





TERRORISTS EXPLOIT INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES

Use of Strategic Communication Calls for United Response

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On May 3, 2010, Faisal Shahzad, a 30-year-old Pakistani-American, was arrested and accused of planting a car bomb in New York City's Times Square. This failed attack showed once more al-Qaida's ability to recruit self-radicalized adherents. This self-radicalization is partially due to the effective use of strategic communication. For al-Qaida, strategic communication is a vital part of its asymmetrical warfighting campaign. Offsetting this threat requires knowledge of what motivates, feeds and sanctions radical Islamist terrorists and their followers. Research and analysis of the root causes and underlying conditions, motivators and enablers of terrorism — including the propaganda strategies of Islamist terrorists — are vital to shaping appropriate countermeasures to the threat. The mass media, especially the Internet, have become the key enablers and the main strategic communication assets for terrorists and have ensured them a favorable communication asymmetry. With these assets, terrorists are able to compensate for a significant part of their unfavorable asymmetry in military power. Al-Qaida networked terrorists place a great deal of emphasis on developing comprehensive communication strategies to reach their goals and desired ends. They create their strategies

based on careful audience analysis and adapt their messages and delivery accordingly, adhering to the fundamental rules underlying any communication or public relations campaign. Their skillful use of the mass media, cell phones and the Internet to compensate for asymmetrical disadvantages has enabled them to keep creating new generations of radical Islamist terrorists.

The recent fusion of terrorist messages with the global mass media has allowed terrorism to take on a worldwide dimension. In this article, terrorism³ is defined as political violence in an asymmetrical conflict that is designed to induce terror and psychic fear (sometimes indiscriminate) through the violent victimization and destruction of noncombatant targets or iconic symbols. Such acts send a message to a local, national or global community from an illicit, clandestine organization. The purpose of terrorism is to exploit the media to achieve maximum publicity as a force multiplier to influence the targeted audience(s) in pursuit of short- and mid-term political goals and/or desired long-term ends.

Terrorists do not aim primarily at inflicting maximum physical damage with their attacks but rather strive for the greatest possible psychological effect. Terrorism uses a strategy that primarily relies on the symbolic strength

of the act. Thus terror does not primarily serve the purposes of fighting, injuring or destroying the opponent; rather, its primary purpose lies in conveying messages to the target audience(s). Terrorists act without regard to the conventions of warfare. The symbolism originating from terrorist acts and the media marketing thereof are intended to address the public, to use them as a vehicle and a communication channel to influence political representatives, and other target audiences such as potential recruits. Al-Qaida offers a coherent worldview with a simplistic, unitary explanation of ostensibly disparate phenomena that neatly packages the potential recruit's frustrations with the struggles of Muslims across the globe. In these messages, there are only two choices: continue to suffer or join the jihadists and fight.

In this context, I define strategic communication as the systematic planning and realization of information flow, communication, media development and image care with a long-term horizon. It conveys deliberate messages through the most suitable media to designated audiences at the appropriate time to contribute to and achieve the desired long-term effect. It has to bring three factors into balance: the messages, the media channels and the audiences.

This kind of terrorism is ostensibly motivated by an extreme interpretation of Islam. Its practitioners regard the use of violence as a divine duty or sacramental act. Al-Qaida's self-proclaimed goal is to reinvigorate the Islamic *ummah*,⁸ or Muslim community, and to mobilize it in a revolutionary transformation of the Muslim world population in confrontation with the international order embodied by Western society. They strive toward the creation of a new global Islamic caliphate, which Islamist terrorists widely consider the ideal form of government representing the political unity and leadership of the Muslim world. Relying on successful agitation and, increasingly, self-radicalization, they strive to expand the *ummah*. In a 2006 interview, al-Qaida ideologue Abu Musab al-Zarqawi explained the jihadists' goal:

"Our political agenda ... is that of the saying of the Prophet (peace be upon him), I have been sent with the sword, between the hands of the hour, until Allah is worshipped alone ... this is what determines our political goal. We fight in the way of Allah, until the law of Allah is implemented, and the first step is to expel

the enemy, then establish the Islamic state, then we set forth to conquer the lands of Muslims to return them back to us, then after that, we fight the *kuffar* (disbelievers) until they accept one of the three. I have been sent with the sword, between the hands of the hour; this is our political agenda.

Short-term goals

In the short term, the terrorists' aim is to enlarge the scope of their patronage. Therefore, the persuasion and self-radicalization of receptive global Muslim audiences via the heightening of an Islamic identity in confrontation with the West is one of their primary short-term goals.⁹ As Brian Michael Jenkins writes, "the recruiting vocabulary focuses on humiliation, shame and guilt, contrasted with dignity, duty and honor."¹¹ John Venhaus, a career psychological operations officer experienced in foreign media influence operations, adds: "The al-Qaida legend portrays the group as the acme of jihad, and this legend is its greatest asset. It is a glorious, wispy presence, just out of reach, which only the most dedicated, most committed, and purest of heart can hope to obtain."

In addition, the terrorists exploit foreign troop presence and their military actions in the Muslim world to implement their media strategy. The presence of troops in places such as Afghanistan, Iraq and parts of the Caucasus produces the desired graphic footage of the "occupation of Islamic nations" that furthers the terrorists' media-centered strategy. That strategy thrives on images of and words about innocent civilians killed by Western bombs transmitted via television and the Internet, producing intense antipathy toward the West. Building on this, terrorists can more effectively call for the end of foreign influence in Muslim countries. Therefore, even though it is an obvious contradiction, another of their stated short-term goals is to drive those so-called invaders from Muslim nations.

Intermediate and long-term goals

Al-Qaida's midterm goals include the removal of all political leaders who currently govern secular Muslim states and the elimination of the state of Israel. The terrorists aim to install supportive Islamic regimes and transform the current fractious political landscape of the Muslim world from a decentralized network to a massive Islamic movement that strives toward

their desired end. As Abu-t-Tanvir Kavkazskii, a leading ideologist of the Caucasus Emirate Jihadist Network, stated in 2010: “In the near future we can assume that after the liberation of the Caucasus, jihad will begin in Idel-Ural and ... all these lands will again be a united state living only by the law of Allah – the Caliphate.”

Al-Qaida’s primary long-term goal is to create a monolithic Islamic religious and social movement to restore a devout Islamic caliphate by politically uniting all countries with a Muslim majority. The desired end is the worldwide rule of the caliphate. Al-Qaida’s communication strategy is inseparable from its political strategy, as its terrorism and rhetoric work toward common goals. Consequently, its communication goals are based on its short-, mid- and long-term agenda. Its primary long-term strategic communication goal is the propagation and enlargement of its movement through the global dissemination of information among receptive Muslim audiences and potential converts to expand the ummah. The terrorist communication strategy aims ultimately at a fundamental restructuring of the political discourse and identity of the Islamic world.

The legitimization of al-Qaida’s movement and methods — establishing its social and religious viability while engaging in violence — requires continuous communication. Its violent methods and killing of innocents inevitably contradict some of the core tenets of Islam. This built-in drag on the organization’s legitimacy can, in the long run, only be circumvented through an unceasing communication effort in which, as Gabriel Weimann notes, “Violence is presented as a necessity foisted upon the weak as the only means with which to respond to an oppressive enemy.”

Therefore, legitimacy and the ostensible demonstration of compliance with Islamic law are prominent in al-Qaida’s communication strategy. Its utopian goals and Islamist-jihadist worldview fulfill a significant purpose: The utopia is not only the goal of its violence, but also its moral and religious justification. Al-Qaida members try to portray themselves as freedom fighters forced to use violence against a ruthless enemy that is crushing the rights and dignity of their community. They communicate messages to reinvigorate a pan-Muslim identity, using a vengeful, defiant underdog narrative in which Islam is under constant and global attack. This makes legitimization



of their terrorist deeds their second strategic communication goal.

The coercion and intimidation of opponents both at home and abroad is al-Qaida’s third main strategic communication goal. The enemy nearby is composed of apostates, or secular Muslim regimes, especially ones that receive Western (and in the case of the Caucasus, Russian) support. The distant enemy is, in its view, made up of Jews, unbelievers and Western society as a whole. Al-Qaida tries to manipulate the domestic enemy to reach its midterm political goal of removing that enemy from power. It also tries to intimidate the distant enemy to withdraw completely from the Muslim world and to remove support from secular Muslim regimes. That increases Western society’s psychological vulnerability and inspires potential recruits to join the movement. The accomplishment of the desired end — global rule by a devout Islamic caliphate — is the all-embracing, long-term communication goal.

Communication infrastructure

During the 1990s, al-Qaida communicated with its audience using more traditional means such as storytelling, journalist interviews, faxes, face-to-face propaganda, even news conferences. At the end of 1998, there was a shift in strategic communications due to technological advances and the rise of the Al-Jazeera television network. Al-Jazeera became a channel for broadcasting al-Qaida’s messages to the Muslim world and would provide the tapes to CNN and other international news organizations. To a certain extent, the media mutated from its role as critical observer to become active

Hakimullah Mehsud, leader of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, appears in a 9-minute video posted online in May 2010 that threatens suicide attacks in U.S. cities. The group also took responsibility for the failed car bombing in New York City’s Times Square.

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participants in the conflict.

After September 11, 2001, al-Qaida expanded its communication infrastructure and methods considerably. That year saw the formation of the As-Sahab (The Cloud) Foundation for Islamic Media Publication. It is essentially the main media production division of al-Qaida, which relies heavily on the Internet. As of 2007, Mohamed Abayath, aka Abd al-Rahman al Maghrebi, was steering As-Sahab as leader of the al-Qaida media committee. Today, al-Qaida communicates primarily through three media communication channels: Fajr (the first of the five daily prayers), the Global Islamic Media Front and As-Sahab. The organizational structure changed after the loss of Afghanistan as a physical base. The conversion from a clandestine organization to a decentralized, open network represented the Islamist terrorist movement's only possible means of survival. Its previous dependence on traditional broadcast mass media was replaced and its impact was multiplied by its adoption of the Internet as its medium of choice, supplemented by CDs, DVDs, cell phones and night letters.

After losing their base in Afghanistan, al-Qaida members decreased the number of targets in their attacks to about 50 to 200 casualties, illustrated by the bombing of the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad on September 20, 2008. The blast of 600 kilograms of RDX and TNT occurred hours after Pakistan's new president, Asif Ali Zardari, told the Pakistani parliament that the country would continue its fight against terrorism. Bigger and more complex operations with thousands of victims, such as the attacks on the U.S. September 11, 2001, are no longer the operational norm. The risk that operations of this scope could be detected and stopped by law enforcement and intelligence agencies is too great. According to a January 2010 report to the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, intelligence and military officials agree that al-Qaida's capacity to carry out large-scale operations has been significantly degraded. Its financial and popular support is declining and allied operations have killed or captured much of

al-Qaida's leadership. In April 2010, top al-Qaida leaders in Iraq were reported killed in a raid near Tikrit. Many terrorists have taken refuge across the Afghan border in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Authority. This largely remains a major safe haven. According to intelligence and counterterrorism officials, hundreds have relocated to Yemen and Somalia. Both nations have weak central governments that exercise little or no control over vast swaths of their own territory.²⁵ According to Dennis C. Blair, then director of U.S. National Intelligence, al-Qaida "today is less capable and effective than it was a year ago." In June 2009, Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, al-Qaida's leader in Afghanistan, released an audio message begging for money: Al-Qaida members were short of food, weapons and other supplies.

Radical Islamist terrorists now resort to the tactic of "guideless resistance," in which responsibility for planning operations rests solely with the decentralized actor (Abu Musab al Suri wrote a lengthy essay on this scheme). These attacks are increasingly committed by self-radicalized Muslims and converts. Al-Qaida concentrates on producing abstract directives and motivational audio and video calls to steer the movement. Processes running in parallel and coordinated via the World Wide Web enable jihadist terrorists to survive as a loosely connected network. The fusion of cell phones and mass communication, connecting audience members who can be publishers and broadcasters simultaneously via the Web, enhances the echo chamber available to terrorists and greatly increases their audience.

Even though the mainstream media sticks mostly to official news sources, the terrorist message still receives abundant coverage. There is always the imminent danger that the mainstream media will become the outlet for state or terrorist "spin" if journalists' research and investigation does not provide context and depth. The intensive, sometimes obsessive, coverage the media gives to a terrorist act generates the desired psychological effect. Terrorist actions are planned and organized to cause a maximum communicative effect while requiring minimal resources. The symbiotic relationship between terror events and the media is apparent: The perpetrators would have far less impact without media publicity, and the media can hardly be expected to

resist reporting on these events. Terrorists already make abundant use of the Internet for internal and external communication. They raise money, franchise their brand names, lay the basis for self-radicalization to recruit followers, find partners and suppliers, provide training materials through their online library and manage operations. Terrorists capture information about the users who browse their sites. Users who seem to be most interested in the cause or well suited to carry out its work are then contacted. But more often, they try to get in contact with al-Qaida itself. Recruits regularly followed a “bunch of guys,” according to a theory proposed by Marc Sageman. In Sageman’s view, the individual usually seeks information about al-Qaida through friends and associates.

Al-Qaida’s media structure

For years, terrorists could rely on an almost streamlined Islamic media that willingly conveyed desired messages and videotapes and helped terrorist groups build a “brand name.” Until the advent of the Internet, terrorists focused on television, radio or print media. However, these traditional media have “selection thresholds,” multiple stages of editorial selection over which terrorists have no control. In addition to this obstacle, by early 2003 the media in the Arab world had begun to fragment, becoming increasingly crowded and competitive. A growing array of satellite television stations began to ensure competition and therefore a diversity of opinion, which hampers the communication strategy of the terrorists on the TV front. The quantity and volume of anti-al-Qaida voices in the Arab media have dramatically increased since 2003, with many al-Qaida-linked terrorist attacks being met by a chorus of Arab criticism and condemnation. Public opinion polls have shown steep declines in support for al-Qaida, particularly in countries directly affected by its terrorist attacks. Arab satellite television has become one of the strongest forces pushing for change in the region and representing one of the biggest obstacles to al-Qaida’s agenda of imposing a monolithic Islamic identity through a streamlined Muslim media voice. It therefore poses the greatest challenge to the terrorists’ political vision and accelerates use of the Internet as an information-spreading platform to compensate for the loss of satellite TV as a friendly media outlet. This further

entrenches the Internet as the main strategic communication asset for terrorists. As Abu Omar expressed it, “We are the energy behind the path to jihad. Just like the jihadis reached their target on September 11, we will reach ours through the Internet.”

Target audiences and communication channels

While some propaganda messages are intended for a broad audience, the majority are tailored to a particular target group. The messages, the channels by which these messages are communicated, and the languages they use are customized to suit the special needs of the target group. The terrorists select and segment the strategically desired target audience, the transmitting medium and the targets for destruction. They determine the location and timing of their actions to satisfy media criteria for newsworthiness that fit with the media’s deadlines and news cycles, thus reaching the desired audience. The actual violent operation is embedded within their strategic communication efforts. An example of this is the suicide bombing of Moscow’s subway system by the Caucasus Emirate jihadist network in March 2010. Radical Islamist terrorists have become extremely adept at exploiting the unique attributes of the Internet. It offers the possibility to communicate in almost real time. The Internet is also used extensively to educate and transfer knowledge to followers. Further, they use the medium for command and control, to gather intelligence and to distribute information among their sympathetic audience to stimulate self-radicalization. The Internet has fostered the rise of numerous loose and decentralized terrorist networks and enables terrorist groups to operate like decentralized franchises or freelancers. This revolutionary electronic medium enables the terrorists to operate as virtual transnational organizations and reach their audiences around the globe to maintain group identity, indoctrinate new members, and demonstrate its revolutionary ideology and principles. The Internet, as an uncensored medium, carries information regardless of its validity or potential impact. It allows even small groups to amplify their messages and exaggerate their importance and the threat they pose. The target audiences of radical Islamist terrorists can be divided into two groups: those who lie outside the ummah and those inside it.

The ummah

Ummah is an Arabic word used to describe the Muslim diaspora or “community of believers,” and thus the global community of Muslims. With regard to al-Qaida, this group can be segmented into insiders and outsiders. The outsiders include two groups: the sympathizers and the neutrals. They consist of the Muslims and converts who could be persuaded to become ummah insiders and follow up by becoming active al-Qaida terrorists. In the long run, major portions of this audience need to join the community of ummah insiders to realize the goal of a global, devout Islamic caliphate. This means the terrorists’ primary target audience is neither a minority of radicalized terrorists nor the public of the nations with Muslim minorities, but the vast majority of the Muslim public and potential converts. Terrorists do not possess a central recruiting organization, so their main channels for reaching this vast audience consist of face-to-face methods such as prayer, speeches, and sermons in mosques and *madrasahs*, or schools; the mass media; and, increasingly, the Internet. Especially for converts, the Internet plays a significant role. To stimulate transformation of Muslim and non-Muslim ummah outsiders to ummah insiders and jihadists, the terrorist network provides inspiration for homegrown self-radicalization. Social networks and local group dynamics, especially peer pressure, play a significant role in forging intimate emotional ties. Suffering identity crises, a majority of jihadists began as “unremarkable” individuals living ordinary lives, before they were “reborn” in their late teens and early twenties as ummah insiders. In one of several attempts to describe the process, the New York Police Department developed a compelling four-phased model in 2007 describing this multistep self-radicalization process:

1. PRE-RADICALIZATION PHASE

Receptive individuals initiate the first step, the so-called preradicalization phase. This step constitutes the period before radicalization in which the individual lives an ordinary life, not showing ambitions to become an ummah insider or to convert to Islam in the first place. In a two-year research project that investigated the difference between violent and nonviolent radicals, 58 in-depth profiles

of “homegrown” terrorists were analyzed. The study by Jamie Barlett et al. found that recruits usually have experienced some degree of societal exclusion and an identity crisis of sorts, hate Western foreign policy and are disconnected from their local community. This view is supported by Venhaus, who concluded that potential recruits have unfulfilled needs to define themselves. He divides them in four groups: revenge seekers needing an outlet for frustration, status seekers needing recognition, identity seekers needing a group to join and thrill seekers needing a sense of adventure. Al-Qaida presents itself as the best way to satisfy those needs.

2. SELF-IDENTIFICATION PHASE

Frequently, the occurrence of an unexpected event triggers the individual, if not already a Muslim, to convert to Islam, join the ummah and become an insider. Often, a crisis in a person’s political, social, personal or financial life shakes his certitude in previously held beliefs and catalyzes the individual to be “reborn” as an ummah insider. This occurrence marks the beginning of the self-identification phase. The jihad-Salafi ideology and derived communication messages provide simple answers to complex disputes. These messages resonate especially with certain politically naïve Muslims and converts. In general, they have an inadequate understanding of their religion. That makes them vulnerable to misinterpretations of religious doctrines. The messages justify the use of violence against all



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In Jakarta, a journalist viewing an Internet blog page points to the name of a person purportedly representing “al-Qaida Organization Indonesia,” which claimed responsibility for the July 17, 2009, bombings of the J.W. Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotels in the center of the Indonesian capital.

kinds of kuffar. Stirring up a sense of moral outrage, al-Qaida propagates three key messages to receptive individuals that reverberate with personal experience in this phase:

- Individuals should withdraw from impure mainstream society and use violence to cleanse it.
- Jihad is the only way to resolve glaring problems of global injustice permanently.
- Muslims should be outraged about perceived attacks upon Islam.

After the individual self-radicalizes, he is now an ummah insider. Ummah insiders consist of two groups: the supporters and the followers. The supporters are committed Muslim radicals who provide operational, financial, administrative or potential “ultimate” support to the global al-Qaida movement as martyr. For this audience, the main communication channel is the Internet, with the mass broadcast media providing a secondary avenue. But reaching both elements of the ummah is crucially important to the jihadist movement. As Ayman al-Zawahiri stated in July 2004: “We are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media ... We are in a media battle for the hearts and minds of our ummah.” Yet expanding the ummah is not sufficient. Al-Qaida needs indoctrinated terrorists to actively support its goals.

3. INDOCTRINATION PHASE

This development is followed by the indoctrination phase. Using strategic communication methods, ummah insiders are stimulated to be more receptive for jihad-Salafi messages and to seek information to reinforce their newfound spiritual commitment. At the same time, they are looking for like-minded ummah members to exchange beliefs and increase their commitment. Eager acolytes usually coalesce into autonomous cells in small like-minded groups (mini ummahs). These mini ummahs function as catalysts, creating a peer-pressured environment in which members compete to see who is the most radical. Converts seem to be the most zealous in trying to assert their new religious convictions. Within these mini ummahs, physically stimulating group activities such as soccer act as binding forces. This radicalization process makes little noise and is therefore hard to detect. At some point, many self-radicalized members contact a charismatic al-Qaida leader or radical Imam

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who functions as a communication channel, providing ideological background and moral justification.

4. JIHADIZATION PHASE

The final step is the jihadization phase, in which the ummah insider is indoctrinated to consider committing terrorist attacks and possibly sacrificing his life to prove the firmness of his beliefs by becoming a martyr. This phase is characterized by a readiness to perform as a terrorist.

The adversary outsiders

This audience includes apostate secular Muslim regimes, sometimes referred to as troublemakers, and all unbelievers: the so-called crusaders, Zionists, apostates, Jews and the West, of which the U.S. is considered the leader. These segments are further dissected into the “near enemy” (apostates, secular Muslim regimes) and the “far enemy” (Jews, non-Muslims and Western society). The preferred communication channel to reach these groups is the global mass media. The Internet plays a secondary role.

Findings and recommendations

It is certain that terrorists use strategic communication techniques, as this article has shown. They have defined their communication objectives, developed their communication tactics and established the media strategies necessary to reach these communication goals. Al-Qaida’s communication goals aim at legitimizing its methods, building its membership and intimidating its opponents. Terrorists customize their strategies based on thorough audience research and shape their messages and media choices accordingly, following the rules of any successful public relations campaign. Their skillful use of many forms of electronic media has enabled them to promote their message and continually win new adherents to their cause. Through strategic communication, al-Qaida inspires people, through homegrown radicalization, to become ummah insiders. Becoming an al-Qaida terrorist is a gradual, multistep process. It usually involves informal congregations and prayer



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Video propaganda from the Islamic Jihad Union terrorist group features children practicing gunfire. Four members of Islamic Jihad were convicted in March 2010 of a bombing plot in Germany.

groups in mosques, cafes, schools, prisons and the Internet. Eager acolytes often coalesce into autonomous mini ummahs. Their unremarkable record, background and appearance make it especially difficult for law enforcement agencies to expose a potential self-radicalized terrorist. There is no single psychological, sociological or ethnological profile. They usually do not match one distinct economic profile either. They often seem to be seeking adventure, esteem in the eyes of their peers, and a sense of brotherhood and purpose. Nevertheless, the overall recruiting process seems to be inefficient and its yield low. This information asymmetry must be further undermined to counter the threat of a growing radicalization of the Muslim community. This can best be accomplished by calling al-Qaida's credibility into question. It is possible to counteract the three primary terrorist communication goals outlined in this essay: legitimization, propagation and intimidation. Next to eliminating the root causes and alleviating the underlying conditions, motivators and enablers of terrorism — for example, rooting out terrorists' physical bases — developing an effective counterstrategic communication plan that exploits weaknesses and contradictions in al-Qaida's message is a vital step in winning the asymmetrical

conflict with terrorists. A successful counterstrategic communications plan must destroy the psychological appeal of the al-Qaida brand by destroying and displacing the feelings that attract young men. However, to reduce the likelihood of al-Qaida becoming the chosen path, options need to be presented that satisfy adolescent developmental needs. Being radical and rebelling against the received values of the status quo are important parts of being an adolescent. Ways must be found to ensure that young individuals can be radical, dissent and make a difference without serious or violent consequences. A good way to fight radical ideas is with a liberal attitude to dissent, radicalism and disagreement. Governments must focus on the things they can realistically change. However, the lead role rests with society at the local level. Individuals, groups, organizations and communities that understand and respond to these complexities at the individual level play a significant role. Radical ideas that do not break the law should be aired, but they should be debated and denounced. Governments, and more importantly independent Muslim voices, have to set out counter arguments as to why particular radical ideas are wrong. Local social workers, teachers and sports coaches with street credibility should play a central role.

Relatives and friends are usually more likely than authorities to know when an individual is radicalizing. But Jenkins warns there is an imminent danger of eroding the most effective barrier to radicalization: the cooperation of the community. If society concedes more power to the authorities to combat terrorism, it could discredit intelligence operations and provoke public anger.

The first phase in developing an effective countercommunication plan is research. The goal is to take a comprehensive look at all the variables that will have an impact. To attain a complete picture of the root causes driving the terrorists, it is crucial to research the causes at the individual, group, societal and governmental levels. Starting with political science, this research involves numerous additional academic fields such as computer science, comparative sociology and religion, psychology, and ethnology. Addressing the underlying root causes that facilitate self-radicalization, recruitment and support for terrorists is an elementary part of such an effort. Society must offer alternatives to appeal to those who seek revenge, status, identity or thrills and could fall for al-Qaida's message. The fragmented strategic communications efforts in nations opposing the effective pervasiveness of al-Qaida need to be harmonized. To employ a strategic countercommunication plan successfully, it has to be woven into a comprehensive approach of coercive military and law enforcement measures and conciliatory political, diplomatic and socio-economic measures. These measures and the countercommunication plan have to be synchronized at all levels of government (political, diplomatic, law enforcement, military and intelligence) and with our partners and allies in order to harmonize international efforts within a grand strategy. This grand strategy — a comprehensive approach as security philosophy — is an all-embracing approach and can be developed only within networked security structures based on a comprehensive international security rationale that effectively combines civilian and military. Data on terrorism research should be made public, as far as possible, and shared to reduce the “hidden knowledge” in disparate databases and disconnected researchers. We need to move from a “need to know” to a “need to

share” mentality — that is, move away from risk aversion and information protection to more risk acceptance and information dissemination. By internationally democratizing data and integrating both qualitative and quantitative information utilizing different academic fields, we can dramatically increase our knowledge and bring greater empiricism to this research.

Al-Qaida's capacity to carry out large-scale operations has been significantly degraded. Its financial and popular support is declining, and allied operations have killed or captured much of its leadership. The al-Qaida leadership has been reduced to making appeals for others to carry out small-scale attacks. Our society should not overreact to this terrorist phenomenon. As Jenkins puts it: Panic is the wrong message to send our terrorist foes. If David Rapoport's four waves theory of international terrorism is applicable, the wave of recruits radicalizing in society might have passed its peak and is in decline. According to the Europol Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2010, the number of terrorist attacks in EU member states decreased 33 percent from 2008 to 2009 and has fallen by half since 2007.

The 14th-century ideology promoted by al-Qaida and the indifferent killing of innocent people, both Muslim and non-Muslim, hold little appeal for the majority of Muslims. According to Peter Waldmann, they have no wish to live under a repressive theocratic dictatorship in a new Islamic caliphate striving for global domination. If the terrorists' effective strategic communication — and in particular their use of the Internet — can be curtailed by a countercommunication plan embedded in a grand international strategy, the basis of their favorable asymmetry can be eroded. If al-Qaida can be prevented from expanding the pool of ummah insiders and generating self-radicalized adolescents and young adults, finding new physical bases in safe havens or ungoverned areas, including those on the Internet, jihadism may ultimately prove to be yet another instance of fanatical ideology that eventually fades. □

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