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Conclusion

Assessing the Conceptual Battlespace

Joshua Alexander Geltzer and James J. F. Forest

IF THERE IS a single direction in which all the contributions in this volume point, it is to the mind. The mind—of the terrorist, of the would-be terrorist, of the potential supporter of terrorism, of the targeted population member, of the counterterrorist official—*the mind* is the site of acute concern in the world of terrorism and counterterrorism, and in the present information age this is even more so than ever before. Physical geography remains an important dimension of national security, but it is not in the skies above London, on the beaches of Normandy, or amidst the waves off Midway Island that current and future conflicts between terrorists and governments will be decided; rather, it is on the conceptual battlespace, located in the mind itself.

This concluding chapter draws from the contributions to this volume to identify central themes and concepts. After describing the various internal and external dimensions of strategic communication efforts, the discussion examines how terrorists and governments assess their challenges and successes on the conceptual battlespace. The chapter then analyzes various disadvantages faced by governments—particularly liberal democracies—when competing against terrorists and other violent nonstate actors for strategic influence and concludes with implications for policy and further research.

INFLUENCING INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL AUDIENCES

Terrorists and governments compete vigorously to sway a number of different sets of audiences. Sometimes foremost is the internal audience: terrorists strive to generate, sustain, and enhance support, while with equal fervor governments aim to reassure, manage, and placate their populaces. Lawrence Freedman has written insightfully about what he terms "inner-directed strategies"—strategies "geared to mobilizing support"—which are distinguished from "other-directed strategies . . . that are geared to engaging rivals, competitors and enemies."[1] Inner-directed strategies are by no means unique to conflicts between terrorists and governments, as political leaders in many interstate conflicts also have expended great efforts to mobilize domestic support. But inner-directed strategies are particularly crucial for both terrorism and counterterrorism.

As Sammy Salama and Joe-Ryan Bergoch's contribution to this volume makes clear, for al-Qaida, "instilling their vision, religious ideology and political doctrine in the minds of the Muslim masses" is every bit as vital to the group's strategy as instilling fear in Western populations through acts of terrorism.[2] Awakening, rallying, and maintaining the internal audience is not only essential to a terrorist campaign, but doing so has become far easier and far cheaper due to developments in communication and media—a point driven home by Frank Hairgrove, Douglas M. McLeod, and Dhavan V. Shah's chapter. For terrorist groups such as Hizbut Tahrir-Indonesia, "to communicate internally with its constituents regarding the organizational mobilization activities" has become a task more easily and effectively accomplished than in the past.[3] Indeed, as Aidan Kirby and Vera Zakem point out in this volume, with the widespread availability of Web sites, chat rooms, and video games, the internal audience now can become much more than a passive audience, and instead can actively—even proactively—interact with content designed and intended to galvanize a terrorist group's internal audience by influencing minds worldwide, one by one. These efforts to exercise strategic influence illustrate the crucial importance of today's conceptual battlespace.

Equally engaged in the conceptual battlespace with inner-directed strategies are governments working to thwart terrorism. As Frank L. Jones explains, "Governments react immediately to a terrorist attack to create for their public a perception of order, to exert control over a potentially destabilizing event, and to communicate a message to both the populace and the perpetrators that all instruments of government will be used to hunt down the malefactors and 'bring them to justice.'"[4] Reassuring the populace and restoring trust in the government, the economy, and other foundations of order and pillars of daily life are not mere political postures (though they can be abused as such). Rather, such inner-directed strategies are essential components of counterterrorism, as they demonstrate a state's and a society's capacity to withstand and overcome acts of terrorism. The speed and extent of communication in today's world makes such tasks not only more vital for governments but more difficult and immediate, as well.

Another crucial domain within the conceptual battlespace consists of another audience, the external one toward which Freedman's "other-directed strategies" are oriented. Here, terrorist groups generally must rely on other, independent sources for transmission—in particular, the media. Coverage by the media directly bridges the gap between an act of terrorism and the external minds that the act was intended to influence. The extent of that influence depends in significant part on the degree to which those in the media have, as Cori E. Dauber phrases it, "exposed their audience to the powerful manipulative effects of enemy propaganda."[5] The media can determine, to a significant extent, the potency that terrorist groups can bring to bear on the conceptual battlespace and in the minds of their external audience. Further, as Karen Walker's chapter reveals, new media are particularly powerful in carrying out the "amplification, co-production, and diffusion" of terrorist threats.[6]

Governments also employ other-directed techniques of strategic influence as important aspects of countering terrorism. In particular, as the chapter from Christopher Paul, Todd C. Helmus, and Russell W. Glenn examines, the success of current and future American operations depends heavily on the ability to shape the attitudes and behaviors

of civilians located within a given theater of operations. Efforts "to garner the support of the noncombatant population" constitute a contest for the minds of those in the zone of conflict, a contest in which one's adversary, the media, and other sources of influence are active competitors.[7] Moreover, governments engaged in counterterrorism seek to influence another element of their external audience: their adversaries themselves. Jones's emphasis on a message designed "to demonstrate that terrorism fails and historically, the data bear it out" underscores the importance of conveying to terrorist enemies that their method of violence will not lead them to their objectives.[8] Joshua Alexander Geltzer's analysis in this volume similarly points to the ways in which American decision makers already view their counterterrorist actions as conveying certain messages to their terrorist adversaries.

Overall, both terrorist groups and counterterrorist governments possess strategies that rely heavily on exercising effective strategic influence toward a number of audiences, internal as well as external. For each side, inner-directed strategies are not only difficult in themselves; they also hold the potential to undermine the exercise of other-directed strategies.

For terrorists, inner-directed efforts to establish one's own group as the most committed, most able, and most worthy of support can prove counterproductive with respect to the group's external audience. Bruce Hoffman and Gordon H. McCormick have brilliantly characterized terrorism "as a signaling game in which high profile attacks are carried out to communicate a player's ability and determination to use violence to achieve its political objectives."[9] Often, they explain, such attacks are designed to rally support internally.[10] Yet as Max Abrahms points out in this volume, those same attention-grabbing attacks can have an external effect counterproductive to the terrorist's strategy: such attacks often are viewed by members of the wider population "as evidence that the terrorist wants them destroyed," a perception that frequently leads to fierce countermeasures and a government's refusal to negotiate (or even to consider negotiating) with terrorists.[11] Thus, terrorists' inner-directed strategies can undermine their other-directed strategies—providing a crucial opportunity ripe for exploitation by counterterrorist governments, as will be discussed further.

Those same counterterrorist governments must be wary of their own inner-directed efforts proving counterproductive externally. Many commentators have already noted the external problems associated with certain language used by the Bush administration in discussing counterterrorism and chosen presumably for the sake of its appeal to an internal audience. Referring to American counterterrorist efforts as a "crusade" or boasting to "bring them on" may have a certain domestic lure, but the counterproductive effects on audience members external to the United States but vital to the success of American counterterrorism have been underscored elsewhere.[12] In similar vein, Guermantes E. Lailari's discussion in this volume demonstrates the challenges and difficulties faced by the Israeli government, during its summer 2006 operations in Lebanon, to balance its various audiences, both internal and external. Coping with an internal audience through inner-directed strategies without undercutting one's own efforts externally proves to be a delicate balancing act indeed, especially as messages today travel both farther and faster.

Not only is the dynamic between internal and external audiences a crucial element of today's conceptual battlespace, but where the dividing line *between* internal and external audiences falls may well define competition over that battlespace. Salama and Bergoch's analysis highlights this vital point. Whether al-Qaida's strategy for influencing perceptions ultimately succeeds or fails depends to a great extent on the group's efforts to convert a potentially external audience into an internal one—namely, by swaying those potentially hostile, skeptical, or at least undecided into becoming full supporters.

From the counterterrorist perspective, as Paul, Helmus, and Glenn discuss, successfully influencing those who sit on the dividing line between being considered internal and external—namely, the civilians located within a theater of operations—is essential to achieving victory in that theater; they must come to see themselves *not* as an utterly external audience to the government operating there, but, at the very least, as something of a partner. The dividing line is hazy, as the authors note: "the possibility of an individual's role as friendly, neutral, or enemy changing from day to day compounds the challenges of audience segmentation."[13] Likewise, as Geltzer's contribution to this volume explores, successful exercise of strategic influence can transform that most external of audiences—those already involved in, or considering involvement in, terrorist activity—into an audience less inclined to pursue its objectives through the use of terrorist violence. Hence, in both terrorist and counterterrorist strategy, the dividing line *between* internal and external audiences constitutes a core area of competition on the conceptual battlespace.

ASSESSING THE CONCEPTUAL BATTLESPACE

Militaries worldwide have recognized the importance of intelligence preparation of the battlefield, described in a U.S. Army field manual as "a systematic, continuous process of analyzing the threat and environment in a specific geographic area."[14] Such threat analysis is clearly crucial to assessing the physical battlefield. But for competition waged largely *beyond* the boundaries of a specific geographic area, and instead on the conceptual battlespace, how can the government engaged in counterterrorism assess the threat and the progress being made against it? In other words, how might one go about intelligence preparation of the conceptual battlespace?

In particular, the question of metrics or milestones for success is a difficult one when posed with respect to the conceptual battlespace. Before a competitor—either a terrorist group or a counterterrorist government—vying for influence on the conceptual battlespace can establish such metrics, that competitor first must define what would constitute success—a difficult problem in itself.

For the terrorist, achieving a delicate balance in the minds of various audiences provides a significant measure of success. As Dauber explains, capturing a sustained level of media attention in the wake of an attack is the sine qua non for a terrorist group's potent exercise of external strategic influence. Yet as Abrahms aptly notes, going *too* far and instilling a terror so profound as to overstate terrorists' true objectives and reasons

for employing violence often proves externally counterproductive. So terrorist success hinges on evoking enough terror to induce some type of desired governmental reaction—whether acquiescence, or negotiation, or the enacting of repressive countermeasures—while also producing a steady escalation in support by defining the nature of the struggle and the identities of the actors involved.[15] For the terrorist, success on the conceptual battlespace consists of shaping external perspectives so as to make certain policy choices more appealing and thus more likely, and shaping internal perspectives so as to make the terrorist group itself appear more appealing and more likely to achieve its objectives.

Counterterrorist governments have struggled to define success on the conceptual battlespace. As Geltzer notes, it is unclear what purpose is served by a government's intended demonstrations of power, relentlessness, resolve, and other attributes without knowing what those attributes actually signify for an often poorly understood external audience. Directing and unifying such external efforts must be an overarching emphasis on demonstrating the precise opposite of what a terrorist group hopes to convey— namely, the counterterrorist government must aim to reveal the unappealing nature of the terrorist group and the impossibility of its achieving its objectives through the use of violence. Encouragingly, this recognition appears to have gained increased prominence in American counterterrorist strategy, which now emphasizes "attacking and undercutting the image and ideology of the enemy," in the words of Juan Zarate, U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor for Combating Terrorism.[16] At the same time, those external audiences not yet aligned with terrorist groups must be reassured as to the counterterrorist government's benign and positive intentions, as well as its capacity to see those intentions transformed into improved conditions on the ground. Finally, the views of the domestic population must be shaped through education and reassurance so as to understand and in turn withstand the terror that attention-grabbing attacks aim to produce, so that the populace will not, in fact, respond to such attacks by calling for the very policies sought by the terrorist.

If success on the conceptual battlespace is defined in such terms, then the metrics for a terrorist group's or a counterterrorist government's evaluation of progress can be outlined. From the terrorist's perspective, attention, publicity, and prominence provide an initial marker of success. The extent to which widespread support is mobilized in favor of the group's terrorist campaign—rather than the mobilization of outrage at its violence or of opposition to the group's stated objectives—is a crucial further metric, and one that is particularly important with respect to evaluating inner-directed strategies. Externally, the degree to which the target population and its leadership come to favor the types of policies sought by the terrorist group is a major indicator of whether that group is effectively wielding strategic influence in its quest for gains on the conceptual battlespace.

For the counterterrorist government, metrics for success are even fuzzier and harder to pin down. As Paul, Helmus, and Glenn write with regard to shaping the attitudes of civilians, "Measuring the effectiveness of shaping is particularly challenging. The biggest problem is connecting the shaping action or message with some measurable quantity or quality that is not confounded by other possible causes."[17] *Influence* is rarely

reducible to a measurable quantity or quality. It is a state of being, a potentially transient inflection of the mind—indeed, of many minds—whose current state is not necessarily reflected in particular outward behavior.

Yet the contributions to this volume suggest that metrics for success must be found not in the behavior on which evaluations of counterterrorism typically focus, namely, terrorist attacks themselves. Rather, it is not what happens *during* terrorist attacks but what happens *between* them that signifies the state of affairs on the conceptual battlespace. Internally, the extent to which attacks succeed in producing *sustained* fear and public pressure to adopt the very policies sought by the terrorist is a far more important measure of a government's management of its domestic audience than the panic almost certain to appear at the actual moment of a terrorist attack. Externally, the sense that a counterterrorist campaign is being prosecuted legally, respectfully, capably, and with due regard to the civilians caught up in the conflict is far more significant to gauging counterterrorist success than the (certainly lamentable) flashes of visceral support for terrorist attacks seen as bloodying the nose of powerful governments that emerge in the direct wake of such attacks (e.g., Palestinians celebrating after the attacks of September 11, 2001). It is during the long stretches between terrorist attacks, rather than in the short flashes during the attacks themselves, that counterterrorist success in exercising salutary strategic influence must be evaluated.

PARTICULAR CHALLENGES ON THE CONCEPTUAL BATTLESPACE FOR COUNTERTERRORISM

As the preceding discussion has emphasized, competition for strategic influence on the conceptual battlespace involves a number of challenges for the terrorist group as well as for the counterterrorist government. From balancing inner- and other-directed strategies to formulating metrics for success, seeking victory in the mind is a task fraught with difficulty. But the degree of that difficulty is not equal on both sides of the dynamic between terrorism and counterterrorism. For a whole host of consequential reasons, the counterterrorist government, especially if it is an open, liberal democracy, finds itself at a distinct disadvantage in the competition for strategic influence. This section elaborates on a number of reasons why this is so.

In formulating, implementing, and assessing a nation's strategic influence efforts, there are several issues and questions that must be considered.[18] For example, as a liberal democracy with the world's most advanced telecommunications and media capabilities, what is the United States not doing effectively? What might be hampering the effectiveness of government agencies responsible for strategic communications? In terms of this latter question, a number of observers have rightly described a need to mitigate the "noise" factor—that is, messages (and messengers) which undermine the integrity and validity of the public diplomacy effort. For example, to paraphrase a recent article by Georgetown University professor Daniel Byman, a few years ago Vice President Cheney condoned Israel's assassination of Palestinian officials in a television interview—a position that obviously plays poorly in the Muslim world. While in years past, few Muslims

(even in pro-U.S. countries) would have seen Cheney make such a statement because their state-run media would not have shown it, today satellite television and Internet streaming video allows them to watch and hear the vice president's message, as well as the heated debate it generated on various Web forums and in local news throughout the Muslim world.

Similarly, the statements of U.S. evangelical leaders such as Franklin Graham, who offered the invocation at Bush's first inauguration and later decried Islam as a "wicked" religion, received considerable attention in the Muslim world and sparked controversy. In recent years, too many prominent Americans have spoken publicly about Islam from a position of nearly total ignorance (particularly since the attacks of 9/11), and then are somehow surprised when their words inflame the Muslim world. Instances of Americans desecrating copies of the Qur'an are prime examples of how ignorance and irresponsibility can undermine a democracy's public diplomacy efforts, generating significant discussion on jihadist Web sites and bulletin boards worldwide who cite it as "evidence" of how Americans truly feel about Islam. Anti-Islamic speeches and public statements made by political, religious, or social leaders can give even greater strength to the jihadist propaganda machine, as do the infamous photos of the atrocities committed at Abu Ghraib. All these kinds of "noise" make it difficult for U.S. officials to promote the idea that the United States respects Islam.[19]

In essence, the noise created in an age of globally interconnected information providers and consumers allows members of a liberal democracy to undermine their own security. Ignorance and irresponsibility are potentially dangerous in any society. For a democracy that is engaged in an ambitious public diplomacy effort, seeking to influence the hearts and minds of potential terrorist recruits, ignorance and irresponsibility in the information age are perhaps two of the most worrisome constraints we face in trying to achieve our public diplomacy objectives. From this perspective, surely media correspondents, politicians, talk show hosts, newspaper editors, and virtually anyone else with a public bully pulpit who comments about Islam must be held responsible for educating themselves about Islam.

In a democracy, however, the problem of noise runs far deeper than ignorant public officials, clergy, or others whose words can become featured in mainstream press and television news sound bytes. In an information age, we are all empowered to communicate to the same audiences which our leaders in the Global War on Terror are most concerned with. The Internet enables us all to become publishers of words, images, sounds, and videos—some of which can negatively impact our government's ability to achieve a comprehensive public diplomacy agenda. The education of our own citizenry is thus vital to a successful public diplomacy effort. At a minimum, two kinds of education are needed—education about the public diplomacy mission and its importance to national security, and education about being responsible communicators with the rest of the world.
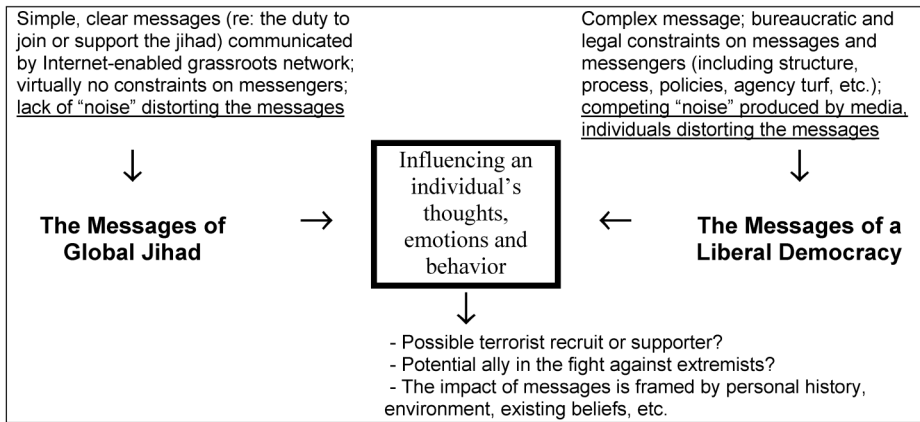
In comparison to the noise generated by the proliferation of information producers in a liberal democracy, nonstate terrorist groups (and even individual adherents of terrorism) have a distinct advantage over nation-states in the realm of strategic communications, an advantage that stems from the lack of constraints on what, when, and where

they publish their motivational and operational information. This problem is particularly acute when examining the role of the Internet in the spread of the global salafi-jihad movement influenced by the leaders of al-Qaida. Here, we find an important and potentially powerful advantage not found in liberal democracies—a single, clear message is being put forth by virtually all members of this network: "join our jihad." Al-Qaida's ideologues and propagandists have sought to connect their vision of the future with historical concepts of jihad as a means for rationalizing their use of violence. Various rationales are offered for joining their jihad, and these are crafted in ways which can appeal to a variety of target audiences. Further, individuals can "join" the jihad from the comfort of their home, by providing money, information, and safe haven to those more actively engaged in the violence.

This simple call to join or support the jihad is repeated in various ways by a growing number of voices, supported by a wide range of strategic and religious texts, videos, music, and even video games—a type of viral marketing strategy that often reflects a sophisticated understanding of who will find different kinds of information resources compelling. The terrorists post at will, with a consistent set of messages and a concerted, complementary effort. They use the Internet to recruit, distribute training materials, collaborate on terror plots, share videos of their attacks, and spread their messages to as wide an audience as possible, while also providing false and inaccurate information to key audiences about U.S. policies, intentions, and actions.

Al-Qaida ideologues wrap their messages in the cloak of religion—the world's fastest growing religion—whereas the U.S. ideology of democratic freedoms necessitates a separation of church and state. Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and many others provide interpretations of selections from the Qur'an to support their claim of violent jihad as a duty. And they encourage and praise those who support their cause on the conceptual battlespace. For example, terrorism scholar Jerrold Post recently described a message he found on an al-Qaida Web site urging Muslim professionals to use the Internet to serve the jihad. "If you fail to do this, you may be held into account before Allah on the day of the judgment," the message said.[20] In some cases, incentives are provided for contributing one's voice and talents to the chorus of jihadist Web sites. This online grassroots activity is spreading, indicative of a social movement, the likes of which we have not seen before in scale or common mindedness.

Sophisticated armed groups, at least at the outset, generally excel at staying "on message," in the jargon familiar to discussions of American political campaigns. Initially consisting of a relatively small number of tightly knit individuals sharing a similar worldview, a reasonably well organized terrorist group can execute with precision a crisply framed and unwavering approach to exercising strategic influence, rarely straying from the group's central themes and claims. For the counterterrorist government, exerting such consistent and targeted strategic influence is far more difficult, particularly when its competing ideology is more complex than that of the terrorists. For example, explaining democracy to a community in which it has never existed can be complicated and time-consuming, whereas a simple message that calls adherents to perform a duty proscribed within their own religion is easier to communicate and understand. In the second facet, the jihadists can frame their struggle in a terminology of "doing God's

Figure 18.1   Comparative Disadvantages in the Strategic Communications Battlespace[30]

Simple, clear messages (re: the duty to join or support the jihad) communicated by Internet-enabled grassroots network; virtually no constraints on messengers; <u>lack of "noise" distorting the messages</u>		Complex message; bureaucratic and legal constraints on messages and messengers (including structure, process, policies, agency turf, etc.); <u>competing "noise" produced by media, individuals distorting the messages</u>
↓	Influencing an individual's thoughts, emotions and behavior	↓
The Messages of Global Jihad →	←	**The Messages of a Liberal Democracy**
	↓	
	- Possible terrorist recruit or supporter? - Potential ally in the fight against extremists? - The impact of messages is framed by personal history, environment, existing beliefs, etc.	

An earlier version of this figure appeared in James J. F. Forest, "The Democratic Disadvantage in the Strategic Communications Battlespace." *Democracy and Security* 2(a) (2006): 73–102.

will," while democracies are about "people's will"—governance by the people, for the people. Figure 18.1 provides a visual representation of significant disadvantages faced by democracies in the strategic communications battlespace.

To date, there has been a relative absence of "noise" distorting the jihadists' message, while the same cannot be said about liberal democracies.[21] However, there are also additional challenges that can be considered as further hindrances in conducting effective strategic influence efforts in support of a counterterrorism campaign. First, the government lacks the central direction and unity of a terrorist group's propagandists. Instead, the typical counterterrorist government consists of a number of enormous bureaucracies, each with one or more spokespersons and each prone to emphasizing the elements of counterterrorism in which that bureaucracy specializes. That emphasis may undercut the efforts of other bureaucracies, or at least generate a more muddled set of messages. As Jones explains, "factionalism and bureaucratic 'turf' wars that exist within the institutions of government" can contribute to government efforts at strategic influence being far less unified or even coordinated than the messages promulgated by centrally directed small terrorist groups.[22]

Second, while the media can distort the message of the terrorist group, the media's effect on the attempts at strategic influence by the counterterrorist government tends to be more profound. As Paul, Helmus, and Glenn discuss, the media can seize on small incidents or remarks and elevate them to huge prominence, while neglecting government efforts that actually consume far greater time and resources. Furthermore, the inner workings of liberal democracies are subject to exposition, scrutiny, and criticism in a way that the internal affairs of clandestine terrorist groups clearly are not, allowing the media an opportunity to dissect, question, and even undermine democracies' efforts

on the conceptual battlespace in a manner from which terrorist groups generally are more insulated.

Beyond (and in addition to) the distinction between the unity of the terrorist group and the disunity of the counterterrorist government in exercising strategic influence, a number of other factors place the latter at a disadvantage in competing with terrorists on the conceptual battlespace. One is the fact that terrorist groups, through their use of an asymmetric strategy, are able to attack on just one or two carefully selected fronts, while the counterterrorist government is responsible for defending its populace on *all* conceivable fronts. As Lailari discusses, not only is this true in kinetic terms, it is also true on the conceptual battlespace: terrorist propagandists can seize on a single grievance or highlight a single image that allegedly reveals the pernicious nature of the government being opposed, while that government must prosecute its many operations in all arenas with the type of care and diligence that denies such opportunities to terrorist adversaries. Hence, the terrorist attacks the government on the few fronts seen by the terrorist group as particularly vulnerable for the government, while that government scrambles to defend its citizens on all fronts.

Moreover, another factor disadvantaging the counterterrorist government in its competition for strategic influence is its need to consider and cope with a whole set of enemies and potential enemies, while the terrorist group typically has just a few. That is, a typical government must prepare for a wide spectrum of threats: criminals, terrorists, insurgents, other states, natural disasters, diseases, and so on. In contrast, a typical terrorist group will face counterterrorist forces from the government being attacked, and perhaps those of its allies as well—and usually little else. Even rival terrorist groups are hesitant to attack each other outright, instead competing for support by trying to outdo each other's attacks and to undercut each other's platforms. The counterterrorist government not only faces many potential adversaries, but those potential adversaries have the ability to learn and benefit from watching the government's conduct toward others.[23] Lailari notes that "many other Islamic violent organizations" watch closely to learn from Hizballah's experiences against Israel, and, similarly, commentators have begun to point out that the United States must consider the ramifications vis-à-vis third parties such as Iran, China, and others in considering the true effects and consequences of America's continued engagement in Iraq.[24]

The often outspoken private sector that exists in liberal democracies adds yet another element complicating government efforts to exert and to direct strategic influence. In addition to the aforementioned media organizations, large corporations are often seen by crucial audience members to represent the countries in which they are based. Of particular note in this regard are entertainment companies, whose very field is one of communication yet whose offerings frequently reflect neither the actual positions and attitudes of their home governments nor the perceptions that those governments are striving to cultivate.

Hence, for these (and undoubtedly still more) reasons, counterterrorist governments find themselves at a particular disadvantage when they clash with terrorist groups on the conceptual battlespace. What can governments do to maximize the potential for succeeding in that arena?

IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNTERTERRORIST POLICY

A number of implications for counterterrorist policy emerge from the contributions to this volume. These implications all stem from a single energizing principle: that counterterrorism should focus less on *defeating* terrorists and more on helping terrorists *defeat themselves*. The inherent contradictions, hypocrisies, internal divisions, operational security vulnerabilities, and other shortcomings that afflict virtually all terrorist groups hold the seeds to those groups' own downfall, if only those seeds can be cultivated and nurtured by well-designed counterterrorist policies.

The historical contributions to this volume suggest that the conceptual battlespace is a particularly conducive arena in which to succeed through enabling others' own failure. Daniel Baracskay's chapter on the Cold War details the ways in which American strategic communication proved effective in part by underscoring the shortcomings and deficiencies of life under communist regimes. Revealing the conditions produced by communist governments contributed to those governments collapsing underneath their own weight. Similarly, James Dingley's account of the *Cook Report*'s effect on Northern Ireland's Ulster Defence Association (UDA) illustrates how revelations of "overtly criminal activity . . . produced a serious loss of prestige" from which the UDA never fully recovered.[25] The seeds of the group's demise thus lurked within its own extant identity and practices.

To be sure, the terrorist groups engaged in combat on today's conceptual battlespace differ in significant ways from the UDA and, even more so, from communist governments. Yet the contributions to this volume suggest that internal weaknesses and divisions can be exploited in ways that might prove similarly potent for counterterrorist governments. Gabriel Weimann's chapter on terrorist debates on the Internet underscores the significance and magnitude of all sorts of debates occurring in the terrorist world: "debates between terrorist organizations, debates within terrorist organizations, personal debates, debates over actions, and debates among supporters."[26] The very existence of these debates reveals the crucial importance of strategic influence in counterterrorism: it matters immensely because the potential already exists to bring terrorist groups down from within, by exacerbating and aggravating divisive debates and by giving those skeptical of terrorist violence firm foundations for arguing that it is abhorrent, futile, or both. Joshua Sinai's contribution to this volume outlines the type of analytical approach that could inform such vital counterterrorist efforts.

What this volume as a whole brings to light is that possibilities for helping terrorists defeat their *own* causes exist on the conceptual battlespace even as they appear frustratingly rare on the physical battlefield. Finding terrorists to kill, capture, and interrogate or even place under surveillance is undoubtedly an essential component of counterterrorism, but the opportunities for doing so are often few and far between. On the conceptual battlespace, however, many possibilities exist for exploiting terrorist groups' capacity to defeat themselves. Taking al-Qaida as an example, already the brutal killing and maiming of civilians, especially Muslim civilians, have harmed the group's standing in the minds of many once sympathetic to the group's agenda. Particular individuals, such as the late Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, have been criticized heavily and thus hurt the standing

of the larger movement. Further, as Weimann notes, religious differences have caused serious ruptures among al-Qaida's supporters. Critical accounts such as Montasser al-Zayyat's biography of Ayman al-Zawahiri have called into question al-Qaida's chosen strategy and tactics, demonstrating a tendency for intra-jihadist criticism which Fawaz Gerges has detailed extensively.[27] This combination of humanitarian, individual, ideological, strategic, tactical, and other grounds provides powerful inroads for counterterrorist governments to accelerate and exacerbate terrorist groups' inherent weaknesses—weaknesses that can, if properly exploited, prove fatal to the groups as well as to their causes.[28]

THE FUTURE OF THE CONCEPTUAL BATTLESPACE

The competition between terrorist groups and counterterrorist governments on the conceptual battlespace—a competition for the power to shape perceptions—is certain to evolve in unpredicted and probably unpredictable ways. The overriding burden for counterterrorist governments will be to develop conceptual strategies at least as potent, and ideally more so, than those being formulated and followed by their terrorist adversaries. As Lailari keenly notes, thus far terrorists have tended to invest their efforts in strategy rather than tactics, while governments have tended to emphasize tactics rather than strategy. Yet exercising effective influence must be elevated by governments to the strategic level. Strategic influence cannot succeed if it is conceived as mere "damage control," a narrative employed to "sell" actions already undertaken. Rather, governments must determine which actions "sell" their broader narrative to diverse audiences and act accordingly.

As Aristotle observed in his *Rhetoric*, "The things that are truer and better are more susceptible to reasoned argument and more persuasive, generally speaking." Clearly, the historical record supports a stronger argument for liberal democracies than can be made for radical interpretations of Islam put forward by the global salafi-jihad movement. However, we must also take measures to ensure that in communicating our message to the Muslim world we reduce, not increase, existing perceptions of arrogance, opportunism, and double standards.

Freedman has aptly noted how "strategic narratives" are of steadily increasing importance in today's world of international affairs.[29] On the conceptual battlespace, narrative warfare subsumes tactical and operational warfare, and must be given strategic coherence and, in broad terms, strategic priority. Only by doing so can governments overcome their disadvantages on the conceptual battlespace, effectively influence both internal and external audiences, and promote ways for terrorists to defeat themselves. That combination can prove essential to achieving victory on the conceptual battlespace.

NOTES

1. Lawrence Freedman, "Terrorism as a Strategy," *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 42, No. 3, p. 321.
2. Please see the chapter by Sammy Salama and Joe-Ryan Bergoch in this volume.

3. Please see the chapter by Frank Hairgrove, Douglas M. McLeod, and Dhavan V. Shah in this volume.

4. Please see the chapter by Frank L. Jones in this volume.

5. Please see the chapter by Cori E. Dauber in this volume.

6. Please see the chapter by M. Karen Walker in this volume.

7. Please see the chapter by Christopher Paul, Todd C. Helmus, and Russell W. Glenn in this volume.

8. Please see the chapter by Frank L. Jones, as well as the chapter by Max Abrahms in this volume.

9. Bruce Hoffman and Gordon McCormick, "Terrorism, Signaling, and Suicide Attack," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 27, No. 4, p. 244.

10. Ibid., especially p. 246.

11. Please see the chapter by Max Abrahms in this volume.

12. See, for example, Richard Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror*, updated ed. (London: Free Press, 2004), pp. xvii, 270.

13. Please see the chapter by Paul, Helmus, and Glenn in this volume.

14. "Field Manual 34-130: Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield," Department of the Army (Washington, D.C.: 1994), http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm34-130.pdf, p. 1–1.

15. Please see the chapter by Salama and Bergoch in this volume.

16. Juan Zarate, "Winning the War on Terror: Marking Success and Confronting Challenges," address to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC07.php?CID=393.

17. Please see the chapter by Paul, Helmus, and Glenn in this volume.

18. The following discussion draws significantly from James J. F. Forest, "The Democratic Disadvantage in the Strategic Communications Battlespace," *Democracy and Security*, 2(a), 2006, pp. 73–102. Used with permission of the publisher and editor.

19. Daniel Byman, "How to Fight Terrorism," *National Interest* (Spring 2005), p. 1.

20. Michel Moutot, "Radical Islamists Use Internet to Spread Jihad," Agence France Presse, June 2, 2005, http://siteinstitute.org/bin/articles.cgi?ID=inthenews7005&Category=inthenews&Subcategory=0.

21. As described in several publications by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, distorting the jihadists' message is an important and all too often overlooked avenue for countering the spread of this violent ideology.

22. Please see the chapter by Jones in this volume.

23. For more on the differences in organizational learning capabilities between terrorist organizations and governments, please see Michael Kenney, "How Terrorists Learn," in *Teaching Terror: Strategic and Tactical Learning in the Terrorist World*, ed. James Forest (Boulder, CO: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

24. Please see the chapter by Guermantes E. Lailari in this volume.

25. Please see the chapter by James Dingley in this volume.

26. Please see the chapter by Gabriel Weimann in this volume.

27. See Montasser Al-Zayyat, *The Road to Al-Qaeda: The Story of Bin Lāden's Right-Hand Man*, Ahmed Fekry, trans. (London: Pluto Press, 2004); Fawaz Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

28. For more on this, please see the Combating Terrorism Center report, "Harmony and Disharmony: Exploiting al-Qaida's Organizational Vulnerabilities" (West Point, NY: CTC, 2006), http://www.ctc.usma.edu.

29. Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 22.

INFLUENCE WARFARE

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to Shape Perceptions in a War of Ideas*

Edited by **JAMES J. F. FOREST**

Foreword by **BRUCE HOFFMAN**

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