WINNING THE "WAR ON TERRORISM": A FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT STRATEGY

Anthony H. Cordesman

Dr. Cordesman holds the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy, Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The latest events in Somalia are yet another warning that the United States, its Western allies and Islamic nations need to change their strategies to win the "war on terrorism." The basic lessons have been the same in Iraq, Afghanistan and throughout the Islamic world. The present mix of Western action and Islamic inaction cannot possibly win.

Part of the problem is conceptual. The United States and most Western nations may be "politically correct" when they call the current struggle a "long war" or "global war on terrorism," but the reality is very different. Most terrorism is a minor and largely national threat. The real threat is Islamic extremism, specifically neo-Salafi Sunni Islamist extremism. The violent transnational movements that support these beliefs, symbolized by al-Qaeda, are the only serious global threat that uses terrorism. Isolated terrorist movements do need to be defeated, but Irish, Spanish, secular Palestinian, Sri Lankan, Japanese and other such groups are peripheral threats at most.

Recognizing this fact, and focusing on it, is critical to any hope of winning the real "war on terrorism." The struggle is religious and ideological, not military or driven by secular values. It is a struggle for the future of Islam, and it is not generic, global or focused on political or economic systems.

As such, the real war on terrorism can only be won within Islam and at a religious and ideological level. This does not mean that improving every aspect of counter-terrorism at the national, regional and global level is not important. It does mean that no amount of outside action by the United States, Europe or non-Islamic states can do more than partially contain the violence. It is only the religious, political and intellectual leaders of Islamic countries and communities, particularly in the Arab world, that can successfully engage and defeat Islamic extremism at a religious, intellectual, political and cultural level.

LIMITS OF WESTERN MILITARY INTERVENTION

The West does need to actively protect itself against terrorism and try to deny movements like al-Qaeda sanctuaries in such places as Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia. Whether or not anyone likes the word "war," Islamist extremist violence is so dangerous that it must be met with force. The current efforts to transform U.S. and other Western forces in order to

give them better area and language skills and true expertise in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism are also vital.

The West needs to understand, however, that none of these measures will ever enable the West to "win." They at best enable Western forces to score limited tactical victories, help local forces contain major terrorist movements, defend home territory and buy time. If the West seeks to use major long-term deployments of U.S., British or other non-Islamic forces to fight sustained struggles in Islamic countries, the end result will be to breed new extremists and terrorists. As Afghanistan and Iraq have shown, military and counterterrorist battles need to be won by local and Islamic forces, not "occupiers," "crusaders" and "neo-imperialists."

There are too many memories of colonialism, and there is too much anger against U.S. ties to Israel, for Western forces to succeed unless they act in alliance with local forces and local governments that are clearly sovereign. Moreover, even the United States will never be able to deploy the number of needed troops or have enough forces with necessary language skills and area expertise. It will always have to rotate too much of its force too quickly to build up the personal relationships critical to success.

Islamist extremists have already shown how well they can exploit any long-term presence of "outside" forces. But Western efforts to train and equip effective local forces have a very different effect. They can create enough local forces to do the job, and such forces will start with all the necessary area and language skills and personal relationships, and be able to stay on the scene. Moreover, Western military, counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and intelligence training and advisory efforts can introduce methods and tactics that show proper respect for human rights and the rule of law in those cases where such reform is necessary.

NEED TO CHANGE THE U.S. IMAGE

From a purely American perspective, the United States needs to understand that it can only use its influence and its counterterrorism and military capabilities if it changes its image in the Islamic world. The importance of changing the U.S. image does, however, go far beyond public diplomacy. In fact, it is important to all Western efforts to push for reform in the Middle East and essential to "winning" the global campaign against counterterrorism. While U.S. public diplomacy has been a failure, it is the policies that are being communicated that create the problem, and not the way they are being "sold."

The American image in the Islamic and Arab worlds is a key factor in building popular support and tolerance for extremist and terrorism movements. This anger against the United States is not directed at its values or "democracy," but rather at tangible issues like the U.S. role in the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Iraq War, and other U.S. policies in the Middle East. It is shaped by the perception that the U.S. reaction to 9/11 has gone beyond counterterrorism to a broad hostility to Islam and Arabs.

Such anger does not mean that the United States should change its core policies in any of these areas, but leaders in the administration and Congress, as well as the American people, must understand the impact of such U.S. actions in the Islamic and Arab world. One key to winning the real

war on terrorism is to do everything possible to execute U.S. policies in ways that minimize their negative impact in the region.

Another key is the Arab-Israeli peace process. Most Arabs have reluctantly come to accept the reality that the United States is, and will remain, an ally of Israel. What they will not accept is what appears to be a passive or one-sided U.S. approach to the Arab-Israeli peace process. The perception in the Muslim world is that the United States cannot be even-handed in seeking peace because administration after administration has taken the Israeli point of view.

It is fair to say that the Arab and Islamic approach to an Arab-Israeli peace has been at least as biased and often drifted towards rejection of Israel's right to exist. The fault is scarcely American alone. From a practical point of view, however, what matters to both Israel and Arabs is a just and lasting peace. While that may or may not be possible at a time when Israel and the Palestinians are fighting a war of attrition that has now lasted half a decade, it is clear that a good-faith and high-profile U.S. effort to constantly push both sides towards peace will go a long way in persuading many people in the Muslim world who are on the margin. This is a key to easing Islamic and Arab anger towards both the United States and other Western states.

Islamic and Arab perceptions of the war in Iraq are an equally serious cause of anger and the tolerance or support for Islamic extremism and terrorism. Once again, both U.S. intentions and actions create the problem. The United States may think in terms of democracy, but many in the Islamic world see a crusader and neo-imperialist attack from outside the Islamic and Arab world. This has been compounded by the fact that (1) weapons of mass destructions were not found, (2) the

insurgency has been increasingly dominated by those who claim to speak for all of Islam, and (3) the Iraqi people are suffering profoundly.

These attitudes usually ignore the fact that the war has happened and cannot be undone and that a U.S. presence in Iraq is now essential to keeping the country together and insuring regional stability. The United States, however, needs to be far more visible in seeking to aid the Iraqi people, to create a fully sovereign Iraqi government, and to commit itself to leave without seeking bases or any control over Iraqi oil.

The U.S. focus on the role Iraq now plays in the larger war on terror is valid, but far too many see this nearly monolithic focus on terrorism, military victory, and imposing an American political system as proof that the invasion of Iraq was motivated by concern for Israel's security, Iraq's oil and the quest for military bases in the region. Once again, the United States does not need to change its core policies, but it needs to give the highest possible visibility to aiding the Iraqi people, deferring to a sovereign Iraqi government, and showing that Iraqi oil is for the Iraqis and that Washington has no intention of maintaining any military presence that the Iraqi government does not need or want.

Far more important than any such policy pronouncements, however, is a policy that there must be no more Abu Ghraibs or Hadithas. Mistakes in war will happen, and history is full of such mistakes. The implications, however, of mistakes like Haditha go beyond their tactical importance in the field. Such mistakes cut to the heart of the U.S. posture in the region — the way Iraqis, Arabs and Muslims see the United States — and they are used repeat-

edly by al-Qaeda and other extremists groups as rallying cries for recruitment. Both the war in Iraq and the war on terrorism are religious, political and ideological battles. Every American abuse of the values the United States stands for does far more harm in losing this battle than any direct act of treason.

POLITICAL REFORM: EVOLUTIONARY CHANGE

More generally, the United States and its Western allies need to understand that the wrong kinds of efforts to "reform" the Middle East can lose the war on terrorism at precisely the ideological, political, cultural and religious levels where it must be won. Like it or not, the short- and mid-term battles against Islamist extremism and the day-to-day action in counterterrorism are going to have to be won or lost by existing regimes. Creating open-ended political instability and its consequent broad popular hostility cannot win a religious and ideological struggle fought out by those with a different culture and faith.

Western efforts to push instant political change and "democracy" are more dangerously self-defeating than Western efforts to use military force. As Algeria, Iraq, Kuwait, the Palestinians and Saudi Arabia have shown, elections do not mean progress unless there are national political movements that advocate practical courses of action. Electing Islamists and/or provoking civil war do not bring political stability and cannot defeat a religious and ideological movement. "Democracy" can only make things better if it is built on sound political and legal checks and balances that protect minorities and prevent demagogues and extremists from coming to power. Elections do more harm that good if they

divide a nation in ways that encourage violence and civil conflict.

As Iraq has shown all too clearly, the long history of sectarian violence and tribal wars has not been erased from the minds of much of the Middle East. Western efforts to achieve instant democracy can easily provoke a crisis in traditional societies. Where parties do not now exist, rushing to create them will result in entities that are sectarian, ethnic or tribal in character. Where they do exist, the better-organized and disciplined parties will come to power. In most cases, such parties have an Islamist nature: Hamas, Egyptian Islamic Jihad and the Islamist parties in Kuwait.

Efforts by "occupiers," "crusaders" and "neo-imperialists" to impose change from the outside, rather than encourage it from within, cannot succeed. In fact, neo-Salafi Islamist extremists often do a fine job of using such efforts to discredit internal reform efforts and reformers. Furthermore, the West needs to accept the fact that an evolutionary approach to change means working with many local leaders who are not democratic, fall short of Western ideals or are "traditional" in character. Calls for regime change and other efforts that introduce political instability and produce more resistance to reform will do far more harm than good.

Political reform must be built on a foundation of moderate political parties, a real rule of law, and a respect for human rights that protects all but the most extreme voices in a society. Developing a true culture of political participation will take a decade or more. Most of the impetus for political reform also must come from within and be led by local political leaders and reformers.

LOCAL VERSUS OUTSIDE REFORM: THE LIMITS TO "DRAINING THE SWAMP"

It is equally impractical to call for rapid economic, social and demographic reform to remove the causes of terrorism. In practice, such calls to "drain the swamp" and eliminate popular support for extremism are at best a well-meant fantasy. The demographics of virtually all Arab and Islamic states have already created a youth explosion of new students and entrants to the labor force that will be a major problem for the next two decades.

Economies, societies and birth rates do not change quickly. They can only change in ways that bring internal stability if change is in response to internal political and social dynamics that move at a measured pace. As is the case with political reform, the West can do a great deal over time by working with moderate political leaders and local reformers, by focusing on the internal dynamics and windows of opportunity in individual nations, and by supporting what is really practical to accomplish. The West cannot, however, "win" by calling for instant change; efforts to impose change from the outside only provide the enemy with fresh ammunition.

It also cannot win with broad efforts at public diplomacy, regional meetings and initiatives, or with part-time efforts. At least in the case of the United States, it is going to take strong embassy teams that work hard, country by country, and tailor their actions to what can be achieved and what is productive, case by case. Clear national strategies will be needed for military and counterterrorism cooperation and advisory efforts, for supporting balanced political reform at the pace a given nation can accept, and for balancing political reform with economic, social and demographic reform.

Both governments and analysts in the West need to understand that people in the Islamic world do not make politics or Western approaches to human rights their main priority. They are looking for personal security, jobs, education for their children, health care and other government services. The key to defeating Islamic extremism — and the broad popular base that sympathizes with it — comes, first, from providing popular security without oppression and, then, from providing economic opportunity for both today's workers and their children. Survey after survey has shown this. It does not make those in the region who call for political change and sweeping human-rights reforms unimportant; they are voices that will help shape the long-term future of the Islamic world. But, first things first.

Regional policies, meetings and slogans will not deal with real-world needs or provide the kind of dialogue with local officials and reformers, tailored pressure and aid, and country-specific plans and policies that are needed. Strong country teams both in Washington and in U.S. embassies are the keys to success. Quiet, steady advocacy and well-staffed and funded efforts tailored to a given country should replace noisy, episodic, region-wide pressures and demands.

Above all, successful efforts at counterterrorism, reform and public diplomacy must have a national focus. The Arab and Islamic worlds are not monolithic. In fact, country-to-country differences are generally far greater than in the West. Each country requires different kinds of help in counterterrorism and in moving towards reform.

Some countries need help in reforming their political process and enhancing citizen participation; others need help dealing with economic development; still others need special attention to demographic dynamics and population control. The West, therefore, must avoid any generalized strategy of dealing with the Arab-Islamic world as one entity and making policy pronouncements that are as vague as they are unhelpful to local reformers who have been working on their societies for decades.

BURDEN IS ON ISLAMIC NATIONS AND COMMUNITIES

At the same time, this critique of the U.S. and Western approach to winning the long war in no way means that the political, religious and intellectual leaders in Islamic nations do not have to make even more striking changes in their behavior. There is no room for tolerance of inaction or political and religious cowardice within the Islamic world.

The real "war on terrorism" can only be won if the religious, political and intellectual leaders of Islamic countries and communities actively confront and fight neo-Salafi Sunni Islamist extremism at the religious and ideological level. It will be lost if such leaders stand aside, take half measures, or compromise with enemies that seek to destroy them and what they believe in. It will be lost if they deny that the real issue is the future of Islam, if they tolerate Islamist violence and terrorism when it strikes at unpopular targets like Israel, or if they continue to try to export the blame for their own failures to other nations, religions and cultures.

One message the United States and the West need to firmly communicate to the religious, political and intellectual leaders of Muslim countries and communities is that they cannot be passive or hope to have this struggle won from the outside. No strategy can succeed that is not based on their willingness to take an active role and on their broad acceptance of the fact that this is a war within a religion, not a clash between civilizations. The war to defeat Islamic extremism can only be won at a religious and ideological level if every religious, political and intellectual leader makes the choice to actively engage Islamic extremism rather than engage in cowardice and self-defeat.

Islamic regimes can only win their part of the war if they accept the fact that repression, counterterrorism and the stifling of local reform efforts ultimately aid the very Islamist extremists they are trying to defeat. Algeria, Egypt and Syria have already shown that "long wars" fought on this basis may bring the threat under partial control but cannot defeat it.

If the West has pushed too hard, too quickly, and sometimes for the wrong things, the Muslim or Arab leader who tries to defeat Islamic extremism by blocking or delaying reform or by making concessions to Islamic extremism is guilty of committing self-inflicted wounds to his own faith and country — a failure far worse than any failure of Western states.

The Muslim world is starting to deal with these failures, although several decades after the fact. In December 2005, the Organization of the Islamic Conference met in Mecca and issued a clear statement advocating moderation. The Mecca declaration read in part, "...We reaffirm our unwavering rejection of terrorism and all forms of extremism and violence." In addition, the declaration endorsed the creation of an International Counterterrorism Center to improve global cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY AT EVERY LEVEL

The Islamic world, however, must do far more to confront its own failures and stop blaming the West for its self-inflicted wounds. Its leaders must react immediately and decisively every time neo-Salafist terrorists, Islamist Shiites, and other extremist organizations use the Muslim faith as their recruiting platform. While various Muslim leaders have condemned violence against civilians, they have done little to defeat these groups at the ideological level.

Any kind of victory requires a massive additional effort to beat these extremists at their own game by using religious texts and historical facts. Educational and religious reform, use of the media, statements by leaders, sermons, articles, dialogue and intellectual debate are weapons that cannot be ignored. They ultimately will be more important than internal-security forces and counterterrorism campaigns.

The United States has dubbed this struggle a "long war," but this can be a dangerous misnomer. Islamic leaders do not have much time. They confront a world in which Islamic media and the Internet make inaction and attempts at censorship a certain path to losing popular support and seeing extremists gain by default. The religious and ideological struggle needs to be made as short as possible.

Steady progress toward meeting popular needs and goals is equally important. Such progress may often be slow, and change will normally have to be evolutionary, but it must be a constant and publicly credible pursuit that leaders are seen to push forward. Extremists have capitalized on the dissatisfaction of the Arab street and the majority of the Muslim world with their economic and political situation, the steady decay of public services, corruption and the narrow distribution of income. Governments must be more proactive in ensuring personal security, creating jobs, improving education and health care, providing the environment for the private sector to flourish, and ensuring that the rule of law protects property and personal rights.

Islamic regimes also have to at least move towards some form of centrist, moderate political pluralism. Leaders for life, hereditary presidents, one-party systems, and monarchies with captive political parties or none, all have one thing in common. They help breed extremism by denying the rise of moderate Islamic and secular movements that can give local political leaders practical experience and provide a basis for compromise. The tolerance of moderate dissent is another key weapon in the real-world war on terrorism.

The problem is scarcely limited to regimes. Far too many Islamic intellectuals have learned to ignore the candle, live in the dark, and curse the West or outsiders for their plight. They deny the need to shape the future and wallow in the problems of the past. They turn history into a self-inflicted wound and tolerate extremist violence when they perceive it as being directed at their enemies.

Elites in the Muslim world must act on the reality that they cannot survive without contributing to the building of viable civil societies that are sustainable in the long run. Many elites in the Arab and Muslim worlds argue, and rightly so, that the West's push for "democracy" is backfiring. However, they do far too little themselves to provide viable alternatives and put far

too much blame for the current level of stagnation on their own governments. An intellectual or businessman who fails to actively help build viable private sectors, erect educational institutions, and provide employment opportunities for the youth in his own society is little more than a parasite.

Both leaders and elites need far more willingness to try to end regional conflicts in ways that actually benefit the peoples involved. Pretending that the0 conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Darfur and Palestine are the problems of others or are going to solve themselves is not a solution. Blaming the West and waiting for the United States to solve them is no better. Holding summits and issuing declarations has not solved anything for the last 50 years. These conflicts not only have an impact on their Muslim brethren; they can negatively affect their own stability. For example, an Iraq torn by civil war, or disintegrating into three parts, damages not only Iraqis but the lives of those in every country in the Middle East.

NEED FOR CONCERTED ACTION

Terrorism can never be totally eliminated as a tactic, but the ideology that drives organizations like al-Qaeda can be discredited and its promoters isolated. Support for extremism is still marginal in Islamic nations. Bin Laden and Al-Zarqawi have killed innocent civilians including Arabs and Muslims, have tarred the image of Islam in the world through suicide bombings and beheadings, and have destroyed the economies of Iraq and Afghanistan. Poll after poll has shown that Muslims and Arabs want moderate alternatives to the status quo, if their political, religious and intellectual leaders will actually provide them.

The Islamic world has wasted far too much time complaining about history and too little building the future. Arab and Muslim governments must understand that; in order to salvage the image of Islam and insure stability in their countries, they must actively destroy support for Islamist extremism at every level.

The West must join in this struggle, but its role should be to help Islamic nations develop the military and security capabilities they really need and intervene only as allies when absolutely necessary. The West should support long-term sustainable and evolutionary efforts at reform, geared toward helping Islamic nations improve their own economic, political and social systems.

The West must reinforce local reform efforts and avoid being seen as meddling in countries' internal affairs in supporting secular over religious Islamists, driving reform from the outside, or trying to change the character of Muslim countries. It must not be seen as picking sides in the sectarian "game" between Sunnis and Shiites, Arabs and Persians, Afghanis and Pakistanis. To the extent possible, the West must be seen as an even-handed broker in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Both sides, however, need to get their priorities straight. The key to victory is ultimately in Islamic and not Western hands. Implementing a "winning" strategy in this struggle does require mutual cooperation, but the key lies in the ability of those who are part of the Islamic world to exploit the specific limitations and capabilities of the enemy and defeat them at the heart of their ideological arguments — in the mosques, in the classrooms, on the television screens and at all levels of civil society. This is not the job of Westerners, but of Muslim religious leaders, government officials, business executives and intellectuals.