

Talking to the Islamic World

NATO must communicate its pro-Muslim support

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NATO will continue to face daunting challenges in the fight against terrorists who use Islam as an ideology. The terrorists' claims that NATO is at war with Islam, while disingenuous, have implications for NATO's reputation. To avoid tarnishing its reputation in the Islamic world, the Alliance must vigorously refute such assertions and show they are contrary to NATO's values.

Nearly a year after the successful conclusion of military operations in Libya, now is a perfect time to emphasize to the Islamic world that NATO's strategy in Afghanistan is altruistic. The good will earned in Libya should be used to point out some of NATO's achievements and counteract the terrorists' communications strategy.

In Afghanistan, terrorist messages that focus on Islamic themes are often effective. This strategy connects the terrorists with communities. That increases the likelihood that these terrorists will succeed in their objectives because, in their eyes, religious ideology justifies their actions. Some community religious leaders are unwilling to question the scholarly validity of the terrorists' claims out of fear for their lives. Those who immediately reject such messages are subject to intimidation and threats.

The elimination of terrorism that uses Islam as an ideology is not attainable. The financial and moral support terrorists receive from some factions of Muslim communities throughout the world will blunt strategies to defeat them. To some degree, terrorists have successfully asserted that the war against terror is a war against Islam. As a result, it will be important to chip away at this communication strategy and undermine their credibility.

No group reserves sole authority to speak for its religion or its adherents. In Islam, this also holds true. Knowledge of Islam may gain one a certain degree of authority, but purposeful misinterpretation is contrary to basic Islamic principles. When this happens, the misinterpretation must be exposed. NATO may not have an absolute advantage in getting its message to the audience in every case, but in some areas it may have a comparative advantage. Financial resources, technological capabilities and Muslims in uniform from Alliance countries should be employed intelligently. But religion can be an emotional matter and

utmost respect must be taken in crafting messages so they are not perceived as misleading.

The Islamic world is not homogenous. It comprises a vast range of cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity from Morocco to Southeast Asia. Muslims, however, hold basic universal convictions about their religion. They expect Islam, to which they express unquestioned devotion, will be respected. This belief cannot be overemphasized. In Afghanistan, NATO's strategic communication must stress respect for Islam. Highlighting accomplishments in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Libya would show that NATO is not at war with Islam. Equally important, it should be pointed out that terrorist misinterpretation of Islam is contrary to the religion's true values.

U.S. Adm. James G. Stavridis, in his 2007 *Joint Force Quarterly* article "Strategic Communication and National Security" (<http://www.ndu.edu/press/joint-ForceQuarterly.html>), explored the issue of communication to diverse cultural groups within U.S. Southern Command's geographical area of responsibility. His articulation of USSOUTHCOM's challenges is indicative of some of the challenges NATO faces in communicating with the Islamic world. The admiral's article was insightful because it offered specific and valuable guidelines to communicate with cultures different from that of the United States, guidelines that have applications beyond the U.S. Southern Command.

The two most important guidelines Stavridis recommended are: Tell the truth and understand the audience. As with all audiences, telling the truth is of paramount importance. Telling the truth will establish one's credibility with the targeted audience and, as such, must always be the overriding principle in strategic communications. Additionally, to undermine terrorists' charges that NATO is at war with Islam, it is necessary to avoid labels that give the slightest hint of any linkage of terrorism to Islam.



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Muslims generally show antipathy to such a linkage because they believe it denigrates their religion. When, for example, a terrorist organization uses Islam in its name (such as Islamic Jihadist – a hypothetical example), strategic communicators can reasonably say: “An Islamic Jihadist conducted a horrendous attack on innocent civilians and, in so doing, disparaged Islam.” The rationale is that when a terrorist organization uses Islam in its name, its members want to highlight their Islamic identity. Additionally, they are trying to show their religious fidelity, but are most likely acting contrary to mainstream Islamic views. That misinterpretation must be exposed.

Terrorists do not have an absolute monopoly on the use of Islamic themes and principles in their messages. Issues such as suicide attacks, improvised explosive devices, killing innocent people, illegal/illicit activities and violence toward women are potential areas for exploitation. The Quran and Hadith (documented sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad) are the primary foundations of Islamic law. When terrorist organizations cite these sources,

their interpretations are likely to contradict respected scholars’ views. Analyses show that terrorists intentionally craft their messages to fit their ideology to achieve their objectives.

To affirm that it is not at war with Islam, NATO’s fight against terrorists who use Islam as an ideology will require flexible techniques. In principle, such views and dogmatic thinking generate emotions that overwhelm pragmatic discourse. As a result, adherence to values that respect religious sensitivities is difficult to achieve because religious-held beliefs are impervious to logical arguments. Despite this, NATO must still get its messages through to the Islamic world while respecting Muslim sensitivities. Continuously re-emphasizing that NATO’s actions are not anti-Islamic, while highlighting achievements in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Libya, will be key to undermining the terrorists’ credibility. Considering the terrorists’ threats and capabilities, the Alliance must prevail in its mission. □

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the author’s employer.

Asmaa Mahfouz of Egypt, left, and Ahmed al-Zubair Ahmed al-Sanusi of Libya, right, receive the 2011 Sakharov Prize from Jerzy Buzek, then president of the European Parliament, in December 2011. The prize was given to Arab Spring activists who exemplified freedom of thought.