

Proposal: Develop Research-Proven Strategies to Undermine Public Support for Terrorists' Violent Ideology in the Muslim World

Widespread empathy for terrorist organizations' violent ideology and tactics exists in many Muslim countries, creating an environment conducive to terrorist recruitment and resistant to collaboration in the war against these violent extremists. Recognizing such attitudes as a major threat to the safety of American civilians and military personnel, the federal government has increased funding for "public diplomacy" -- i.e. countering extremist propaganda through direct, positive communication with Muslim civilians -- by 40 percent since September 11, 2001 to \$1.3 billion government wide. The 9/11 Commission, the Pentagon's Defense Science Board, and others have urged that public diplomacy be made a top national security priority, and have found our past diplomacy efforts to be ineffective in countering Islamic extremist propaganda.

These developments have spawned a wide range of U.S. public diplomacy strategies for improving the image of the United States in the Muslim world, such as: expanding student exchange programs; funding schools run by moderate Muslims to provide alternatives to those run by Islamic extremists; building libraries in Muslim communities where people can learn about American culture and history; and conducting media campaigns emphasizing how terrorist attacks harm innocent civilians. But none of these strategies have ever been rigorously evaluated, making it impossible to determine which are truly effective in diminishing public support for Islamic extremists, as well as the dangerous influence they exert over many governments in the Muslim world.

This paper (i) discusses the urgent need for research-proven public diplomacy strategies to undermine public support for terrorist ideology in Muslim countries; and (ii) outlines how rigorous evaluations capable of identifying such strategies could readily be built into America's public diplomacy efforts.

The Problem: Widespread public support for terrorists' violent ideology in a number of Muslim countries, and virtually no evidence about what works to combat it.

A. For example, a Pew Research Center survey (June 2005) found alarming levels of popular support for terrorists' violent ideology in several countries:

- Approximately half of those surveyed in Lebanon, Morocco, and Jordan view suicide attacks on American and Western targets in Iraq as justified.
- Majorities of those surveyed in Jordan (60%) and Pakistan (51%) were confident that Osama Bin Laden would "do the right thing regarding world affairs."

B. Public diplomacy strategies intended to mitigate support for terrorists have not been rigorously evaluated, making it impossible to know which are effective. Recognizing this as a problem, the 9/11 Commission has called for "standards for performance in the war against Islamic terrorism," and the 2004 Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act requires that the President establish "benchmarks for measuring success" in winning the "struggle of ideas in the Islamic world." At present we have many reasonable hypotheses about which public diplomacy strategies are effective, but science and social science are full of examples of ideas that sounded reasonable yet proved ineffective when subjected to rigorous evaluations.

Without such evaluations, the United States will spend hundreds of millions of dollars implementing public diplomacy strategies that may be ineffective or even counterproductive. Meanwhile, the lives of Americans in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the United States, as well as innocent civilians around the world, are at stake. Identifying effective public diplomacy strategies must be a top national priority.

The Opportunity: Rigorous, well-controlled studies could *for the first time* build the scientifically-valid knowledge needed to undermine public support in the Muslim world for terrorists' violent ideology.

A. Controlled studies, particularly well-designed randomized controlled trials, are considered the gold standard for evaluating an intervention's effectiveness in many fields of human inquiry.

The most well-controlled studies – randomized controlled trials – randomly assign a large number of individuals to either a group that receives the intervention (e.g., a medical therapy, job training program) or a control group that does not. This random assignment process ensures, to a high degree of confidence, that there are no systematic differences between the groups in any characteristics except one – namely, the intervention group participates in the intervention, and the control group does not. Therefore, the resulting difference in outcomes between the two groups can confidently be attributed to the intervention and not to other factors.

B. Well-controlled studies have been the key to rapid progress in other fields – such as medicine and welfare policy -- by generating conclusive evidence on “what works.”

In medicine, randomized controlled trials have provided the conclusive evidence of effectiveness for most of the major medical advances over the past 50 years, including: (i) vaccines for polio, measles, and hepatitis B; (ii) treatments for hypertension and high cholesterol, which in turn have helped bring about a decrease in coronary heart disease and stroke by more than 50% over the past half-century; and (iii) cancer treatments that have dramatically improved survival rates from leukemia, Hodgkin's disease, breast cancer, and many other cancers.

Similarly, in U.S. welfare policy, randomized controlled trials over the past 25 years have succeeded in building a valuable knowledge base on what works in moving people from welfare to work and in improving family well-being. This knowledge was a key to the political consensus behind the 1988 welfare reform law and helped shape the 1996 act, leading to major reductions in welfare rolls and gains in employment among low-income Americans.

Such studies have also produced scientifically-valid knowledge about what works in such diverse policy areas as education, mental health, crime and substance abuse prevention, and international poverty reduction.

C. Well-controlled studies of public diplomacy strategies are often feasible and could produce valid knowledge about what works in undermining public support for terrorist ideology.

The following is a concrete illustration of how such a study could be used to evaluate a public diplomacy effort.

- 1) **Identify a well-defined, promising public diplomacy intervention or interventions** (e.g. funding schools run by moderate Muslims, or conducting media campaigns emphasizing the harm terrorism causes innocent civilians).
- 2) **Identify communities where support for violence against Americans is known to exist.**
- 3) **Randomly assign these communities to a group that receives the public diplomacy intervention or a control group that does not.** (Alternatively, the study could evaluate the relative effectiveness of two interventions by randomly assigning communities to receive one or the other.) Random assignment of communities is feasible and has been successfully executed in

large-scale randomized controlled trials of the PROGRESA anti-poverty program in Mexico, as well as community policing strategies in the United States.

- 4) **Conduct baseline and follow-up surveys to measure community residents' attitudes towards terrorism and the United States over time.** As an illustrative example, the survey could ask respondents whether they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with statements such as the following:

- The United States is at war with Islam;
- Suicide bombers are worthy of admiration;
- The Koran does not justify attacks against non-Muslim civilians;
- Osama Bin Laden is a moral leader.

In so doing, one could measure how community attitudes conducive to terrorist recruitment change over time, and, because of the random assignment process, could confidently attribute any difference in attitudes between the intervention and control communities to the intervention. As noted above, the Pew Research Center already conducts surveys in Muslim countries asking these types of questions, and perhaps a similar instrument could be used in a randomized controlled trial to measure outcomes.

Our Proposal: Set aside a small percentage (2-3%) of public diplomacy funds government-wide to conduct rigorous studies – particularly randomized controlled trials – of promising interventions. These evaluations should be a national security priority, as they would produce the critical evidence the United States needs to effectively undermine public support for terrorism -- support which now damages our ability to gain cooperation in the war against violent extremists, and may indeed be feeding terrorist recruitment.