

Engaging the Muslim World beyond al Qaeda

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The United States is not, and will never be, at war with Islam. . . . In fact, our partnership with the Muslim world is critical not just in rolling back the violent ideologies that people of all faiths reject, but also to strengthen opportunity for all its people.

I also want to be clear that America's relationship with the Muslim community, the Muslim world, cannot, and will not, just be based upon opposition to terrorism. We seek broader engagement based on mutual interest and mutual respect.

—Barack Obama, address to Turkish Parliament, April 6, 2009¹

President Obama's call in Turkey for an engagement with the Muslim world beyond al Qaeda offers the prospect for a dramatic and long-overdue shift in the American approach to the "war of ideas" that since 9/11 has occupied a central place in American national security policy. Over the last seven years, a wide consensus has emerged about the importance of such a "war of ideas." Stunned by the catastrophic decline in international approval of the United States in a series of global public opinion surveys, an Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy's 2003 report urged a dramatic increase in U.S. engagement with the world. The 9/11 Commission report defined the "war of ideas" as a generational challenge facing the United States. The Bush administration's 2006 National Counterterrorism Strategy declared that "[i]n the long run, winning the War on Terror means winning the battle of ideas." This rhetorical consensus has been met with a commensurate commitment of resources, at least on the military side. But the nature, objective, and appropriate means of this "war of ideas" remain ill defined and poorly conceptualized.

After an initial period focused on marketing American values and trying to improve American favorability ratings in public opinion surveys, the Bush administration came to define the "war of ideas" primarily in terms of counterterrorism, counter-radicalization, and "combating violent extremism." While this does indeed represent an important component of any serious approach to the problem of al Qaeda, it represents a dangerously narrow focus for America's engagement with the Islamic world. The focus on violent extremism as the primary mission of engagement privileges and reinforces al Qaeda's conception of the nature of the confrontation, ironically at a time when al Qaeda is weaker than it has ever been as a political force in the Arab world. This requires

a move beyond the “counter-radicalization” and “violent extremism” formulation. The United States should not be in a tacit dialogue with al Qaeda on its own terms, entertaining its fantasies of a global caliphate or offering any sustenance to its conceptions of an essential clash of civilizations between the West and Islam. Al Qaeda should be marginalized, recognized for the radical fringe movement that it is, and not allowed to dominate our vital dialogue with the mainstream of the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Al Qaeda is relatively weak today, at least in the Arab world. But the spirit of “resistance” to American hegemony—a mass-based, political resistance rather than a fringe, religious radicalism—is strong and rising. The focus of U.S. engagement with the Muslim world must be to reframe and transcend the binary oppositions that fuel the appeal of the advocates of resistance. That means focusing far less upon al Qaeda or upon grand ideological rhetoric, and more on practical issues related to core diplomatic agendas: building broad support for American foreign policy goals, establishing long-term foundations of trust and mutual respect, supporting engagement with potential adversaries, and addressing the political issues that provide the sustenance for the rhetoric of resistance.

Al Qaeda thrives only when it can hijack other, more popular projects—the popular vehicles of Arab and Muslim anger and concern such as the Palestinian issue, Iraq, or fury with Arab authoritarianism or American hegemony. Iran today is attempting the same gambit, appropriating more popular issues and seeking to be the standard-bearer of resistance. The old-school version of the war of ideas, which lumped together all forms of Islamic activism under one global jihadist label, served to reinforce and strengthen that narrative. So does the current effort in some quarters to present Iran as the epicenter of radicalism in the region, with Hamas and Hezbollah simply proxies for Iranian malevolence. If the key for American strategy against al Qaeda must be to expose it for the marginal, radical fringe that it is, the key against a popular, politically oriented, mass-based sense of resistance must be to address those political issues that give its appeal resonance. But in both cases, the key is to disaggregate rather than to aggregate, to split the problem rather than lump it together into a single threat, and to deny the adversary the advantage of being viewed as the primary alternative to the United States.

This does not mean entirely a return to traditional “public diplomacy.” The global media landscape and information environment have radically changed, and America’s engagement with the world must change to reflect this. Instead, engagement must take the form of an ongoing dialogue across multiple levels—what James Glassman has called a “great conversation”—with insights gleaned from this conversation integrated directly into the policy formation process at the conceptualization, not implementation, phase. American engagement with the Islamic world cannot fall into the “marketing trap,” attempting to sell policies formed in splendid isolation from the Islamic world’s interests and concerns.

Conceptualizing the “War of Ideas”

It is now a cliché to say that the most important war of ideas isn’t about us, but rather a war inside the Muslim world. But the United States has generally not been able or willing to internalize the implications of this fully. Attitudes toward

al Qaeda and toward the United States are only very weakly related to one another, and it is entirely possible for al Qaeda to lose without America winning. If the war of ideas is taking place within the Muslim world—and it is—then what is the appropriate role for America?

This question should take into account the reality that the more intensely that the United States is involved, the worse the outcome is likely to be. This is because of the deep-rooted fears in the Islamic world of American hegemony and intrusion, and the much-mentioned but nevertheless real “kiss of death” (which can be lessened when America pursues a more respectful and effective foreign policy than that on display in the last eight years, but is unlikely ever to go away given the realities of power and vulnerability in today’s international system). It is also because America’s involvement inevitably turns the struggle into one between the United States and Islam—precisely the “clash of civilizations” narrative preferred by al Qaeda and that American public diplomacy should be striving to undermine.

There are at least three different conceptions of the “war of ideas,” all of which move beyond the traditional conception of public diplomacy as explaining American policy and values to foreign publics.

The first, which emerged powerfully in the later portion of the Bush administration, is rooted in counterterrorism, and involves a narrow campaign to marginalize al Qaeda and delegitimize violent extremism. As the most influential proponent of this perspective, former under secretary of state for public diplomacy James Glassman, put it,

While educational exchanges and other such efforts seek over the long term to encourage foreigners to adopt more generally favorable views of the United States, the war of ideas today should have a different, specific focus. The aim must be to ensure that negative sentiments and day-to-day grievances toward the U.S. and its allies do not manifest themselves in violence. We want to create an environment hostile to violent extremism, especially by severing links between al Qaeda and like-minded groups and their target audiences.²

Glassman is very clear about the difference between the “war of ideas” and traditional public diplomacy: “the aim of the war of ideas is *not* to persuade foreign populations to adopt more favorable views of the United States and its policies. Instead, the war of ideas tries to ensure that negative sentiments and day-to-day grievances toward the United States and its allies do not manifest themselves in the form of violent extremism.”³ This is the appropriate domain of “strategic communications,” but should be only a minor, secondary sliver of the larger portfolio—because, most fundamentally, al Qaeda could be completely defeated without the United States winning in the areas that matter. Below, I argue that this campaign is going rather well, only partly because of anything the United States has done.

The second is the vastly ambitious campaign to spread liberal values through the Islamic world, bringing about fundamental changes in Arab and Muslim political cultures and promoting Western civilization. While I am broadly sympathetic to the aspirations of many advocates of this campaign, I also believe that it is well beyond the capabilities of the U.S. government, can only be conceived as a long-term campaign rather than a short-term political

campaign, and must be carefully circumscribed to avoid triggering defensive reactions. The United States, whether the Pentagon or the State Department, is almost uniquely poorly positioned to “reform Islam,” to “promote moderate readings of the Qur’an,” to “combat *salafi* interpretations of Islamic tradition,” or any of the other ideas often on offer in the “war of ideas” industry—and trying to do so is likely to discredit the approved carriers of the message and to ignite fierce opposition. At any rate, the foundations upon which to build such a strategy are far too weak today to be effective—the less than 10 percent who in surveys say that sharia should not play a role in law, the “secular Muslims” featured in many conferences—and are a fool’s errand for any concrete strategic policy. Rather than try to choose sides aggressively in intra-Muslim debates, this level should involve a long-term campaign aimed at building foundations of civil society, tolerance, and public freedoms—not as part of the war of ideas or war on terror, but for its own sake. It is not clear that government should take the lead on this, and certainly not the Pentagon. The strategic imperative should be to ensure that this is not perceived as a war on Islam, and that it be viewed as a partnership with Islam to strengthen and support the aspirations of Muslims and Arabs.

Third, and by far the most important, is broad-based engagement across the mainstream of Arab and Muslim political societies with the goal of explaining American policies, building support where possible while building networks and relationships of mutual respect. This should involve sustained and productive dialogue with those with whom we disagree, whether states or publics, secularists or Islamists. It also requires serious changes in policy to give substance to the dialogues—full engagement on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, careful management of the withdrawal from Iraq, and openings to Syria, Iran, and others. As discussed below, the Obama administration has made a strong beginning, but will require the full-scale support of the bureaucracies for what has thus far been primarily a White House initiative. The State Department and not the Pentagon should have the lead, while the National Security Council should play a strong role in coordinating and guiding the activities of both to ensure that the resource advantage inevitably enjoyed by the Defense Department does not warp the mission unintentionally.

The Challenge: From Radicalism to Resistance

The dominant approach to the war of ideas after 9/11 took the form of what I would call “lumping”: conceptualizing the Islamist threat as a single, undifferentiated challenge in which internal divisions are primarily over tactics. The lumpers tend to be attracted to cultural explanations for “why they hate us,” and to see all Islamist groups, whatever their surface differences, as engaged in a single jihad. “The crux of the debate between al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood [MB] is not over the ends,” such analysts argue, “but rather the means by which to realize the greater goal of Islamic governance throughout the Muslim world.”⁴ Even differences as obvious as Sunni-Shia divisions pale for the more extreme lumpers, for whom Islamist extremism is its own sufficient category. For lumpers, the appropriate response is a full-bore confrontation with Islamism in all of its manifestations. The advantage of the lumping approach is

that it focuses attention on the very real sharp antagonism between American foreign policy and most Islamist movements, and the essential shared attitudes of many of them. The disadvantage is that it squanders opportunities to divide and conquer, obscures very real and crucially significant differences among them, magnifies the challenges, and unintentionally strengthens the hand of our most radical adversaries. Liberal or “secular” trends in the Arab and Islamic world are exceedingly weak; what sense does it make to build a grand strategy on a base that might be measured in public opinion surveys as a residual category?

The second approach, which has gained increasing acceptance over the last few years, might be called “splitting”—seeing the internal differences among Islamist groups as extremely significant both analytically and politically. In this view, the differences among Islamist groups go beyond tactics, and extend to fundamentally different approaches to politics, society, and the use of violence. The advantage of the splitting approach is that it undermines al Qaeda’s polarizing worldview, takes advantage of the intense internal conflicts between al Qaeda and its Islamist adversaries, and opens up new opportunities for policy. Hamas and Hezbollah are problems, but they are very different problems from al Qaeda and are not reducible to Iranian interests—and it does no good to group them together under a common label.

Indeed, taking seriously the cliché that the real battle is inside of the Islamic world virtually requires a “splitters” approach. Indeed, even lumpers claim to be splitters—they just draw the lines on one extreme, and view groups like the MB as part of the problem (“nonviolent extremists”) rather than as part of the solution. There is no question about the Brotherhood’s deep conservatism and commitment to Islamizing the public realm, as well as its enthusiastic support for Hamas and for the insurgency in Iraq. But for splitters, a wide range of conflicts capture attention—the MB’s embrace of democratic participation, its rejection of violence against civilians in the West, and its ideological rejection of al Qaeda’s extreme brand of salafi jihadism. The disadvantage is that it may lead the United States to support groups that could prove problematic in the future, or strengthen cultural or political trends that conflict with American liberal values.

Generally speaking, the shift from “lumping” to “splitting” within the U.S. government probably roughly coincided with the experience in Iraq, where an undifferentiated “al Qaeda” enemy gave way to a much more nuanced understanding of the internal competition and ideological differences among insurgency factions and tribal groupings that facilitated the “Awakenings” strategy, turning “former” insurgents against the hardest-line al Qaeda factions. The Iraq experience showed graphically the tactical value of careful exploration of the lines of division within Islamist movements. Years of undifferentiated warfare against an insurgency seen as monolithic and infused with radical extremist ideology only strengthened that insurgency, while the decision to work with the “Awakenings” and to cooperate with “former” insurgents proved far more effective (at least in the short run). The same logic could be applied to the “war of ideas”: differentiating carefully among different groups, splitting where possible, and forming tactical alliances to marginalize and defeat the most dangerous

adversaries. If such an approach worked in Iraq, why not try it not only in Afghanistan but in the Islamic world as a whole?

Al Qaeda: The Case for Its Decline

While al Qaeda appropriately remains a primary focus of counterterrorism, and remains strong in some ways, as a political force in the Arab world it has lost considerable ground over the last few years. This is in large part due to its declining ability to claim effectively the mantle of generic resistance to the United States or to promote its unitary, clash-of-civilizations narrative.

Al Qaeda is still an active and dangerous organization, capable of doing harm. But in the Arab world, at least, it is virtually unrecognizable from its post-9/11 profile. It has become more South Asian in its orientation, which for Arab audiences might as well be on the moon. It has become more ideologically pure, at the expense of its mass appeal, while its “near enemy” attacks have mobilized outrage in virtually every instance. Its media units produce more and more material, to less and less effect, while the fragmentation and competition of the Arab mass media deny it access to the kind of unified public that it seized after 9/11. Iraq has gone from an unmitigated blessing to a serious problem, with the backlash against its attacks on Shia civilians and the confusion sown by its falling-out with other Sunni insurgency factions and tribal groups. And finally, it has found itself on the wrong side of virtually every major issue for Arab publics in the last few years—with its anti-Shiism putting it in stark opposition to those who admire Iran and Hezbollah, and its feuds with Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood putting it at odds with virtually all of mainstream Arab public opinion.

While U.S. strategic communications efforts may have helped along these trends, for the most part they were the product of the Arab world’s own internal dynamics—as Arab regimes such as the Saudis and popular Arab movements like the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas turned against al Qaeda out of their own self-interest. Al Qaeda thrived after 9/11 by hijacking the popular issues about which mass Arab publics cared—Palestine, Iraq, Arab despotism—but over the last few years has lost its ability to claim this mantle of generalized resistance. The key for American strategy against al Qaeda must be to expose it for the marginal, radical fringe that it is—while demonstrating, as we did in Iraq, that the United States is able and willing to work respectfully with less radical forces even if they are Islamists.

The Muslim Brotherhood Question

The Muslim Brotherhood, the largest and most influential mass-based Islamist movement in the Arab world, poses a unique challenge to efforts to combat al Qaeda and like-minded groups. It is one of the key sources of Islamist thought and political activism, with organizations in almost every country in the world and a sophisticated political and social infrastructure.⁵ It plays a crucial role in promoting Islamic consciousness and organizing political activism in a wide range of countries, particularly in the Arabic-speaking world. At the same time, the MB has consistently denounced al Qaeda’s ideology and terrorist activities, and offers a significantly different vision of an Islamic state from that favored by salafi-jihadist groups. As an Islamist movement with global reach and a

message that resonates widely with Arab publics, the MB represents the strongest challenger to al Qaeda and like-minded groups within Islamist politics. Its leaders speak the language of democracy, reject extremism and *takfir*, and advocate peaceful political participation, yet the MB remains deeply committed to spreading a conservative vision of Islamic society and its cadres are deeply hostile to Israel and to American foreign policy.

The long-latent conflict between the MB and al Qaeda has emerged over the last few years as a central cleavage in Islamist politics, driven by intense disagreements over Iraq, Palestine, the Shia question, and the legitimacy of participation in democratic elections. Al Qaeda leaders from Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza al-Muhajjir have sharpened their long-standing animus against the MB into a more global critique. In a series of tapes and writings, al-Zawahiri savaged Hamas and the Egyptian MB for their participation in elections and public life. Al-Baghdadi and al-Muhajjir identified the MB as the driving force behind the setbacks of the jihad in Iraq, pointing not only to the Iraqi Islamic Party but also to a wide range of other Islamist adversaries lumped together into the MB label.

The MB therefore poses the question very directly: should the United States seek to take advantage of this intra-Islamist conflict, or should it seek to combat all forms of Islamism? If the goal is marginalizing al Qaeda, then the MB is a tacit ally as it wages its ideological and organizational battles. If the goal is to promote secularism and liberalism, then the MB is a tenacious adversary as it seeks to promote cultural conservatism. And if the goal is to transcend the rhetoric of “resistance,” then the MB should be ground zero of the campaign to persuade, engage, and compete.

“Resistance”: The Real Challenge

The shift to “resistance” and the Muslim Brotherhood’s pivotal role both point to the new challenges the Obama administration confronts. Al Qaeda’s decline doesn’t mean that support for American foreign policy is rising. It has always been the case that al Qaeda can lose without the United States “winning” with the mainstream publics that most matter. Indeed, despite some optimism over Obama’s election and appreciation of his outreach efforts, thanks in large part to Israel’s recent war with Gaza the spirit of “resistance” is strong and rising. Responding effectively to that requires different tools and conceptual frameworks from those that were appropriate for the struggle against al Qaeda.

Al Qaeda offered a radical religious ideology that sought to hijack popular political issues to broaden its appeal, and primarily drew upon a small, marginal fringe of Arab and Muslim societies. It had no political demands that could be addressed. But today’s discourse of resistance is mass based rather than concentrated in a small radicalized fringe, and is fundamentally political rather than religious. Anger over the invasion of Iraq, outrage over Guantánamo, and outrage over Israel were widespread, majority attitudes with mass publics. That means a political response, not a response focused on delegitimizing violent extremism, and a public diplomacy oriented toward mass publics rather than strategic communications oriented toward a concentrated, marginal niche.

The focus of our engagement with the Muslim world must be to reframe and transcend the binary oppositions that fuel the appeal of the advocates of resistance. That engagement must be oriented not toward “counter-radicalization” but toward public arguments about the political issues about which mass publics and elites care—whether through traditional means such as broadcasting and appearances on satellite television or massively ramped-up exchange programs, or through Internet-based new media technologies. Either way, such a “great conversation” will have to tackle head-on the major political issues—above all, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where the Obama administration should be and is taking a very public lead role in pushing for a just two-state solution—and cannot simply be about combating “radicalism” or even about “Islam.”

America’s public engagement in this environment should—and will—focus less upon al Qaeda and more on building broad support for American foreign policy goals, establishing long-term foundations of trust and mutual respect, supporting engagement with potential adversaries, and moving beyond the counterproductive binary oppositions and threat inflation that have blocked progress for so many years.

Framing the region’s politics as a binary choice between Israel and the United States versus Iran would repeat the mistakes of the early post-9/11 years—inflating the strength of the adversary and choosing unnecessary battles by making it about “us.” The lessons of the last few years should be that the better approach is to take away the appeal of “resistance” by reframing the confrontation, disaggregating the challenge, and dealing pragmatically with the political issues rather than engaging in rhetorical wars of ideas. Riding the tiger of anti-Iranian sentiment would be counterproductive—increasing rather than decreasing Iran’s appeal in the region, strengthening its most repressive and autocratic forces, and sharply conflicting with President Obama’s vision for the region.

How can Obama defuse the “resistance” discourse and genuinely transform the political contours of America’s engagement with the Middle East? Obama’s election and successful early outreach—including his much-anticipated speech to the Islamic world scheduled for June 5 in Cairo—helps, but only so much. To change attitudes will require a new form of engagement that adopts a genuinely different approach, as outlined in this paper. And above all, it requires serious changes in policy to give substance to the dialogues. It is here where the Obama administration has made a strong beginning: high-level engagement on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, announcement of a withdrawal from Iraq, direct outreach to the Islamic world, the closure of Guantánamo and renunciation of torture. The new approach to engagement and public diplomacy should be directly and forcefully integrated into the policy process to ensure that they work together to the vital strategic goal of reducing the political appeal of the “resistance” discourse with Arab and Muslim publics and offering a constructive, positive alternative vision of partnership.

Notes

1. "Remarks by President Obama to the Turkish Parliament" (Ankara, Turkey, April 6, 2009), available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Obama-To-The-Turkish-Parliament/.
2. James K. Glassman, "How to Win the War of Ideas," *Wall Street Journal*, June 24, 2008, p. A19.
3. James Glassman, "Winning the War of Ideas" (speech, Washington Institute for Near East Forum Special Policy Forum, July 8, 2008).
4. Lydia Khalil, "Al-Qaeda & the Muslim Brotherhood: United by Strategy, Divided by Tactics," *Terrorism Monitor* 4, no. 6 (March 23, 2006), available at [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=714](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=714).
5. Mona El-Ghobashy, "The Metamorphosis of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37 (2005), pp. 373–395; Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam* (Columbia University Press, 2001); Bruce Rutherford, *After Mubarak* (Princeton: 2008); Marc Lynch, *The Brotherhood's Dilemma*, Middle East Brief 25 (Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University, January 2008).