

## THE JEBSEN CENTER FOR COUNTER-TERRORISM STUDIES RESEARCH BRIEFING SERIES

VOL. 3, NO. 1 (JANUARY 2008)

### Strategic Counter-Terrorism: Getting Ahead of Terrorism Part III: Mass Media Response to Terrorism

Dr. Rohan Gunaratna  
Senior Fellow  
The Jebesen Center for Counter-Terrorism Studies

*“More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media ... We are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our umma [Islamic nation].”*

—Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri<sup>1</sup>

*“Our enemies have skillfully adapted to fighting wars in today's media age, but for the most part we — our country, our government — have not adapted.”*

—Donald Rumsfeld<sup>2</sup>

#### Introduction

The mass media has a profound impact in shaping domestic and international public opinion—a fact that can perhaps best be illustrated through a personal anecdote. One month after September 11, 2001, I flew to Indonesia. As I was driven to the hotel, the proud taxi driver told me that he had named his first-born in honor of Osama bin Laden. Shocked, I asked why he named his precious son after a mass murderer who was responsible for the deaths of 3,000 innocent people. In the middle of the road, he abruptly stopped the taxi, turned to me, and said angrily, “You do not know Osama! You think Osama did it? The American government did this to bring a bad name to Islam. Look at Osama’s face! He is God’s man. He is such a kind man. He gave all his wealth for the suffering Muslims in Africa, the Middle East, and in Asia. He is a humanitarian. You still think he did it?”

The father of the newborn continued to narrate the life story of bin Laden, who had overnight become very popular in the world’s most populous Muslim nation and the third-largest democracy. When we reached a traffic light, the driver purchased a broadsheet with the headlines “U.S. forces killed in Afghanistan.” He was pleased. He virtually threw the paper at me and said, “Look, our *mujahideen* [warriors of God] are winning.”

The mass media creates our heroes and villains. The media sets the standards of what is socially acceptable and what is not. The media sways public and international opinion, which in turn compels politicians to act and bureaucrats to shape government and global policy. A force multiplier, media is a crucial tool to influence the population.

Both terrorist groups and governments use and manipulate the media to influence their constituencies. The media determines support or non-support of a leader or for his cause. Without the goodwill of the media, support will inevitably evaporate. In the fight against terrorism and extremism, media support is vital for the government and its partners. To confront violence and extremism, the media is an indispensable tool. To use it intelligently, government must understand the mass media, how it works, and its enduring impact.

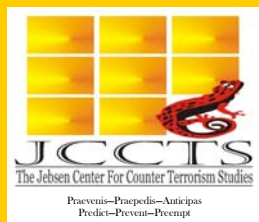
The Jebesen Center for  
Counter-Terrorism Studies  
The Fletcher School  
Tufts University  
160 Packard Avenue  
Cabot 505  
Medford, MA 02155 USA

Phone: 617-627-4740  
Fax: 617-627-5436

<http://fletcher.tufts.edu/jebsecnter>



THE FLETCHER SCHOOL  
TUFTS UNIVERSITY



## The Context

To engage the media effectively, it is essential to understand it. The media is a plural, not a monolith, and should not be lumped together as a whole. There are many differences in platforms, formats, and operations of different media outlets and programs. Especially important is the distinction of Western vs. Arab media. The media consist of content creators—the journalists—and gatekeepers—the editors and owners.<sup>3</sup> The content is generated by the journalists and allowed by the gatekeepers. It is necessary for governments to work with both parties.

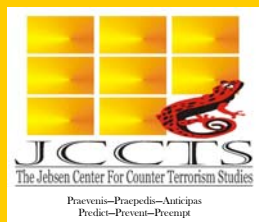
In its relations with the media, government strategy should be one of honesty and understanding. Except on matters of operational security, government should trust selected media personnel and media organizations. Governments must view having the media on its side to be as important as having the populace on its side. In engaging the media, there should be full disclosure and candid appraisals offered to press corps from print, TV, and radio outlets. Government should keep spin doctors away from the press. Those who think that they can manipulate the media and peddle myths will sooner or later be found out; the Bush administration's claims that Iraq under Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction or links with al Qaeda is a case in point. Eventually, Hussein was tried and executed for genocide of the Iraqi Kurds. In such cases, without covering up, mistakes should be admitted. In media relations, it is vital for government representatives to honestly state what they know and to allow journalists to further investigate and do their jobs.

The media should also be made mindful of its own strengths and weaknesses. Many journalists and media organizations have an inherent propensity to criticize government—the conventional wisdom being that bad news sells. There is a general failure to appreciate good governance, especially within a sensationalistic news cycle. As the media have a bias toward reporting bad news, those opposed to government have a huge psychological advantage, playing into the propensity to identify the inherent gaps and loopholes in the system. To encourage government to be transparent and for its leaders to be open to the media, journalists must be fair.

Until now, media reporting has damaged most counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism campaigns. Success stories from the strategic to the individual level have been ignored or underreported. The significant relief and rehabilitation work in Iraq and Afghanistan has hardly made front-page news. To correct the media bias to criticize and to prevent media misreporting, it is important to formally train journalists. Without proper training, even a highly talented natural writer will make mistakes. The media propensity to overstate or understate can be corrected by promoting responsible journalism. With training, the media tendency to hype and sensationalize will also decline. Likewise, journalists must not blindly accept what governments, terrorist groups, and others claim but investigate, discover the truth, and write about it.

## Challenges

The challenge facing the West is to put a functioning, globally-networked strategic communications structure in place. If there is a lack of direction on how to accomplish this, the West has only to emulate al Qaeda's media organization and operations. After the formation of the World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and the Crusaders in February 1998, al Qaeda leadership assigned a high priority to its media relations activities. Even before the attacks of September 11, 2001, al Qaeda had a media and public relations capability and tasked its most brilliant minds to fight the media battle. The Media and Public Relations Committee, one of the four most important committees of al Qaeda, was led by Ayman al Zawahri, its deputy leader. Under al Zawahri, the media office in Kandahar was led by Khalid Sheikh Mohamed, the 9/11 mastermind. The U.S.-educated Khalid Sheikh Mohamed assigned a high priority to multimedia productions in different languages, using a staff of various nationalities. The capability briefly shifted to Karachi after the U.S.-led coalition intervention in October 2001.



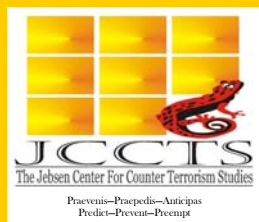
Even after the Taliban and al Qaeda were forced out from mainland Afghanistan and Pakistan, through like-minded groups in the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) they shaped the narrative, influenced the discourse, and built support for their ideologies. To make their threats and attacks carry weight, “militants issued a *fatwa* [decree] asking print media not to use the [term] ‘martyr’ for soldiers killed in suicide attacks.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, after an attack, a terrorist called a journalist and informed not to call the attack a “suicide” but a “*fidai*” or “liberation” attack.<sup>5</sup> Today, the al Qaeda Media and Public Relations Committee is led by Abu Abdel Rahman al Maghrebi, a German-qualified computer specialist married to the daughter of al Zawahri.

Al Qaeda has proven to be increasingly “media-savvy,” using its media arm, Al Sahab, to convey sophisticated messages to an ever-larger international audience.<sup>6</sup> Al Sahab produces slick videos and other propaganda frequently and in several languages. In December 2007, Al Sahab issued an invitation to media journalists to submit questions for al Zawahri—much as a government might convene a press conference. These efforts indicate that, according to Bruce Hoffman, al Qaeda’s “media capability is as sophisticated as ever.”<sup>7</sup>

Six years after 9/11, the international community still has no such globally networked communications structure in place to counter the jihadist strategic media threat. As the nation facing the biggest threat, the U.S. must lead this important initiative—very much the same way in which Echelon was created after World War II. The short-lived Office of Strategic Influence at the Pentagon, which I visited after 9/11, had no Arabists (the lingua franca of al Qaeda) and was thinly staffed and poorly networked. Although “public diplomacy” became a buzzword with the appointment of Karen Hughes to the U.S. State Department, a more nuanced understanding of the threat and the target audience was sorely needed. Most U.S. officials assigned to public diplomacy viewed the world through Western or American eyes and had a limited understanding of Arab culture. With that mindset, it was difficult for the U.S. government to build a global governmental and non-governmental network that could effectively counter the radical message. Its efforts to organize and catalyze high-profile public events and festivals and its promotion of gestures showing respect for Arab and Muslim culture had at best a modest impact. Although I recognize the mammoth size of this undertaking, more comprehensive efforts can and should be undertaken.

The second challenge is to create networked information centers worldwide. To develop and disseminate messages to the media in the Muslim world, such centers should work with a range of partners—everything from think tanks to radio stations. Staffed by scholars, journalists, advertising specialists, and communications technology experts, these information centers will develop global rapid response teams that can quickly exploit the adversaries’ tactical mistakes—such as the killing of Muslims in bombings that targeted Westerners in Saudi Arabia—and to work with surrogates to get the message out in an effective way. These teams would highlight the suffering of the Muslims resulting from Osama bin Laden’s salafi jihadist ideology, to exploit their doctrinal differences, and to counter terrorist leaders through the media. They would also exploit the strategic and tactical mistakes of the global jihad movement; for instance, pinpointing al Zarqawi as the killer of Iraqi Shi’a repelled most Muslims, including the Sunnis, worldwide.

The third challenge is to make the mass media itself realize that extremism and terrorism are global threats that they must address. The threat is real, and government alone cannot fight it. Instead of remaining neutral on violence, media must become partners in the fight against violence. As every terrorist attack generates severe damage to society, media must play a role to build a norm and an ethic against violence and extremism. The London attacks of July 7, 2005 killed 52, mutilated 770, and caused severe trauma in 6,000 others,<sup>9</sup> but media coverage often served to highlight the success of the terrorists behind the attacks. Unless government develops the appropriate structures and invests in the formal and informal education of the media, the media itself will be exploited by the terrorists to disseminate their extremist message. This is what is happening today.



## Terrorist Use of the Media

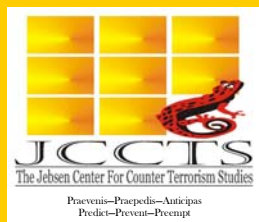
To understand the terrorist use of the media, let us examine how and why terrorists capture media attention and manipulate, exploit, and maximize publicity to their advantage. Of the essential elements for a terrorist or insurgent group to grow, propaganda is the most vital. Terrorist propaganda shapes intent and actions. It is central to recruitment, funding, supplies, and sanctuary. For propaganda to be effective, however, it must be communicated through the mass media. Both the jihadists and government are competing to reach out and harness the media—newspapers, radio, television, and the Internet—to their advantage.<sup>10</sup>

As terrorist groups must replenish human losses and material wastage, they must rely on the media as a means to constantly expand its support base. Actively and tacitly, media performs multiple vital functions for terrorists, most notably publicizing the “jihad cause.” By acting as a vehicle to spread the message and inculcate terrorist ideology, media allows these groups to actively recruit members, supporters, and sympathizers. Without recruitment, a terrorist organization will lose strength and die. Propaganda sustains terrorist rank-and-file morale. Likewise, propaganda is essential for fundraising. Without politicizing, radicalizing, and mobilizing the support base, terrorists will fail to raise funds. Without communicating its message, a terrorist group cannot generate support. In addition to using its own media mechanisms, tapping into the wider mass media is essential for a terrorist group to communicate to its actual and potential support base. The active engagement of the media by the terrorist group is paramount for its survival.

Unlike political parties, terrorist groups do not need large-scale public support, but are very conscious of how their actions affect public opinion. Nonetheless, advances in modern communication technologies have given them both depth and reach. The quality and quantity of information that terrorists have been able to amass and disseminate have dramatically changed in the last decade. The new media technologies have enabled terrorists to communicate in real time, more effectively, and to larger groups of people. Furthermore, the operational range of terrorist groups has grown dramatically. With the increase in the ability of terrorist groups to communicate to populations outside their conflict zones, they are able not only to build support among their territorial communities but also transnationally, including within migrant and diaspora communities. As has been seen throughout Europe, terrorist ideologies have become more dispersed and pervasive, creating networks and homegrown cells within smaller ethnic enclaves. Using those supporters and sympathizers in the West as bridgeheads, contemporary threat groups operate far away from their Middle Eastern and Asian theatres of origin and conflict.

Through media, both terrorist and insurgent groups are able to reach out to the vulnerable segments of communities, establish a presence, accrue support, and mount operations. Just as the radicalized Irish diaspora funded the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the radicalized Kurdish diaspora funded the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the radicalized Basque diaspora funded the Basque Fatherland and Liberty movement (ETA), and the radicalized Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora funded the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). As such, conflicts located in the global south have extraterritorial security implications. Robust translational networks move funds, goods, and trained personnel to conflict zones. Prior to 9/11, since most fighting was taking place in the global south, Western governments did not disrupt terrorist support infrastructures. The radicalized Muslim diaspora that funded the threat groups in Algeria, Kashmir, Somalia, and Chechnya now seek either to support or mount attacks on Western soil.

At times, the media can inadvertently become the instrument of the terrorists.<sup>11</sup> Both politicians and terrorists seek to influence and shape public opinion. To its own constituency, the terrorist group portrays itself as waging a just campaign. Through the media, the terrorists also communicate threats and acts of violence. Keen to influence an audience beyond its immediate victims, the terrorists are among the most active users of modern communication.



Publicity is the fuel used by the terrorists to exercise control over the population. Instilling hatred and fear in the community creates the enemy's image. In the case of al Qaeda and its family of groups, the enemy is the U.S., its allies, and its friends. In the case of the ETA, it is Spain. In the case of the LTTE, it is Sri Lanka. In the case of the Palestinian Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, it is Israel. By demonstrating that the terrorist group is winning, terrorists can attract recruits, funds, and intelligence as well as terrorize the enemy audience into granting concessions and submission to the group. Such coverage also reinforces group morale, dampens group dissent, and expands the group's support base.

As public pressure on terrorist groups and activities has mounted, media reporting has often undermined attempts to negotiate for or rescue hostages. Although the U.S. invented most of the world's modern communication, it has been a very poor communicator. On the contrary, terrorist groups understand that any terrorist event involving the U.S. guarantees maximum publicity. The U.S. remains the most-targeted country for terrorist incidents. Terrorists have successfully harnessed every single advance in modern communication. Whether audio and videocassettes, satellite television, fax, privately-owned radio and television stations, desktop and laptop computers, the Internet, DVDs, CD-ROM, or video cell phones, terrorists have exploited technology, savvily using it to their advantage. Terrorists themselves began to control or access some media organs. Messages are often translated into many languages to maximize exposure.

Although terrorism is very low-probability event, it has a medium-to-high impact. When compared to everyday incidents like automobile accidents or disease, terrorism has caused relatively few fatalities. However, terrorism has profoundly altered the way we live, work, and travel. Media portrayals of these events are a crucial influence on public opinion.

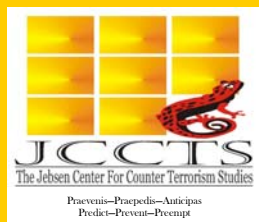
### Turning the Tide

Media is a critical instrument in the Global War on Terrorism. However, the media is currently orientated to sensationalize violence and publicize threats, generating a fear psychosis. How can we turn the tide?

Let us first identify the problem: educating the media on the basics. Reporters and writers must look beyond mere reporting of facts and explore the content and impact of those facts and how they are presented. Will a given story harden common Muslim understanding, encouraging further enmity toward non-Muslims? Will a given story propel the anger of a Muslim boy into joining a violent group? The key to educating the Muslim world of the events of the rest of the world is to make the media understand how the extremists exploit the media to spread their message. As such, many Muslims exposed to radical propaganda genuinely believe that America is Satan. They believe that Americans are deliberately killing Muslims and willfully attacking Islam. Such Muslims want to assist those fighting Satan or directly participate in the fight themselves.

Likewise, many non-Muslims believe that Muslims are extremists and that they support violence. As much as engaging the vulnerable community, government must also engage the wider public. Both government and public must understand the real problem in order to counter deviant ideologies. Common but incorrect beliefs, such as the notions that all Muslims are violent or that the West is uniformly hostile to all Muslims, must be dispelled. Such stereotypes fall right into the hands of the terrorist propaganda machine. The dissemination of facts that refute these misconceptions will, on the other hand, help to stop the cycle.

For example, unless directly traumatized by conflict, less than one percent of Muslims worldwide actively support terrorism.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Islam explicitly forbids harming non-Muslims. It is essential to correct these misperceptions, which lead to misunderstanding and eventually to hatred and violence. To reduce the potential for conflict, it is necessary to engage the non-Muslim public and educate them about the Muslim community and the Islamic faith. The fight should be a global one that not only focuses on the Muslim community or



threat groups in Muslim countries, but also addresses non-Muslim terrorist groups, such as those active in Northern Ireland, northeastern Sri Lanka, southeastern Turkey, and the Basque country. The Irish, Tamils, Kurds, and Basques exposed to propaganda have provided support for violence, much in the same way that radical Islamic terrorists have. The key to moving forward is working with the media.

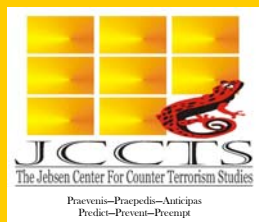
To embark on such a mission, the first step will be reaching out to media moguls and personnel. As most are familiar with the response but not the threat, the key is to explain the nature of the emerging threat of global terrorism. The starting point is to establish partnerships with media contacts who are passionate and willing to work to reduce extremism and violence. Rather than look for total cooperation and a start big, it is prudent for the media associations to dedicate modest resources to this task. For example, every country has a journalism school or interest to create a professional training center for reporters. The opportunity can be seized to introduce conflict, war, and peace reporting courses that explain how terrorists exploit the media to divide ethnic and religious communities. Such schools can benefit from the insight of highly experienced journalists such as Andy Clarke and Henry Schuster of CBS London, Nick Fielding of *The Sunday Times*, Josri Fouda of Al Jazeera, Maria Ressa of ABS-CNA, Nic Robertson and Ingrid Arnesen of CNN, and Mike Boetcher, formerly of CNN. These journalists—and others like them—have spent time in conflict zones and experienced the effects of terrorism to a point that they will never glorify terror.

Equally important would be instruction in social resilience—or how societies might challenge terror by standing up to violence, aided by media. The murder of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl in February 2001, and the response to it, is a case in point. The first American to be killed after 9/11, Pearl was beheaded by the 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohamed in Karachi, Pakistan in February 2001. In the face of this brutal crime, Pearl's wife, Marianne, a journalist herself, fought hard to prevent the media's demonization of Pakistan, Muslims, and the religion of Islam. By creating dialogue with the very community producing the extremists and terrorists, the Pearl family aimed to reduce the propensity for misunderstanding and misrepresentation and subverted the intentions of the killers, who have victimized Muslims by using Islam to provide religious justification for terrorism. By not allowing lives and dreams to be destroyed by every act of terror, it is essential for every family affected by terror to contribute to societal resilience to make the weapon of terror have the least impact.

### Media Bias?

Is there a natural bias in reporting about violence? Many media organizations and journalists are inherently against government, especially the defense establishment. Some media personnel, especially newcomers to the field, think that for a story to be read, it must always be critical of the government. The U.S. media is naturally inclined to criticize war and publicize terrorist messages. Shameful events, such as the prison abuse at Abu Ghraib, have been widely publicized in the Western and Arab media. The reporting, when viewed out of context, could give the impression that all U.S. soldiers were engaging in torture—which obviously was not the case. Conversely, terrorists are the biggest human rights violators; yet their human rights violations have been hardly reported. Reporting on the kidnappings, beheadings, and mutilations tends to generate fear among the general population and admiration by terrorist supporters and sympathizers.

On the contrary, reporting should generate dislike and disgust of terrorist acts.<sup>13</sup> It should generate revulsion of the responsible group, aversion of their ideology, and loathing of their leaders. For instance, to portray the horror of violence in Iraq, first-person vignettes of bombings leading to the death of a brother, a sister, or a parent should be created. Similarly, opportunity and hope can be conveyed through stories of young girls going to school illustrated by visuals of girls reading and professional women acting as role models. Likewise, stories about reconstruction projects that create jobs and benefit the community, including community centers, hospitals, schools, and sports complexes, can help convey prosperity.



While retaining its invaluable role as a watchdog, media must report intelligently. For instance, in every counter-insurgency, atrocities occur, and reporting must reflect proportionality and accuracy. Media reporting on the Iraq conflict, which has focused on casualties and deaths, has negatively affected U.S. military morale, while media coverage of the military's efforts to create infrastructure and an improved life for Iraqis is sparse at best. While the U.S. invasion of Iraq was a mistake, the efforts of personnel working day and night to secure and rebuild Iraq should not be projected as failures.<sup>14</sup> Most U.S. and other coalition soldiers have been disciplined and restrained in the face of a ruthless and a cunning foe. For the families of killed or disabled Iraqi personnel, U.S. personnel raised funds within their military bases and from U.S. families at home, collecting everything from toys to clothes.<sup>15</sup> There have been few stories in the media reflecting the generosity of the U.S. soldiers in Iraq or their families at home.

The Bush administration's lack of a comprehensive media strategy has prevented an accurate portrayal of U.S. generosity. The U.S. government's weak understanding of foreign cultures, particularly Muslim cultures, has greatly impeded the projection of the true U.S. spirit to help others. The U.S. "occupation" authority's lack of understanding of Iraq and hence its failure to govern Iraq resulted in a loss of media support. For instance, by embedding journalists with the military, media credibility and independence suffered. Additionally, media contacts were not educated in the complexities of terrorist acts and entities. Instead of perceiving a terrorist act as an act of violence, there was little or no understanding of why the attack occurred. The media did not understand that terrorism is a by-product of extremism. In the pressure to cover individual acts of terrorism, rather than the perpetrators or their ideology, media reporting centered less on the fight against terrorism and served to generate fear by publicizing terrorist successes.

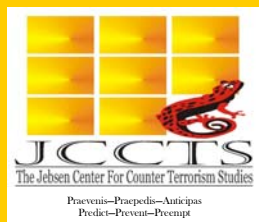
Some Western newspapers, quoting Western commentators, only labeled as terrorists those groups targeting Westerners, while referring to all other violent groups as separatists, rebels, or guerrillas.<sup>16</sup> To some extent this was a reflection of the state of terrorism knowledge among even the best and most informed public officials. For example, during a visit to India in the 1990s, counter-terrorism specialist Paul Wilkinson was horrified when the British Defense Advisor in New Delhi told him, "In India, there is no terrorism, only insurgency."<sup>17</sup>

Some Western newspapers are influenced by terrorists and extremist lobbies on their soil. Through human rights, humanitarian, political, socio-economic, educational, cultural, community, charity, and other innocuous organizations, terrorist and extremist groups operate in the migrant and diaspora communities. Some Western news agencies report directly from terrorist and extremist websites, without understanding who they are, what they are saying, and why they are saying it. To create awareness of how terrorism can cause grave harm to society, it is necessary for government and its partners to proactively engage the media in formal and informal education. However, to move forward, there are a number of impediments and obstacles that must be overcome.

#### Four-Step Approach

To understand the importance of media in the fight against terrorism, a number of steps needed to be taken. The first step should be to raise awareness among both political and military leaders of the need to invest in information operations to counter the terrorist message. The information operations target audience should be the Muslim public—the very community producing the terrorists at its fringes. Without convincing one's own leaders of the nature of the threat, governments will not be able to devote the appropriate resources and trained human capital to move forward.

The second step is to build structures within and outside government to engage the media in a long and enduring campaign to fight propaganda generated by al Qaeda, its associated groups, and affiliated cells. The rationale should be explained to government leaders. Media is the communication channel to the public. Unless government involves the media in the



fight against terrorism, terrorists will exploit media outlets to their advantage, however unwittingly.

The third step is educating the media—international, regional, national, and local—about the terrorist groups, their objectives and motivation, and their modus operandi. This would prevent over-sensationalism associated with reporting of acts of terrorist violence, which indirectly gives publicity to the groups, inadvertently attracting new recruits to terrorist groups and extremist causes.

The fourth step is educating the public. To build a societal ethos and culture against politically-motivated violence and extremism, it is essential for government and its partners to work with and through the media.

### The Future

Successfully countering the extremist narrative should be at the heart of a government campaign against terrorism. But the fight has not yet seriously started for many governments. For instance, radical Islamists and violent Islamists who are supportive of or engaged in the campaign against the West use the term “jihad.” While “jihad” means “to struggle,” these elements use the term to denote both preparation for and conduct of battle. As there is no strategy to challenge the Islamist use of the term, it has become popular among a segment of Muslims to use the term to denote a religiously-sanctioned war against Christians, Jews, and other non-Muslims. They are made to believe that non-Muslims are actively opposing Islam. The main platform for government and its partners to correct such misinterpretation and misrepresentation should be through the media.

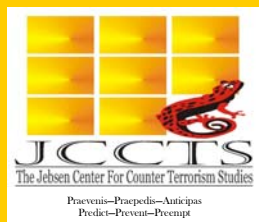
The media can play a role in exposing how the terrorists and extremists seek to build power by dividing people along religious, ethnic, regional, or other lines. Terrorist attacks are mounted in the name of Islam when Islam is, above all, a religion of peace, a faith that respects humanity. There is a precedent and provision for Muslims, Jews, Christians, and those of other faiths to live together as a community. When Prophet Mohammed referred to the community (*umma*) in Medina, he meant the people of the book—Muslims, Christians, and Jews. This sense of a greater community has not been adequately highlighted.

Today, the beautiful religion of Islam has been tarnished by the actions of a few. Although many Muslims do not know it, there is no greater threat to Islam than the radical interpretation and misinterpretation of the faith by violent extremists. To galvanize Muslims to rise and protect their faith and community, immediate attention by the media is required.

### Conclusion

We are in a difficult period of transition. During the last five years, the U.S.-led coalition focused on the “Global War on Terrorism.” Over the next five years, we must reorient ourselves to fight the “War on Extremism,” or the battle of ideas. Understanding the importance of the media in the campaign against extremism and extremist ideology is the first step. Providing visionary leadership, allocating a budget, staffing using trained personnel, and building domestic and international structures to engage in this battle are the next steps. Educating the media and the public are the successive steps.

The campaign against extremism and its by-product, terrorism, is a multi-generational fight. As the adversary is dynamic and the threat is fluid, our response must be adaptable and multidimensional. There is no standard textbook for fighting terrorism, and the counter-terrorism community must maximize successes and minimize failures. The campaign must be fought from a platform of understanding and knowledge. It is not sufficient to know the enemy; one must understand it, especially how it enlists support. Both terrorists and counter-terrorists understand how crucial the battle for “hearts and minds” is in this fight.



Before 9/11, extremists politicized the public to provide support. Today, they are radicalizing the public to organize and mount attacks, increasingly targeting the greater Muslim community. Although it is responsible for security, government alone can do very little to prevent terrorist radicalization of this community. Without co-opting the community elite and building public awareness and support through the media, it is impossible for the government to fight the contemporary wave of extremism and violence. To detect and deny the jihadist exploitation of the public, the fight must be spearheaded by the Muslim community leaders, institutions, and the community itself. This is the only way for the government to maintain an active, permanent presence in the Muslim community. By reaching out, government can challenge the extremists competing to radicalize the community. Failure to build an ideological counterweight in the Muslim community will only strengthen jihadist membership and leadership. Without media support, such an initiative is bound to fail.

The West, particularly the U.S., must catch up. The U.S. is the only country with the global reach and resources to seriously fight the global jihad movement. The U.S. has initiated a few ambitious and creative projects, with some success. For instance, in Mali, the U.S. government funded a radio station run by a moderate cleric countering extremism.<sup>18</sup> More activities like this are needed to creatively counter the extremist threat. The West must partner with both Muslim governmental and non-governmental institutions in these initiatives, ensuring necessary broad-based support. By enlisting Muslim elite, a robust capability to fight the terrorist media campaign can be built. As Muslim nations alone have little will and capital to invest in a robust sustainable program, it is necessary to build an effective partnership between the West and Muslim countries under threat. In an information-saturated world, countering the extremist message requires a far-reaching and a dynamic strategy. It should be created by the West with advice from Muslim intellectuals and implemented in partnership with the Muslim world.<sup>19</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Craig Whitlock, "Keeping Al-Qaeda in His Grip: Al-Zawahiri Presses Ideology, Deepens Rifts Among Islamic Radicals," *Washington Post Foreign Service*, April 16, 2006, A01. The quote is from a letter to Abu Musab al Zarqawi (the al Qaeda leader in Iraq) by Ayman al Zawahiri (the principal strategist of the global jihad movement, designated successor to Osama bin Laden, and the deputy leader of al Qaeda), dated July 9, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Lieutenant Colonel John A. Nagl, "A better war in Iraq," *Armed Forces Journal*, August 2006. The article cites Donald Rumsfeld, the then Secretary of Defense of the United States of America, in February 2006.

<sup>3</sup> For his insights on how media is structured, I wish to thank Nalaka Gunawardene, Chief Executive Officer of TVE Asia Pacific ([www.tveap.org](http://www.tveap.org)). TVEAP operates in the Asia Pacific region, using television, video, and new media to promote sustainable development and social justice.

<sup>4</sup> Amir Rana and Rohan Gunaratna, *Al Qaeda Fights Back: Inside Pakistani Tribal Areas* (Lahore and Islamabad: Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, 2007), 144. Similarly, a *fatwa* was issued by the late Ghazi and his brother, Maulana Abdul Aziz, during the Wana Operation (interview with Amir Rana, Director, Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies, October 2007).

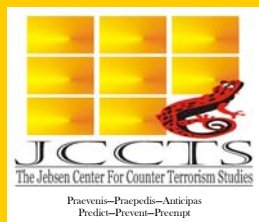
<sup>5</sup> Rana and Gunaratna, *Al Qaeda Fights Back: Inside Pakistani Tribal Areas*, 151.

<sup>6</sup> Associated Press, "Al-Qaida incites journalists questions for al-Zawahiri," December 20, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Discussion, Michael Ivahnenko, Policy Advisor, Office of Intelligence & Operations Coordination, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, November 2007.

<sup>9</sup> David Thomas, Head, UK Financial Intelligence Unit, UK Serious Organized Crime Unit, "The UK Bombings: The Role of the Financial Sectors," Anti-Money Laundering Conference 2007, RBC Financial Group, Toronto, Canada, October 24, 2007.



<sup>10</sup> Gradually, most threat groups expand and develop specialization. A few remain committed to traditional methods of disseminating and design of propaganda.

<sup>11</sup> After the U.S. compelled Israel to release 756 imprisoned Shi'a, the Lebanese Hezbollah released 39 American captives taken hostage on board TWA flight 847 on June 14, 1985. Bruce Hoffman cites the role of the media as narrated by CBS White House correspondent Lesley Stahl: "We re an instrument for the hostages ... We force the Administration to put their lives above policy" (Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* [New York: Colombia University Press, 2006], 175).

<sup>12</sup> With the exception of those living in the conflict zones, such as Palestine and Northern Ireland, active support for violence in non conflict zones is below one percent.

<sup>13</sup> Discussion, Michael Ivahnenko.

<sup>14</sup> Personal observation at Saddam's Hunting Lodge during a visit to Iraq in December 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Personal observation at Camp Victory Baghdad during a visit to Iraq in December 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Andreas Landwehr, "Doubt raised over 'terrorism' in China's restive West," *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, January 9, 2007; see also Paul Mooney, "Analysts dispute Uygur ties with terrorists," *South China Morning Post*, September 5, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Conversation with Paul Wilkinson, June 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Confidential Source, U.S. Strategic Command, November 2007.

<sup>19</sup> J. Michael Waller, *Fighting the War of Ideas Like a Real War: Messages to Defeat the Terrorists* (Washington, DC: IWP Press, 2007). Waller's book is the most comprehensive guide on how to do it.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

*Dr. Rohan Gunaratna is Head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and Senior Fellow at the Jebesen Center for Counter-Terrorism Studies. He is the author of eight books, including Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror (Columbia University Press, New York), an international bestseller, and the lead author of Jane's Counter Terrorism. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts in 2002.*

#### ABOUT THE JEBSEN CENTER FOR COUNTER-TERRORISM STUDIES:

*The Jebesen Center for Counter-Terrorism Studies was established at The Fletcher School, Tufts University in September 2005 with a mission to increase the understanding and competency of counter-terrorism professionals at the local, national, and international levels. Rather than developing policies that react to events as they occur, the Jebesen Center takes a proactive approach to fighting modern terrorist threats, aiming to develop practical and lasting counter-terrorism strategies. Its innovative and proactive method examines issues and develops alternatives through three areas of focus: prediction, prevention, and preemption.*

*To view Jebesen Center publications, research topics, news, and events, please visit our website at <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/jebescenter>.*