The Strategic Landscape: Avoiding Future Generations of Violent Extremists; Strategic Insights, v. 7 issue 3 (July 2008)
The Strategic Landscape: Avoiding Future Generations of Violent Extremists

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Introduction

This article addresses the global environment, with a specific focus on U.S. Central Command’s (USCENTCOM’s) Area of Operations (AOR), and it contemplates the question: How can we avoid losing the next generation to Violent Extremists (VE)? It focuses on Islamic VEs, both Sunni and Shi’ia, addresses the Human Terrain and seeks to identify individual’s personal motivations. This article does not state official USCENTCOM policy or opinions.

Today, the United States’ primary national security challenge centers around a problem that, should we “get it wrong,” will have transcendent implications. Terrorism and violence have plagued humankind throughout history, but now the world finds itself at yet another critical juncture. The terror challenge is the nexus of a multiplicity of issues that lead toward it, like the spokes on a wheel lead from the rim to the hub. Alternatively, terrorist vision can inform a multiplicity of issues and lead outward toward the rim, out to where the rubber meets the road.

In contrast to ongoing efforts to understand the enemy’s extremist theological ideology, there has been less energy devoted to understanding the radicalization process or to understand what leads individuals to become radicalized and act out in violence or terror, or to understand the impact of U.S. foreign policy on this radicalization process.

Psycho-social and political factors play an important role in radicalization. Where Islamist Violent Extremist Organizations (VEO) are concerned, these factors play a significant role in recruitment—versus just theology. However, once recruited, theology becomes the justification for violent actions. In the initial stages of al-Qaeda’s ascendancy, theological values that became politically radicalized were a driving factor motivating the core actors. As al-Qaeda (AQ) and other VEOs aim to increase in size, their recruitment process has become more oriented toward—or broadened to include—political issues, and those foot soldiers who volunteer are often psycho-socially motivated. Yet, in effect, AQ is “engaged in an unprecedented exercise of corrupting, misinterpreting and misrepresenting the word of God to generate support for their political mission.”[1]

“Terrorism is the ultimate consequence of the radicalization process.”

–Silber and Bhatt, NYPD, Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat.
Al-Qaeda, the primary Violent Extremist Organization of immediate concern to USCENTCOM, purports a global ideology, but participants join for a variety of personal or more localized reasons. The same dynamics apply to participants of violent organizations such as smaller AQ Network (AQN) groups, the Taliban (TB), and a plethora of insurgent or militant groups in Iraq and throughout the region. These local organizations are often grassroots movements that “fly the flag” of global violent extremist ideology in order to gain perceived legitimacy, funding and material support. Thus, when thinking about groups or individuals, their intention provides clarity which will guide both understanding of motivations and help define solutions. While insurgencies are political movements that desire a change in policies, terrorism is a violent, fear-producing method to force change in an environment.[2]

If USCENTCOM is interested in focusing in on global VEOs such as al-Qaeda, the first step toward deterring their ascendancy is to understand the individuals involved at all levels of the organization. Thus, it is essential to identify the different populations and their varied motivations, religious ideological or political. This will enable USCENTCOM to identify means available to diminish AQ’s political-religious legitimization.

The tipping point for the individual occurs when, seeing no other recourse for redress of grievances, he becomes radicalized. VEO ascendancy occurs when the radicalized individuals are motivated to join the jihad as the only available means to express opposition, and is solidified when the recruit begins to actually commit to the organization’s stated ideology.

Who are Violent Extremists?

Broadly, Violent Extremists fall in to one of the following categories: insurgents, militia, global totalitarian radicals (such as al-Qaeda), religious nationalists (such as the Taliban), and their associated volunteers (mujahedeen, the foot soldiers). Violent Extremists are individuals who have been radicalized. Many have experienced a specific life event or “dark epiphany” that led them to engage in violent acts, while others have been psycho-socially groomed or manipulated, and still others have personal reasons to turn to martyrdom, violence or terror. Some are enacting a displaced social protest, and some participate in order to simply make a living. Just as terrorist motivations are diverse, so are their educational and social backgrounds, but they are generally united by a need to see oneself as good and heroic, esteemed by the community and blessed by God (which is, in essence, preservation of the self image).[3]

Politically Radicalized Muslims

The 2005 Pew Global Attitudes Project, conducted among more than 17,000 people in 17 countries, found that while many Muslims believe that radical Islam poses a threat, there are differing opinions as to its causes. Sizable minorities in most predominantly Muslim countries point to poverty, joblessness and a lack of education, but pluralities in Jordan and Lebanon cite U.S. policies as the most important cause of Islamic extremism.[4]

A 2005-2006 Gallup Poll representing over 90 percent of the Muslim world determined that 7 percent of the population fits in the “politically radicalized” category—those who both felt the terror attacks of 9/11 were “completely justified,” and who have an “unfavorable” or “very unfavorable” view of the United States. However, these people were not necessarily interested in acting out violently as a result of their opinions. In fact, they were more likely than mainstream Muslims to say that “moving toward greater democracy will help Arab/Muslim societies progress,” possibly indicating a generalized, underlying desire of the politically radicalized for greater self-determination in all aspects of their life. If this is the case, then solving issues that are politically frustrating to Muslims is a significant aspect of the solution toward preventing transition toward violence within that population.
“Ideology is not the motivation for terrorism but is a radicalizing factor in that it provides the moral justification for engaging in killing, suicide and destruction.”

–Gallup

These same individuals often cited “occupation and U.S. domination” as their greatest fear for their country, indicating U.S. foreign policy as an important concern. They also expressed fear that the United States would not allow them to fashion their own political future, and they doubted U.S. intentions or seriousness about supporting democracy in the region. This group felt that the West should respect Islam and stop imposing its beliefs and policies or interfering in internal affairs of predominately Muslim states, suggesting a generalized apprehension over Western threats to the Islamic way of life. The politically radicalized have a sense of urgency to protect their cultural identity, something which often leads to apocalyptic activity. They are also more likely than mainstream Muslims to say it is “completely justifiable” to sacrifice one’s life for a cause one believes in. These are the individuals and issues that the United States, her allies and partners must confront to prevent conversion of radicalized political sentiment into violent action.

Theological and Doctrinal Underpinnings

There is no universally accepted Muslim doctrine with regard to violent jihad and terrorism, and Islamic precepts can also be used by mainstream Muslims promoting peace. Many of those polled by Gallup, for example, who condemned terrorism did so for humanitarian or religious reasons. One respondent paraphrased Qur’anic sura 5:32, saying “Killing one life is as sinful as killing the whole world.”

The major branches of Islam, Sunni and Shi’ia, as well as other movements or sects, follow varied belief systems and schools of thought on theological law. Accordingly, the radicalized al-Qaeda “brand” rhetoric of Usama bin Laden (UBL) is not necessarily heeded by all Muslims, nor is it perceived as legitimate by members of other sects. This provides an opportunity, though challenging, to ideologically counter Violent Extremists using Islamic precepts.

Al-Qaeda tells its recruits that Islamic sacred scriptures and laws authored directly by God very clearly prescribe warfare and violence as a means to achieve an ultimate religious purpose, especially when such a war can be defined as defensive. In the case of Iraq, for example: it can fairly readily be defined as invasion by persons in the Middle East, has been defined by the UN as an occupation, and has been admitted by the Administration to be a pre-emptive strike. For many Iraqi extremists, they are putting up what they perceive to be a resistance—a defense against an invasion or an occupation. Considering the divine nature of these Islamic prescriptions, al-Qaeda in Iraq says, it is a “supreme” Muslim obligation to wage jihad against the United States and her allies because the coalition presently meets every prerequisite for Muslims to fulfill the obligation for jihad. Thus, in this case, U.S. foreign policy and its global communications regarding related events played directly into the hands of al-Qaeda.

Usama bin Laden took a strategic decision to wage jihad against the “far enemy first”—something considered to be a revolutionary concept. His goal to facilitate rapid globalization of the al-Qaeda “brand” of ideology has required AQ to become a network of veritable franchises in order to encourage expansion. However, not all Violent Extremists, nor all Muslims, have interest in a world-wide caliphate. In fact most Shi’ia would not accept a Sunni leader of the ummah, “of all Muslims worldwide,” presenting a division within Islam. This will likely lead to future internal conflict as the primarily Sunni al-Qaeda strives toward its globalized goals. Other VEOs, such as the Taliban, have specific local aspirations with local political and economic goals. Similarly, franchises often carry the AQ brand name in order to achieve legitimacy while they strive to achieve their own local political and economic goals.
“We must not fail...to distinguish between the homicidal revolutionaries like bin Laden and mainstream Muslim believers.”

–David F. Forte

Violent Extremist Organizations (from al-Qaeda to the Taliban to traditional insurgencies) use violence in order to influence politics. They are smaller, less well armed or equipped, less salient but more motivated groups that face a larger, more powerfully armed government and are thus forced to utilize unconventional tactics and strategies. In the case of the Taliban before 2006, they were an instrument of Pakistani policy, and sometimes U.S. policy and Saudi Arabian policy. The language of ideology was a cover, providing something around which to rally, a veritable flag to fly (as was the language of communist ideology during the Cold War, when insurgencies worldwide claimed to be “communist” to obtain legitimacy and material or financial support).

Today, acts of terrorism rely on media amplification to achieve maximum psychological effect and thus achieve grandiose narcissistic affirmation for the organization and its leaders. Audiences for these efforts include their targets of violence, sympathizers, sources of funding, and potential recruits.

Al-Qaeda is expert at marketing. It has successfully framed the purported struggle against the United States in emotional narratives that link Muslim suffering and humiliation to what is portrayed as the collusion of apostate Muslim leaders with Western oppressors who are seeking to destroy Islam and subjugate Muslim lands. This has also provided the psychological relief to allow radicalized Muslims to deactivate their own self-inhibiting norms against murder and mayhem, allowing them to claim the status of moral agents—even when they are acting in un-Islamic ways. It is worth analyzing other prevalent Muslim narratives that can be upheld in lieu of, or to counter, al-Qaeda’s narrative, but that is another subject for another paper.

**Violent Extremist Leaders and Lieutenants**

Violent Extremist leaders and lieutenants are, like fascists and Marxist-Leninists in their days, highly competent, motivated and ambitious. They are often middle class, educated, and idealistic. Politically disenfranchised individuals who sometimes exhibit cult-leader psychological qualities, they could be psychopaths, but are certainly fanatics with a deep sense of commitment to a political agenda. Such ideological millennials are uncompromising and see a survival issue; their political disenfranchisement is culturally motivated in the sense that Western policies and values are perceived as compromising the extremist’s values, the sovereignty of his nation, and the assumed role of Islam in the world.

Lieutenants come from a largely engineering-scientific academic background, and tend to be challenged with a lack of professional opportunities, a feeling of relative deprivation and frustrated expectations. Many families in the AOR pressure their children to study these subjects as they are perceived to be good career paths and little other options are known, whether it is of interest to the student or not. Thus the job market is flooded with these people, resulting in a deep frustration and anger when they dislike their profession and also face few opportunities.

Islamic Violent Extremist leaders, especially al-Qaeda Senior Leadership (AQSL), stem from disillusioned intelligentsia in more developed countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt and are influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood and ideas of Sayyid Qutb. Disillusionment over the decline of Arab/Muslim influence in the geopolitics of the world and the failure of pan-Arabism is viewed with an eye to failure of other systems such as communism and Marxism. It is also considered against a backdrop of perceived failure of democracy in the Middle East and perceived moral and ethical corruption in Western democracies. These politically and culturally
disenfranchised individuals suffer a poverty of dignity.\[13\] They desire a return to Islamic roots and are looking for a new way to find Arab/Muslim success in the world.

**Foot Soldiers**

Violent Extremist volunteers are often drawn from uneducated and economically downtrodden classes, and usually their motivation to act results from the United States, or the West, being implicated in the creation of their problems, and the inaccessibility of non-violent forms of dissent. In the social context of the Middle East and south central Asia, bearing of arms is considered to be an honorable profession, thus it provides not only a form of dissent but also a means by which to achieve respect, honor and income. For some, cultural factors such as revenge, or a desire to become a martyr to make up for personal sins, are the real reasons they engage in violent activity. In these cases, theology is merely the excuse and rallying point to join the larger group.

Children and youth residing in war-torn or conflict ridden countries have the potential to become Violent Extremists; anti-U.S., anti-Western or even anti-local-government insurgents. Those who are psychologically susceptible to cult-like influence will become tomorrow’s martyrs unless actions are taken to eliminate circumstances creating vulnerability. A generation of fighters exists who know no other skills (thus, have no legitimate work skills), and to complicate matters many small businesses fold because they are unable to operate without reliable electric or alternative energy sources. Thus, many adults are involved in nefarious activities because they see no other options. Poor economic, energy and governance environments provide the fertile ground in which the seed of extremist ideology will grow, if not otherwise nipped in the bud.

_Hassan Ali, sociologist at the Iraq Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs estimates at least 1 million kids have seen their lives damaged by the war—“these children will come to believe in the principles of force and violence…”_

–“Iraq’s Young Blood” by Christian Caryl, Newsweek, January 22, 2007

Ongoing violence has destroyed the social fabric that once provided a safety net, and created a generation of undereducated[14] unemployed, traumatized, and vengeful boys and girls receptive to appeals of militias and insurgent or terrorist groups that give them a new sense of belonging. Examples: Ali Sadkhan, a 14 year old Shi'ia from Karbala says he is grateful to the Mahdi Army for “making a man out of me” and he is ready to stand against “the evil of America.”[15] Following the Red Mosque incident, a fifteen year old girl said “I was at the madrassa to study religion”…”But after what the government did, this has given us the idea of being martyrs.”[16]

Some children are born into circumstances supportive to becoming a Violent Extremist (such as in Taliban-ridden provinces of Afghanistan and Pakistan) or into cults of martyrdom (such as Hizb'Allah in Lebanon or Hamas in the Palestinian Territories) where they respond to societal glorification of martyrdom. Thus, many at a very young age are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice of martyrdom, a decision which is clearly not motivated by economics or politics or even theology as much as an ingrained belief system imposed upon them. Many receive an “education” that consists of psycho-social manipulation (brain-washing) similar to what is conducted by cults. The madrassas offer not only spiritual inspiration, but also economic advantages—they provide room and board as well as what is perceived as an honorable theology-based education for children of poor families, or for orphans.

Children in war torn societies may be less likely to become Violent Extremists if they are given better alternatives. Stability and Reconstruction activities are effective tools to create an environment counter to that which breeds Violent Extremists. This is best conducted by the local governments, but can be successful with assistance of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs).
Civil-military activity, interagency cooperation with Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), Department of State (DoS), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and subcontracted NGOs on reconstruction projects such as alternative energy sources, schools and medical clinics, job creation, or other endeavors leading toward reduction of poverty have the potential to provide a long term solution to the problem—if redevelopment efforts by the United States and the international community are properly managed.

Keeping children out of extremist clutches is an issue in Pakistan, where largely inaccessible and problematic madrassas reside inside entire swaths of territory controlled by de facto rule which keeps legitimate security forces and governance at bay. The militants have used children for fighting and for propaganda purposes, even releasing a video showing a very young looking boy hacking off the head of a hostage (which presents itself to the United States and coalition as an opportunity to publicly present militants as exactly what they are—politicized violent extremists taking advantage of people, especially children).

The United States’ home-grown Violent Extremists and global VEs have some common denominators. Lacking direct ties to VE Organizations, they are inspired by radical websites calling for violence, and are connected via the internet to a transnational web of sympathizers. They are self-recruited, self-trained, and self-executing. “Experts cite cultural alienation, the influence of radical clerics, and even youthful rebellion run amok as motivations for these plots and misadventures. But what ties many of them together is the idea of defending a religion under attack.”[17] This is a localized example of the challenge facing the United States and the West world-wide, wherein local issues morph into a global problem.

**Psycho-Social Factors and Other Motivations**

Turmoil combined with acute feelings of injustice or disrespect on the part of authority figures in the Middle East and South Central Asia creates young adults who experience traumatic bereavement, outrage and a sense of powerlessness, and their normal developmental cycle does not occur. They are in the phase of what psychoanalysts call “prolonged adolescence”—a state in which a person is vulnerable to cult-like influence. Upon occasion, VE lieutenants recruit orphans, the fatherless, and refugees (such as Pakistani Taliban recruiting in madrassas and refugee camps), offering them a new “family” centered around Islam, occasionally targeting individuals for duty as suicide bombers. French scholar Gilles Kepel, author of *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, warns that many of these children, raised on anger and fear, are potentially rebels without clear causes. “What will their jihads become?” he asks. “Are they going to grow up to kill each other, or will they turn their weapons against the West?”[18] Growing up in conflict leaves psychological scars and sometimes victims of violence may find themselves drawn into repeating the traumas of childhood.

**Cult Thinking and the Terrorist Threat**

Al-Qaeda can be considered a cult of martyrdom which is led by a malignant narcissist “Pied Piper” who wields charismatic power to influence idealistic, father-hungry and disillusioned young people toward destruction.[19] There is debate amongst psychology professionals as to whether Usama bin Laden should be considered a true psychopath or simply a true Muslim fanatic, and some argue that terror organizations such as al-Qaeda are too rational to be considered cults because they utilize acts of terror to support a political agenda.[20] Regardless, there are psychological characteristics of cults that apply to Violent Extremist Organizations and their members, al-Qaeda in particular.

Most humans search for meaningful affiliation to build significance in our lives, but do not allow others, no matter how charismatic, to dominate our core values or decision-making—although all of us are susceptible to outside charismatic influences during certain times in our lives. Cult
leaders and followers, however, often get psychologically “stuck” and fail to psychologically mature in a healthy way, thus fail to individuate properly. Some extremists are psychopaths; some are less individuated people. Others may simply be individuals searching for the meaning and a sense of belonging that comes with being part of a group with a righteous and idealistic mission. These are the ones that can be rehabilitated.

People with Narcissistic Personality Disorder, which characterizes many cult followers and VE “foot soldiers,” often have a need for admiration yet lack empathy for others, have a grandiose sense of importance, are preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success and power, believe that they are “special” and unique and can only be understood by other similarly “special” people, and take advantage of others to achieve their own ends. Thus, a first indicator of malignant behavior which could lead to violent activity is devaluation of outsiders—the “Other”—who is identified as damned, inferior, or bad. In al-Qaeda’s case the Christians, Jews and the United States are clearly identified as the “Other,” the enemy.

The Malignant Narcissists, the “Pied Pipers,” have a rage involving loss of contact with reality and a desire to punish external enemies, chronic self-destructiveness or suicidal behavior, major and minor dishonesty (which is considered by some professionals to be psychopathy) linked in with manipulation and exploitation of others for personal profit, and a grandiosity with overt efforts to triumph over all authority. “Grandiosity and self-pedestalization are reinforced by the sense of triumph over fear and pain through inflicting pain on others” which allows them “a sense of superiority and triumph over life and death through their own suffering and that of their chosen followers and victims.”[21] In sum, they use their followers.

Those prone to be attracted to cult-like groups tend to see things in very black and white ways, just as do engineers and those who are religious fundamentalists. Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog of the University of Oxford found via analysis of Violent Extremist case studies, that engineers are “strongly over-represented” among university educated VEs. 44 percent of those with known degrees were in engineering, while 14 percent were in medicine and 12 percent were in science.[22] The engineering mindset, they found, lent itself toward more extreme conservative and religious positions, from terrorist groups to extreme right wing movements in Germany. Such inclinations combined with “the emergence of Islamism as the only credible political opposition to authoritarian and corrupt establishments” appears to have led to radicalization as well as the aforementioned lack of professional opportunities, a feeling of relative deprivation and frustrated expectations.

Indeed, there are many recruits who are not psychologically aberrant people, but rather those who feel a fairly justifiable rage when their legitimate aspirations are thwarted. This is especially true when aspirations are perceived to be thwarted by powerful elites who are hypocritical. These elites claim to be acting in the name of righteous values and in the interest of the people while their own population feels that they are living under intolerable conditions, under poor governance, and thus rebel against what they perceive as injustice.

**Psycho-Social Factors**

In conflict zones there is often a combination of unmet psychological needs, with ideology functioning as a type of psychological first aid. Where there is a sense of a foreshortened future, traumatic bereavement, depression, hopelessness, or frustration, a religious war offers many psychological benefits. “To live in a state of war is to live in a world in which individuals know who they are, why they have suffered, by whose hand they have been humiliated…”[23]

Individuals who endure trauma may undergo **dissociation**, or a state of already being dead. This type of mental freezing can lead to consideration of suicide as an “out” in life, other than simply fight or flight, or can lead the individual to become unemotional about killing another human being.
Those generations who see or experience war, torture and other horrors eventually normalize violent acts in their minds, a phenomenon from which a society may require a generation to recover. These people find it much easier to become a terrorist or a suicide bomber.

“Fundamentalist mentality is more prevalent and … more readily embraced at times of severe social turmoil, rapid social change, economic hardship and oppression of minority groups.”

—“Malignant Pied Pipers of Our Time” by Peter A. Olsson, M.D., 2005

A community will embrace terrorism when it feels under threat, less optimistic, and when there is no trust in the political process. Tribal or sectarian support for Violent Extremist activity increases the potential pool of recruits.

Violent Extremist Organizations provide a sense of “family” and an ideology which is the glue that holds the followers together.[24] Individuals look to their communities for a sense of self and identity and will not act in a manner that their community or group will not condone, thus such organizations establish a link between the ideal outcome and rule-following behavior (i.e. group norms and socialization)—the purpose of this Violent Extremist culture is to sustain it. In order to confront this, it is necessary to replace the organization’s collective identity with a more healthy sense of belonging such as a sense of community. “What really matters to people is their individual and group realities and issues in front of them on a daily basis; where they live, the conditions, the reality of their own home, street, neighborhood, and surrounding towns and cities.”[25] Within communities, as a result of Muslim and tribal tradition, there is a strong collective orientation; community pressure is utilized to reinforce rule-following behavior. Thus, a positive focus on community and economic development where individuals serve others in a visibly constructive way with tangible results is an opportunity to counter malignant lures of extremist organizations.

Other Motivations

**Moral Outrage**

Many individuals are lured to violence as a response to perceived discrimination, or as a defensive measure when they feel persecuted. Identification with perceived victims, exacerbated by personal experiences and the memory of that trauma or loss or embarrassment may cause Violent Extremist recruits to find self-fulfillment in expressing the group’s anger, making an enemy suffer as they have suffered.

Discussions of unfavorable U.S. actions such as at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and photos of Abu Ghraib prison have become recruiting tools for AQ. This phenomenon, perceived disrespect and violation of sacred values, unleashes violent responses such as those seen resultant from Danish republication of the Prophet Mohammed cartoons, and the murder of Theo van Gogh over his controversial film.

**Ideology**

Usama bin Laden and ideologues he follows promote the idea that Islam is under attack, which naturally propagates apocalyptic concerns. This ideology is spread using the internet, appealing to those who feel that Muslim pride has been hurt, or who consider the United States and their partners to be hypocrites.

Ideological language is utilized to legitimize armed opposition based on grievances that are, in reality, secular. In some societies where avenues for secular dissent are sealed off, and where
there is little historical tradition of secular “revolution,” manipulating these grievances so that they fit into an ideological prism legitimizes armed resistance.

**Revenge**

Conflict zones provide opportunities to inflame calls for trauma-driven revenge, something that is actually a culturally appropriate response in the Middle East. Cultural issues such as saving face, or codes of honor, can be distorted to justify Violent Extremist activity. Revenge can be sought for being detained, for family members’ deaths, for disrespect or failure to pay *diyya* (a culturally appropriate apologetic payment for transgressions), and so on. Even broader motives, such as defense of land, country and religion against perceived occupation and disenfranchisement, can be used to justify calls for revenge.

**Patriotism**

Especially in the case of insurgencies, Muslims join Violent Extremist groups in the name of nationalistic pride under occupation, especially in the face of what is perceived to be daily humiliation, frustrated aspirations, traumatic loss and hopelessness. These people hold a belief that violence can make a difference in their world as the enemy is defeated or injured. However, many times, a sense of nationalism is represented by ethnic pride which can also be malignant when it becomes sectarianism or leads to genocide. This is a situation where the development of a dehumanized “Other” as the enemy becomes a symptom of a larger problem.

**Financial Incentives**

In Pakistan, many of the “orphans” attending madrasas are there for economic reasons. Not orphans in the traditional Western sense of the word, these children are often one of many borne by their parents. Unable to support, feed and clothe their numerous progeny, parents will submit a child to a madrassa for the room and board. In Iraq you see individuals joining Violent Extremist efforts of insurgent or militia groups simply to make a buck: the Mahdi Army, for example, has pays good money to plant an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) or otherwise somehow kill an American. In Afghanistan, where there is little that is sustainable in the legitimate economy, many individuals turn to bearing arms for the Taliban because it is perceived to be an honorable way to make a living.[26]

**Religious Incentives**

In Afghanistan as with much of the rest of the Muslim world, a martyr is believed to die with the keys to heaven in his hands, and to be granted the right of seventy of his family to join him there. This is believed implicitly, is taught in the madrassas in Pakistan from whence many VE recruits come, and serves as a powerful incentive for those who are able to make the leap—who can get past the hurdle and understand suicide as a form of martyrdom. Most Muslims do not condone suicide, nor perceive it as martyrdom, and there are Islamic precepts that counter this concept.

**Prestige**

Pakistani parents submit a child to madrassas not only for room, board and education, but he gets what is perceived by society as an honorable theological education. The parents can say that they have dedicated a child to Allah; by proving their devotion to God, they gain prestige in their community as true believers who are dedicated to Islam.[27]

**Sense of Purpose, Meaning, Identity**
Violent Extremist Organizations promise or provide a sense of purpose or meaning, and group identity in the face of what may otherwise be alienation. It is human nature to form groups, and as with gangs, VEOs provide a collective glorified path of rebellion and individualist expression which might be considered normal if it weren’t so violent. In addition to the aforementioned sense of community or belonging which provides identity, VEOs also provide a sense of adventure, heroism, means of achieving manhood, escape from one’s current situation, and an honorable exit from life.

Women’s Unique Motivations

A special constellation of motivations and roles apply to women. They historically have supported Violent Extremist efforts as they indoctrinate youth, operate websites, fundraise, carry messages or money, encourage the men, and even offer themselves as “prizes” to jihadists via both formal and informal marriages. However, there is a recent female suicide bomber trend which demonstrates a three-fold increase from last year (2007). This may be in response to the cultural importance placed on the male child, in an effort to gain significance. Some have lost their husband and sons, thus have no material or financial support, and no reason to live. For others, rape, divorce, or marriage to someone the family disapproves of, such as a Christian or one from another sect, are outcast and feel a sense of cultural humiliation. For these women, the ability to be “cleansed” via martyrdom and to ensure her family also goes to heaven, to bring pride to the family, a return of honor, or even revenge are all strong motivators.

U.S. Actions Which May Impact the Problem

Successes and Opportunities for Replication

Humanitarian Assistance

Following the Pakistani earthquake, the United States provided disaster relief which was much appreciated by the populace. Immediately following those events, and even to this day, Pakistanis remember that it was the United States that aided the common man. Circumstances where children are assisted, such as orphans or those needing medical assistance, provide a positive image of U.S. charity to the Muslim populations.

Reconstruction and Development Assistance

It is commonly acknowledged by individuals working with NGOs on the ground in Afghanistan and Iraq[28] that the U.S. Military can be counted on to provide development assistance. However, upon occasion, it is not carried out as well as it could be. There appears to be a disconnect between intent and execution. Education, health, security, energy and alternative livelihood programs all set the stage for positive progress that eliminates the fertile ground in which the seed of extremist ideology can grow. Whether development projects are compromised, and how the projects are carried out, are other matters of concern. In Afghanistan, Taliban commanders have won USAID funded contracts; this ends up financing U.S. enemies, but the Taliban are perceived by a portion of the population as legitimate actors who work toward the best interest of the people. Assistance provided by repudiated government channels is seen by some as reinforcing a very corrupt system (the Government of Afghanistan—GoA) that the people are angry about, and in such cases GoA involvement can be counter-productive. Thus, such assistance must be carried out with caution, and consideration to indirect support mechanisms. Continued U.S. pressure on such governments to eliminate corruption should be publicized amongst the subject populace.
Democratic Values

As stated earlier, the 2005-2006 Gallup Poll found that the “politically radicalized” were more likely than mainstream Muslims to say that “moving toward greater democracy will help Arab/Muslim societies’ progress,” possibly indicating a generalized, underlying desire for greater self-determination in all aspects of their life. There are, in fact, values and principles which also happen to be democratic that both religions share, and tribes operate democratically. Such similarities should be capitalized upon and used to build a bridge to the Muslim world.

Current U.S. policies related to spread of democracy are rejected in the region on a number of grounds including a perception that Middle Eastern attempts at democracy have been a failure, and cynicism regarding the true value of, and intentions of, USG efforts at promoting “democracy” (versus promoting “democratic values”). For some of the region’s population, there is a cognitive dissonance as they question and reject perceived U.S. imposition of “democracy” but at the same time they aspire to increased participation in the collective destiny of their own society. The concept of “democracy” also is rejected due to a perception that U.S.-style democracy does not include justice, something revered within Islam, but only individual freedom, something that is viewed as anathema to Muslims. This is a descriptive in USG official communications and rhetoric that must change, as an image is being portrayed which is different than intended.

A difficult solution to these problems boils down to communication combined with action. The United States could begin communicating with the Muslim world about shared values and principles that also happen to be democratic, and discuss issues that both religions share, such as respect for justice. The United States must furthermore better deliver on the concepts that it promotes. Rather than talking about “democracy,” we must start to represent democratic values by our actions and example, and via the figures in the world that we promote or support. The USG should be clear that we are not seeking to export Jeffersonian democracy to the Middle East, but rather to promote values and principles such as justice and human rights while supporting local governments to develop systems that truly allow the peoples’ voice to be heard.

Successful Examples of Reform and De-Radicalization

Unlike committed terrorists, who must be deterred, intercepted, imprisoned, destroyed, many VEs can be reformed. De-radicalization programs are designed to persuade VEs to abandon the use of violence, moderate individuals’ ideology, or create an environment that discourages growth of radical movements by addressing the basic issues fueling them. Those who can be reformed are clearly not ideologically committed, and motivations for joining Violent Extremist Organizations and motivations to reform or de-radicalize seem to vary by state.

Various countries’ programs have had dubious results, so it would be worth analyzing the fullness to identify the veracity of their conclusions and whether such programs would be worth replicating. It would be an opportunity to identify best practices in order to incorporate them into one comprehensive program. Also, in none of the countries is there a primary focus on a core problem: disenfranchisement of the individual who becomes a Violent Extremist.

- **Indonesia:** Indonesia’s anti-terrorism police have begun using ex-militants as a vanguard for change within their own communities. They argue against violence and have succeeded in persuading over two dozen former Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) members and those of other VE organizations to work with the police. For example, Nasir Abas, a former JI leader, now works to persuade former comrades against violence. He uses both theological bases and strategic arguments that not all Westerners are anti-Muslim. He asks them whether terrorist bombs have made people respect Islam. In many countries, mainstream Muslim clerics are in a position where they must do most of the persuading but they run the risk of being seen as puppets of their government, so this is an
alternative method of communicating moderation through an individual perceived to be legitimate. The International Crisis Group (ICG) has analyzed the success of this initiative, and found that economic aid to families is ultimately more important than religious arguments in changing prisoner attitudes. ICG recommends this program be incorporated into a broader program of prison reform to eliminate corruption and opportunities for hard-line radicals to recruit ordinary criminals to the cause.

- **Saudi Arabia**: Saudi Arabia has established a program to reform and re-educate former terrorists which has been largely, although not completely, successful. It would be appropriate to analyze how and why it has been effective, or not, and whether such concepts and programs could be mirrored elsewhere. The Saudis take care of family members while the radical is imprisoned, the VE engages in dialogue with religious clerics regarding Islamic precepts on violence, and psychiatrists/psychologists treat the radicals. It has been successful with people who for some reason were led to buy into the propaganda but has reportedly not succeeded with true believers. The state exercises extreme control over the reformed VE within society after his release, and provide material rewards for turning from violence such as a car, wife, and a job.

- **Other Countries**:
  - **Singapore**—Modeled after Malaysia’s program, the state works with radicals’ families, provides jobs to the reformed and they are closely monitored upon release.
  - **UK**—Scotland Yard has an effort wherein psychological motivations and vulnerabilities are identified. They work with new militant converts who have poor knowledge of Qur’an, introduce them to critical thinking about religious principles and teach them how to critique what they have been taught.
  - **U.S./Iraq**—The detainee rehabilitation program addresses motivations, utilizes clerical discussions on Islam to counter VE ideology and correct radical’s understanding of Islam. They also use psychological assistance to help overcome trauma, address desires for revenge or to counter sectarianism.
  - **Yemen**—Committee for Dialogue (CfD) was established Aug 2002, a Presidential initiative led by Hamoud Abdulhameed al Hittar. It operates with popular support, and its purpose is to reform detained radicals. It appears to have had dubious results and should be evaluated for lessons learned.
  - **Malaysia**—Dubious results are achieved as radicals are allegedly motivated to “reform” because they get beatings if they do not claim to agree with the new religious teachings. They are surveilled upon release. Nonetheless there may be lessons to learn.

**Potential Problems and Opportunities to Improve**

Problematic partnerships. The United States has a history of seeking partners that are perceived in the region, and the international community, as authoritarian, dictatorial, exploitative, or repressive (Mubarak in Egypt, King Saud in Saudi Arabia, Saddam Hussein in Iraq in the 1980s, The Shah of Iran in the 70s), an issue that fosters anti-American sentiment.
Creating Frankenstein

The Taliban, and Usama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda, are linked to U.S. involvement and influence in the region, as well as that of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. It is critical that the USG remain cognizant to the risk of enabling groups or movements in the region, and that the USG remember the short term nature of alliances born there to overcome immediate problems or issues; as the saying goes, “The enemy of my enemy is my friend.” In other words, an alliance or partnership with the United States to overcome a problem will not necessarily cause a country to remain a U.S. ally or partner long term. Execution of U.S. foreign policy has led to blowback in more than one occasion, thus such relationships should be carefully considered.

The Crux of the Problem for many Arabs and Muslims

No treatise on USCENTCOM AOR problems can go without mention of the Arab-Israeli crisis, but not all people in all countries are truly concerned with the issue. Although not even on the radar screen for many, to a large extent it is a pretext for anti-U.S. sentiment and is used by Violent Extremist Organizations as a call to action.

What it represents to many, and how it is used as a negative factor in the enemy Strategic Communications campaigns, is what makes it worth discussion. It is essential to understand the widespread perception in the region that the United States has not been a neutral, just, impartial or fair party with regard to its foreign policy. The United States is perceived as hypocritical because it preaches human rights to global actors such as Iran or China or Burma, while supporting Israel which is widely perceived to be carrying out rights violations in the occupied territories. Meanwhile detainees are held at Guantanamo Bay for years with what is perceived to be a paucity of rights, in violation of international law. These are situations that fuel anger against the United States, enabling anti-U.S. actors of all types and giving them propaganda material. For example, UBL’s message on 20 March 2008 urged Muslims to support the insurgency in Iraq as the best way to support the Palestinians, and accused Arab leaders of backing Israeli attacks on the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip.

What to Do About Violent Extremists

The first step toward deterring Violent Extremist Organizations’ ascendancy is to understand the individuals involved. Thus, it is essential to identify different populations and their varied motivations, religious ideological, political or personal. Toward this end, some ideas below recommend further areas for evaluation and analysis to enable better decision-making on both a tactical and strategic level.

Al-Qaeda is a totalitarian political organization that executes terrorist acts, and often its network franchises also conduct illegitimate criminal acts. AQ Senior Leadership (AQSL) mis-utilizes religion as a political tool, and the result is harm to innocent civilians across the globe. In the end, the problem of jihad is a Muslim one—one which requires Muslim solutions—but there are things that the United States can do to shape the environment, deter spread of violent extremism, prevent radicalization, and influence via ideology management.

State-to-State Influence Opportunities

Help U.S. partners understand it is in their best interest to increase counter-extremism efforts domestically, and offer to provide assistance overtly, covertly and/or indirectly. Be prepared to exploit and capitalize on al-Qaeda tactical failures and mistakes immediately when they occur, through support to partner states.
Assist regional states in both countering extremism where there is no evident self interest, while helping them understand why they should do so. Foreign Military Sales (FMS), funding, etc could be leveraged and identified as support in exchange for cooperation in reducing both extremist activity and radicalizing education. Unless something is done about madrassas and mosque psycho-social manipulation, this grooming process will lead directly to an increase in future generations that are anti-U.S. There may be an opportunity to indirectly support independently funded NGOs that provide civil assistance, such as secular education in vulnerable areas of Pakistan that provides an alternative to more radical madrassas.

Pressure regional partner states to prevent Violent Extremist financial support and recruitment amongst constituents. Saudi Arabia provides a tremendous human resource opportunity for AQ, and many VEO supporters there who are not ready or able to take action provide financial support for the cause. It makes a good case study of what went wrong, and some steps to remedy the situation. There and in Pakistan, not only revision of educational curriculum and texts but also review of religious fatwas by Muslim marja, and limits imposed on media could lead to a reduction of extremism, which would ultimately be expressed as a reduction in the number of foreign fighters and in financial contributions to jihadist organizations.

Media in places such as Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia have articles in government supported media that call for extermination of Americans and Jews. Those governments may find it useful to stimulate such wrath in order to direct popular anger of disenfranchised constituents away from themselves. The United States should use leverage to encourage those countries to minimize or eliminate such propaganda, and at the same time encourage the leaders to address the problems causing so much political opposition.

Continue to urge partner governments to do more to tackle corruption within their governments, and to counter narcotics. The United States and coalition is creating conditions for development of secure and stable environments in Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, but the rule of law and government transparency are necessary for that security and stability to solidify. Additionally, narcotics is an increasingly destabilizing element that affects commerce, governance, development, security, and enables the enemy, especially the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Security or Development Opportunities

Focus on professionalizing partner military and security forces to enable them to support their state government.

Increase efforts to build partner state Stability, Security, Transition and Reconstruction (SSTR) capabilities. Military support for good governance, achieved via SSTR activities, is an effective tool to create an environment counter to that which breeds Violent Extremists. A positive focus on community and economic development where individuals serve others in a visibly constructive way with tangible results is an opportunity to counter malignant lures of VE Organizations.

Increase Peacekeeping and Stability Operations in Afghanistan and Iraq in order to minimize unstable conditions which make youth (and adults) susceptible to influence of VEs. Expedite deployment and activation of PRTs, work with the interagency to make these efforts more efficient and cogent. Most importantly, use military leverage to back up diplomatic efforts toward improving good governance capabilities of the very people the United States ushered into power.

Increase emphasis on sustainable job development and alternative livelihood programs. This would provide a means for individuals to support their family, thus saving face and allowing the adults to have pride that is culturally important. Opportunities may exist to provide sustainable jobs via labor intensive infrastructure projects that include on-the-job skill development, thus
providing skills that can be utilized toward commerce, improving the economy in the future (once the United States is no longer involved).

**Encourage profit, pride and purpose.** Persons who are vulnerable to Violent Extremist Organization’s recruitment are: individuals searching for meaning and a sense of belonging that comes with being part of a group with a righteous and idealistic mission, individuals who currently feel disenfranchised due to the governance situation in their state, those who are fighting back against a dominant society they perceive “mistreats” them, and those who join the fight in order to earn a living. USCENTCOM could further analyze successful prevention, rehabilitation and de-radicalization programs to identify opportunities to support such programs in the AOR. One alternative for VE rehabilitation may be to teach them other skills, and develop programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) or the Concerned Local Citizens (CLC) groups of Iraq in which they feel honored, respected, enjoy a sense of esprit de corps and discipline, and earn a living wage that allows them to support their families.

The Commander on the ground is at the crux of prevention, through Rules Of Engagement (ROE), understanding of the U.S. footprint and its impact, local customs and context, and an understanding of the enemy. Both Combatant and Operational Commanders can ensure operations are conducted in a way that will not alienate the VEO’s target support and recruitment population, pushing them toward extremism (avoidance of human rights violations, or accusations thereof, for torture or roughing up detainees, events like Abu Ghraib, unnecessary door-kicking, fighting via counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism methods vice conventional, ensuring legal compliance at places such as GITMO). It’s not just about Abu Ghraib, it’s about the way that convoys drive, it’s landing helicopters in wheat fields, it’s drive-by shootings of civilians that are not followed up and investigated or compensated. It is the U.S. posture in these spaces.[31] As a result of the “surge” in Iraq, and the corresponding operational and tactical changes toward asymmetrical methods and counterinsurgency doctrine, Coalition Forces have made significant progress. The surge also demonstrated that consistent efforts by U.S. forces will pay off over time.

There is also a role to be played by commanders on the ground in both Iraq and Afghanistan in holding local leadership accountable to their populations. Many do not consider these governments to be truly representative. The United States has helped bring these governments and leaders to power, and the people feel the United States has a responsibility to hold those local leaders’ feet to the fire in terms of responsive behavior. Military leaders can do this much better than the civilians, although this should be conducted via close collaboration with DoS and knowledgeable civilians, because in the AOR raw power is still more respected than the lone governance officer.[32]

**U.S. Foreign Policy**

*Seek out and indirectly enable genuinely moderate and legitimate Muslim leaders that intervene and counter extremist ideology, and consider enabling more scrupulous regimes.* Muslim religious authorities who confront abuse of religious doctrine, highlighting actions that violate the moral principles, will be more effective than any message sent by the United States or the West and will be effective as long as the United States avoids being directly linked to them. The USG could also consider alternatives to key partners in various states and reevaluate their strategic value (such as historic U.S. support for Musharraf which could in the end cause an anti-U.S. backlash within Pakistan).

Until “the U.S. is our enemy” image is dispelled, Violent Extremist Organizations will continue to have a recruiting tool amongst their laborer group. Thus, one significant issue to consider is the effect of visible support to figures of perceived repression in the region. Support to perceived unbearable governments, political leaders, military leaders, etc does lend some popular credence to our enemy’s arguments that the United States is an enemy to the people. Historic U.S.
orientation toward stability has led to support for autocrats or dictators, which has the potential of driving people into the arms of the violent opposition, so this factor must be considered when aiming for good governance.

It is critical that the USG remain cognizant to the risk of enabling groups or movements in the region, and remember the short-term nature of alliances born there to overcome immediate problems or issues.

**Strategic Communications**

*Any Western efforts to enter the theological domain are likely to fail unless carried out by Muslims*, and even then it should be only in support, indirectly or even covertly, to legitimately perceived Islamic or political authorities in the region.

*Destroy the narrative* —how al-Qaeda and Shi’ia VEOs have framed the struggle. Expose the fact that the foot soldiers are being used by UBL and other VEO senior leaders for political purposes, and to gain power, may be an effective wake up call to diminish their power.

*Demonstrate how Violent Extremist activity can be practically detrimental to an individual’s or a community’s goals (tribe, clan, family) or could lead to demise of their own country.* In Pakistan, for example, tribal elders are realizing that the Taliban and AQ are killing innocents, and wreaking havoc on the local population in the name of Islam. They consider the new generation of Taliban to be more violent than the founders, and are concerned that the way of life will change as a result of such activity.

*The United States could begin communicating with the Muslim world about shared values and principles which also happen to be democratic, and discuss issues that both religions share, such as respect for justice. The United States must furthermore better deliver on the concepts that it promotes.* The 2005 Pew Global Attitudes Project found that publics in predominantly Muslim countries believe that democracy can work in their countries. However, if U.S. partners in these countries are actually undermining justice, discussion about promoting “democracy” rings hollow and the population becomes cynical about U.S. intentions. The USG should embrace Arabs and Muslims who promote governmental accountability, democratic values, and basic human rights and could consider sanctioning those partners that undermine our values. Rather than talking about “democracy,” we must start to represent democratic values by our actions and example, and via the figures in the AOR that we promote or support. The USG should be clear that we are not seeking to export Jeffersonian democracy to the Middle East, but rather to promote values and principles such as justice and human rights while supporting local governments to develop systems that truly allow the peoples’ voice to be heard.

Media amplification could either reinforce the perceived validity of the Violent Extremist Organization’s goals, or it could be turned into a moral and ethical detractor from the cause if mainstream Muslim populations see these acts of terror as anti-Muslim. Such acts can be juxtaposed against precepts such as Sura 5:32.[33]

*Cultivate and support independent local news media.* VEOs make use of censorship, selection, omission, and propaganda such as that from Voice of America (VOA) broadcasts to raise resentment and suspicion amongst the populace. In contrast, the USG/USCENTCOM could support forces in the AOR that are trying to create modern independent, pluralistic, objective media based on Western-style objective journalism[34] which implies tolerance for criticism of the government. Most times, local voices will reverberate with the populace with much more resonance than any artificially contrived Western attempt at countering AQ propaganda.
Be prepared to undermine VEO recruitment. This can be problematic when there are situations without substance, or with challenges, such as in Afghanistan where some of the populace perceives that it suffers more at the hands of the GoA which is USG-supported than it does at the hands of the Taliban.

Expose fantasies about suicide bombers the fact that killing of innocent civilians is un-Islamic. Killing of women and children was explicitly forbidden by Mohammed. Air “confessions” of foiled bombers who claim that they did not know that they were about to engage in a suicide operation, because someone else was in control of the detonator while they thought they were merely delivering the truck to the target, stories about those who had their hands handcuffed to the steering wheel, and others who were given drugs and shown pornographic materials to excite them into meeting heavenly maidens. Defeat means to rationalize Violent Extremist activity.

Give Muslims another message, addressing the “grey areas” (versus black and white—try to counter black and white concepts about Islam while appealing to the fundamentalist mindset that considers concepts in such terms). Provide alternative views so that young Muslims can decide for themselves, and can hear the other Muslim perspectives, not just the UBL version of Islam and jihad. One example is Egyptian Sayyed Imam al Sharif (aka “Dr. Fadl”), formerly one of the chief ideologues of the global totalitarian movement, who published in 2007 “The Document of Right Guidance for Jihad Activity in Egypt and the World.” He refutes UBL’s message and jihadist propaganda and argues that AQ originated essentially as mercenaries, as al Zawahiri was commissioned by the Sudanese government to carry out terror attacks in Egypt in the 1990s. He also argues that there are both “practical” and shari’a reasons not to engage in clashes in which AQ engaged. He claims that AQ followers commit grave violations in the name of jihad almost daily in Iraq, influenced by “deviant programs” of AQ.

Provide means to disseminate already existing, and future incidents, of Fatwas and statements by respected Muslim leaders which counter VE ideas.

The militants have used children for fighting and for propaganda purposes, even releasing a video showing a very young looking boy hacking off the head of a hostage. The horrific use of children presents itself to the United States and coalition as an opportunity to inform the world about how horrific the VEs are. Al-Qaeda/UBL use their followers, something which if pointed out, could be a gain.

Continued pressure on regional governments to eliminate corruption should be publicized amongst the subject populace, using public diplomacy to ensure people in the region realize that the USG is attempting to help make their situation better.

Portray jihadists as “deviants” and misguided individuals who know little about Islam and have been brainwashed into carrying out suicide attacks.

Air religious discussions about “wrong motivations” of so-called jihadists, and that one cannot receive the rewards of martyrdom if he or she is, in reality, motivated by something other than love of God and striving in His path.

Capitalize on and exploit AQ vulnerabilities. USCENTCOM must be prepared to exploit and capitalize on AQ tactical failures and mistakes when they occur. If possible, find a way to force AQ to repeat their mistakes, or even publicize as if they did. This will require immediate reaction, and careful analysis of the situation to identify signs that AQ is losing ground, such as seen previously in al Anbar Province. These are ways that the United States can help Islam correct itself, but it is necessary to highlight these cases/issues in a non-offensive manner as the United States offers assistance to elements such as the Awakening Councils.
The 2005 Pew Global Attitudes Project found that while support for suicide bombings and other terrorist acts has fallen in most Muslim-majority countries surveyed, so too has confidence in Al-Qaeda leader Usama bin Laden. This provides an opportunity to delegitimize UBL and reveals a strategic weakness for AQ recruiting.

There are different paths being taken by the old guard and the current generation. Thus far it has not caused an open rupture, but it may be possible to drive a wedge between the two and weaken the movement. There is currently a revolt against the “establishment” upon which USCENTCOM may be able to build.

The “homegrown resistance” and insurgents do not necessarily trust those they consider to be “foreigners.” Means of prevention for local recruitment… go back into psycho-social/cultural or political rationale, or show difference/gap between the “establishment” and the “rebels”… Members and persons close to Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), Indonesia’s most prominent extremist organization, have developed a publishing consortium, something which at first appears to be a negative issue for the West. However, a close examination of the titles printed indicates an internal debate within JI over the desirability of al-Qaeda tactics which seems to be taking place spontaneously, without any assistance from the government “de-radicalization” program, according to ICG.

Identify situations where al-Qaeda franchises “have been given enough rope to hang themselves” where heavy handedness, attempts to force their version of shari’a law upon the populace, and attempts to supersede local customs may very well lead the populations to turn against them. Be prepared to capitalize upon such tactical failures when they occur.

Local AQ franchise leaders often act in ways that are un-Islamic, which takes away legitimacy from the organization, thus support from the populace, leading to a general decline in support for AQ. In some cases they have isolated themselves from the masses.

Al-Qaeda fatigue is a real factor. There is already a push-back against extremists from other Muslims (al Anbar Province in Iraq is one example, and the conditions for this may be brewing in parts of Pakistan). It would be advisable for the USG to assist in creation of a broader environment where the extremists might maintain their repulsive ideology but are inhibited from actually following through with their extremist prescriptions by social mores.

**De-Radicalization and Rehabilitation**

Analysis of de-radicalization cases may further identify individual motivations that led to extremist activity. **USCENTCOM should further analyze de-radicalization programs to determine viable findings**—results seem to indicate that economic aid to families is ultimately more important than religious arguments in changing attitudes of former VEs. This indicates that economic salience, and quality of life for one’s family may be more important than theology and thus supports military support to SSTR. Creation of paths to durable economic self sufficiency would likely be helpful, and means to support this should be further evaluated. Of specific concern is the question of what to do with them once they are reformed.

Spiritual commitment to the jihad is critical, as individuals with such commitment cannot be de-radicalized or rehabilitated. A question worth analysis is how to identify the “tipping point” where an individual who joined the VE movement for personal reasons becomes sufficiently indoctrinated and truly buys into the rhetoric. Even rehabilitable VEs may truly buy into the rhetoric, but might be won back by changes in their secular conditions or counter arguments that are ideologically orthodox alternatives. These tipping points will be different in different societies. Many VEO recruits are Muslims who do not know the Qur’an and cannot judge for themselves the
validity of what they are being taught by those radicalizing them, and who take suras out of context.

Understanding why and how the individual becomes motivated to pick up arms and act out violently, outside of irreconcilable religious motivation, will allow the USG to identify means to seize opportunities to exploit VE differences and leverage AQ vulnerabilities, widen gaps or drive a wedge between violent extremists and their potential recruits, and impede extremist efforts to gain collective momentum in their overall global totalitarian efforts. Part of the solution to the problem resides in understanding, and helping substantively redress, legitimate grievances or problems faced by the population from which recruits are drawn. Only generational transformation can end the conflict.

Summary

The generation growing up in the Middle East since the early 1990s largely knows and perceives the United States as an occupier, and regional media perpetuates that image. U.S. credibility is tainted. Thus, it should be a goal to provide indirect support to Muslim leaders and countries when they find themselves countering violent extremism domestically, supporting democratic values, and acting in a way that serves the interest of their constituents. When there is a direct threat to U.S. interests, the United States may feel obliged to act unilaterally. However, to the greatest extent possible, public perception in the region and the world should be that it is the host country’s responsibility—and the host country’s actions—that directly counter Violent Extremists. When regional states or sub-communities find that it is in their interests to counter Violent Extremists, the United States and USCENTCOM should do what they can to enable better execution.

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References


5. See Gallup's self-funded Poll of the Muslim World, part of Gallup's larger World Poll, which was conducted in 40 predominantly Muslim countries and among significant Muslim populations in the West. See: Dalia Mogahed, "Framing the War on Terror," Gallup.com.

7. In both Lebanon and Iran 2%, and in Saudi Arabia 4%, think attacks in which civilians are targets are "completely justified." Yet, significantly, residents of Pakistan's NWFP (67%) are more likely than Pakistanis as a whole (44%) to say that sacrificing one's life is a completely justifiable act.

8. Four major Sunni schools of thought are: Hanafi, Maleki, Shafii, and Hanbali. Four major Shi'ia schools of thought are: Ithna Ashariya (or Imami), Nizari Ismaili, Zaidiya, and Mutazila. Further, the Shi'ia are split into three major denominations: Jafariya (Twelvers), Ismailiyah (Seveners), and Zaiddiyah (Fivers). Other sects include Alawi, Alevi, Dawoodi Bohras, Kharijites, Ahmadiyya, Qadiani, Lahore, Deobandi and Zikri. Religious movements include Wahabism (Sunni; an influence on UBL), Sufism (both Shi'ia and Sunni), and Salafism.


11. Melinda Witter, a field practitioner in Iraq with over 28 years of experience with community based ethnic and religious (Muslim) conflict resolution, tribal mediation, private sector development and cross-cultural communications; interview, June 12, 2008.

12. Sayyid Qutb is the leading intellectual of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, best known in the Muslim world for his work on what he believed to be the social and political role of Islam, particularly in his books Social Justice and *Ma'alim fi-l-Tariq* (Milestones). His extensive Quranic commentary *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* (In the shades of the Qur'an) has contributed significantly to modern perceptions of Islamic concepts such as jihad, jahiliyyah, and ummah. Islamists consider him to be a martyr (shahid) because of his execution by Nasser's government.


14. Iraq’s Ministry of Education estimates that only 30 percent of the 3.5 million elementary age children attend school.


23. Mark Juergensmeyer, professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, as quoted in Arthur J. Deikman, M.D., Them and Us: Cult Thinking and the Terrorist Threat (Berkeley: Bay Tree Publishing, 2003), 172.


27. Dr. Marvin G. Weinbaum, Middle East Institute; interview, April 16, 2008.

28. Both Witter and Chayes have indicated this to the author, as well as other sources—a list too long to name.

29. Islam is based upon the premise that one subjugates oneself, or must submit to God’s will, thus personal or individual freedom is counter to Islamic central precepts. Also, from a cultural perspective, due to the influence of the tribal system, it is natural for Middle Easterners to consider it right to act in a way that takes the collective good as its highest goal, not that of the individual.

30. In the Gallup poll, when answering an open ended question, “What can the Muslim world do to improve relations?” people in predominantly Muslim countries noted a need to reduce extremism, and also mentioned it as a responsibility of the Muslim world.


32. Ibid.

33. Sura 5:32 states, “…we ordained for the Children of Israel that if any one slew a person—unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land—it would be as if he slew the whole people: and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people…”

34. Examples of independent media being vital in weakening the grip of autocratic regime: Czechoslovakia videotapes of Russian soldiers