless of their nature. Terrorism, he argues, is a communication strategy; the attacks on civilians are designed to convey to their government the costs of maintaining the political status quo. The problem for terrorists is that their violence miscommunicates their political objectives to the target country. Ironically, instead of amplifying their policy demands, terrorism marginalizes them for two reasons. First, target governments tend to focus on the terrorist acts themselves rather than their political rationale. Second, terrorism may cause the public to focus on the purely negative aspects of a campaign to the exclusion of the presumably "positive" political message that the terrorists will hope to project. Abrahms then derives policy implications from this research about why countries should be reluctant to make concessions.

In the following chapter, Christopher Paul, Todd Helmus, and Russell Glenn address the challenges and barriers faced by the U.S. government as they engage in the war of ideas—specifically, the challenges faced by Department of Defense efforts to "shape" the perceptions and behaviors of noncombatant populations in areas in which the military conducts operations. Understanding this difficult context helps frame suggestions and solutions and may serve to focus the lines of inquiry of others looking to contribute solutions. Their chapter is drawn from a larger report, published by the Rand Corporation, which offers suggestions in response to these challenges. They assert that U.S. forces can and should attempt to shape more than just an "adversary," or "the battlespace," in pursuit of goals that go beyond "operational objectives." Efforts to influence a much broader range of persons and activities in pursuit of a wider array of objectives and policy goals should be considered part of shaping.

Joshua Geltzer further examines the nexus of strategic influence and the military in his analysis of the nonkinetic aspects of kinetic efforts. In other words, actions themselves convey messages—kinetic (i.e., active, generally violent) counterterrorist measures have crucial nonkinetic (i.e., persuasive, demonstrative) elements and implications. Strategic influence comes through word as well as through deed—and an analytical focus on just how the latter functions as a form of strategic influence toward America's target audiences is a vital contribution to the literature on countering terrorism. Geltzer's chapter aims first to reveal a number of ways in which key American counterterrorist policies are predicated (in significant part) on their potential to exercise strategic influence beyond their direct practical effects; and second, to suggest the difficulty—but also the importance—of assessing what influence those policies have had, are having, and will and can have on their intended audiences, whose members are characterized by rather distinct—and in some respects unusual—worldviews.

Simon O'Rourke then explores the implication of virtual radicalization for law enforcement. He rightly notes how counterterrorism is very much a local challenge—indeed, if all politics are local, then clearly political radicalization (and the context which enables it) is also local. The dissemination of extremist material to a self-selecting audience further complicates the mission for the law enforcement, because for the first time

extremists across the globe can unite online. After examining the implications of this globally dispersed, Internet-connected terror threat for local law enforcement agencies, O'Rourke identifies some components of a successful counterterrorism response.

Next, Sebastian Gorka and David Kilcullen examine the message that al-Qaida has been broadcasting, what the message from the United States and its allies has been, and the contextual reality behind both. They also explore why al-Qaida has been much more successful in communicating its ideology and the justifications for its actions than the United States and its allies have been. Based on their analysis, they recommend a simple format and preliminary content for a doctrine of strategic communication to undermine al-Qaida and strengthen U.S. national interests.

In the final chapter of this section, Joshua Sinai describes how the widespread use of the Internet by terrorist groups and their supporters offers myriad opportunities for the counterterrorism community to monitor and track their activities, and by doing so uncover insights about their communications, information gathering, training and education, fund-raising, operational planning, command and control, publicity and propaganda, and the radicalization and recruitment of potential operatives. In addition, "official" postings on their Web sites, and discussions in their forums and chat rooms, also provide information about some of the root causes driving their grievances, ambitions, and other factors that motivate them to conduct terrorist activities. He then offers a methodology to enable counterterrorism analysts to hierarchically decompose the underlying factors driving a terrorist insurgency. He recommends examining the content of official terrorist Web sites and their accompanying forums and chat rooms in order to formulate appropriate responses—whether coercive or conciliatory—to contemporary terrorism.

PART III: CASE STUDIES OF STRATEGIC INFLUENCE

Daniel Baracskay begins this portion of this volume by exploring the chronology of American and Soviet communication strategies during the Cold War era, with particular emphasis on their effects on the developing world. In the United States, the Voice of America (VOA) and U.S. Information Agency (USIA) were both created from congressional mandates in the mid-twentieth century to oversee communication strategies and collaborate with private sector media outlets in the transmission of American broadcasts. Conversely, media outlets in communist states were collectively controlled by authoritarian regimes that utilized communications to globally expand Marxist-Leninist doctrines and to counteract the prodemocracy movement. Both blocs competed for influence over the policies of developing states on every continent. However, the information age has affected the ability of government institutions worldwide to conduct public diplomacy. Faced with the threat of terrorism by the transnational al-Qaida network, new strategic communication policies are needed and must be the product of international cooperation and coordination, with presidential direction, bipartisan support from Congress in terms of funding and cooperation, direction and coordination by relevant national security departments and agencies, and support through private–public sector relationships.

In the next chapter, James Dingley provides a case study of how a group's actions can decrease its own strategic influence. In this case, the criminal acts of pro-state terrorists (loyalists) in 1987 were caught on camera in a TV current affairs program (the *Cook Report*) which highlighted the many rackets they ran, and whose proceeds appeared to be going straight into private pockets and not to the organization. Propaganda is a serious weapon for all terrorists; to succeed they need to acquire legitimacy within their own client population and to an outside world. In this sense they need to be able to promote a relatively "pure" image of themselves, both to enhance their own reputation and, by implication, to lessen that of their opponents, usually the state. Above all they must produce an image of themselves as true and incorruptible servants of their cause and the people they claim to be fighting for, which is not always easy since by their nature they are law-breakers. Thus, many believe that the *Cook Report* had a major adverse affect on the loyalists in terms of military and political impact. Dingley examines the true impact of these events, given that the loyalists were relatively easy for police and investigative reporters to penetrate and gather intelligence from.

Next, Sammy Salama and Joe-Ryan Bergoch analyze al-Qaida's strategy for influencing perceptions in the Muslim world. They describe how al-Qaida has learned a great deal from the failures of al-Jihad al-Islami and other domestic Jihadi organizations in the Muslim world—namely, their inability to muster the support of significant segments of Muslim populations for their causes and help them overthrow secular regimes. As a global revolutionary Salafi-Jihadi movement, al-Qaida and its affiliates aim to not only carry out military operations on Western and Muslim soils but also enhance and facilitate their revolutionary activities by instilling their vision, religious ideology, and political doctrine in the minds of the Muslim masses. Unfortunately, recent advances in communication technology have greatly facilitated this endeavor. Unlike the early 1980s, when governments in the Muslim world exercised a virtual monopoly on media outlets that routinely broadcasted their message and orientation, the advent and global expansion of the Internet in recent decades has provided terrorist organizations like al-Qaida with a sophisticated and robust public relations capability, enabling them to influence perceptions in ways previously unheard of. Their case study examines the various aspects of al-Qaida's strategy for influencing perceptions in the Muslim world by (1) using the Internet to export its revolution, (2) borrowing historical terminology to evoke collective memory, (3) demonizing and attacking Westerners to divide the Muslim community, (4) portraying its activities as part of a popular revolution, and (5) redefining the conflict with the West and its allies as a long-term war of attrition in order to minimize the importance of tactical setbacks.

In the next case study, Guermantes Lailari describes how the Lebanese military group Hizballah has been skillful in conducting information operations (IOs) since its inception in the early 1980s, while Israel's efforts in the IO realm have been mixed. Most recently, both actors demonstrated their capabilities during the Israeli-Hizballah Summer 2006 War—referred to by the Israelis as the Second Lebanon War and by the Lebanese as the Tammuz War or July War. Lailari's chapter examines the IO war between the two and extrapolates some implications for state policies against violent nonstate actors (and in some cases their state supporters). The main conclusions from this case study are

that terrorist groups, much like state actors, continue to improve their technology, fighting doctrine, and IO. Furthermore, a terrorist organization does not have the bureaucratic constraints that state actors have regarding the development and production challenges of new capabilities; their decision cycle is much more flexible and allows for innovation against a Western military. And finally, terrorists have a greater motivation in the fight since to them it is their survival; state actors are not in such dire straits, at least not in the short term. As each capability discussed in this chapter becomes refined and continues to be successful against modern armies, more and more violent groups will be encouraged by these successes. These successes will make the art of fighting against terrorists or insurgents more difficult, and without a clear grand strategy to counter violent nonstate actors and their supporting state actors, coupled with ongoing successes of these actors, current endeavors are likely to fail.

Next, Frank Hairgrove, Douglas McLeod, and Dhavan Shah explore how Hizbut Tahrir-Indonesia (HT-I) has used the Internet to achieve its strategic objectives and mobilization goals. Drawing on data from field research, their study indicates that HT-I uses the Internet mainly for indoctrinating recruits, and that the group is effective at reaching its target audience both online and offline, with members downloading material for distribution among compatriots who are involved with *halaqa* study groups. They also examine the methods used to assess the effectiveness of Internet sites and apply a multimethod approach to exploring Internet content in order to identify the strategic objectives of HT-I and assess the degree to which these objectives have been accomplished. They conclude that the success of the group's efforts can be observed from the organizational growth in terms of numbers as well as the amount of visitors to its Web sites and the impact of its outreach efforts, including the attendance at a recent caliphate conference. Overall, HT-I shows healthy signs in both solidifying its leadership and increasing its influence, and the Internet has played a significant role in this evolution.

Finally, the volume concludes with an integrative analysis that highlights central themes addressed in the thematic essays and case studies, explores various disadvantages faced by governments—and particularly liberal democracies—when competing against terrorists and other violent nonstate actors for strategic influence, and offers some recommendations for policy and further research. In sum, a central dimension of terrorism and counterterrorism involves perceptions of a terrorist group's participants, surrounding communities, government leaders, and other target audiences. A central objective of this volume and the additional research it suggests is thus to help develop a deeper understanding of the ongoing struggle for strategic influence, particularly how states can counter the role that ideologies, the media, and the Internet play in radicalizing new agents of terrorism.

Acknowledgments

AS THIS VOLUME is primarily focused on the topic of influence, it is only fitting that I take a moment to thank those who have influenced and supported me throughout this effort. To begin with, I extend my sincere thanks to the faculty and staff of the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point, from whom I continue to learn much every day. General (Ret.) John Abizaid, distinguished chair of the CTC, and senior fellow Bruce Hoffman have been significantly positive influences and advocates of my research, and I thank them for their continued support. My CTC colleagues Jarret Brachman, Brian Fishman, Joe Felter, Bill Braniff, Assaf Moghadam, and Scott Taylor were all extremely instrumental in shaping my thoughts about how terrorists pursue strategic influence, and I am sincerely grateful for their commitment to my learning. Also, the staff and faculty in the Department of Social Sciences at West Point—particularly Colonel Mike Meese, head of the Department, and Colonel Cindy Jebb, deputy head—have always provided a great deal of encouragement and guidance, which I sincerely appreciate. And of course, the CTC would not exist without the generous commitment, support, and vision of Vincent Viola, USMA class of 1977. From the very beginning of the CTC in 2003 he has supported all my efforts, and my colleagues and I are forever grateful.

Throughout this project, I have learned a great deal about terrorism and counterterrorism from the authors represented here, and it is an honor for me to showcase their work. Each of these chapters is the product of thoughtful research and analysis, and I offer my sincere thanks to the authors for their hard work and commitment to excellence. The insights and suggestions they have provided in these pages will undoubtedly inform discussions and debate in a variety of policy making and academic settings for the foreseeable future, as well as inspire a new generation of scholars to address complex research questions in the field of terrorism and counterterrorism studies. And finally, I thank my family—Alicia, Chloe, and Jackson—for their patience and support throughout this project.

James J. F. Forest