

Defeating al-Qaeda in the “Battle of Ideas”:

The Case for a U.S. Counter-Narrative

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Counterterrorism, much like terrorism itself, is often a "battle of ideas." Yet, in the fight against al-Qaeda, the U.S. is currently losing this battle. This paper argues that the implementation of a counter-narrative strategy is crucial to the overall fight against al-Qaeda. It begins by discussing the importance of narratives, both to human cognition and international relations in general. It then explores al-Qaeda's narrative and the reasons for its success. After detailing the U.S.'s failure to develop its own counter-narrative against al-Qaeda, it ends with a strategy for a potential U.S. counter-narrative moving forward.

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I. Introduction

Following the attacks on 9/11, the U.S. devoted enormous resources to waging the “war on terror.” The 2002 National Security Strategy cast the struggle against global terrorism as “different from any other war in our history” and called for the transformation of national security institutions, that “were designed in a different era to meet different requirements.”¹ “[T]he crossroads between radicalism and technology,” moreover, was deemed to be the U.S.’s “gravest danger.”² Consequently, the federal bureaucracy was reworked and realigned, strategic priorities were shifted, and billions were spent on militarily disrupting, dismantling, and defeating al-Qaeda and its affiliates.³ As William Casebeer and James Russell point out, if combating terrorism was only one of many strategic priorities before 9/11, it now “reigns preeminent.”⁴

Yet, not until recently has the U.S. devoted significant policy attention to the phenomenon of radicalization. While the U.S. continues to disrupt al-Qaeda and its affiliates militarily on multiple fronts, the government has only slowly realized “that military force alone cannot defeat radical Islamist extremism.”⁵ Furthermore, notwithstanding the growing realization that terrorism, above all else, is a “war of ideas,” a precise counter-radicalization strategy has remained elusive.⁶ In fact, it was not until a decade after 9/11, under the Obama administration, that the U.S. managed to produce an

¹ The White House, “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America.” (Sept. 2002), 5, 29, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/> (accessed November 10, 2011).

² *Ibid.*, at 2.

³ The White House, “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America.” (May 2010), http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf (accessed November 10, 2011).

⁴ William D. Casebeer and James A. Russell, “Storytelling and Terrorism: Towards a Comprehensive ‘Counter-Narrative Strategy,’” *Strategic Insights* 4, no. 3 (2005): 2, http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/nps/casebeer_mar05.pdf (accessed September 14, 2011).

⁵ “Rewriting the Narrative: An Integrated Strategy for Counter-Radicalization,” *Presidential Task Force on Confronting the Ideology of Radical Extremism*, (2009), 1, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=311> (accessed November 21, 2011).

⁶ *Ibid.*

official policy statement on countering homegrown radicalization.⁷ The policy statement, entitled “The National Strategy for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States,” was just recently given a “Strategic Implementation Plan” in December 2011; as a result, the exact contours or effects of this strategy are only beginning to come to fruition. Worse, still, “jihadist” radicalization is growing at alarming rates “in both number and geographic dispersion,” fueling both al-Qaeda recruitment and anti-American sentiment.⁸

According to Leuprecht et al., there is ample survey evidence showing that many Muslims in the U.S. and the U.K., as well as in Muslim countries, view the “war on terror” as a war against Islam.⁹ In fact, when “asked ‘in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, do you feel the U.S. is fighting a war on terrorism or a war against Islam?’, the percentage of American Muslims who answered ‘a war against Islam,’” has kept rising steadily from 18% in 2001, 31% in 2002, 38% in 2004, to 55% in 2007.¹⁰ Likewise, a poll in 2004 concluded that a staggering 80% of Muslims in the U.K believed that the “West” was waging a war against Islam, with 5% of U.K. Muslims (approximately 50,000) believing that further attacks by British suicide bombers in the

⁷ The White House, “The National Strategy for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States,” (2011), http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/empowering_local_partners.pdf. (accessed September 21, 2011).

⁸ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Declassified Key Judgments of the National Intelligence Estimate ‘Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States,’” (2006), http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/Declassified_NIE_Key_Judgments.pdf (accessed November 18, 2011); Mitchel D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, “Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat,” *Police Department City of New York* (2007), 8, 13, 16, http://www.nypdshield.org/public/SiteFiles/documents/NYPD_Report-Radicalization_in_the_West.pdf (accessed September 14, 2011); Christian Leuprecht et al., “Winning the Battle but Losing the War?: Narrative and Counter-Narratives Strategy,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3, no. 2 (2009), <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/68/html> (accessed September 14, 2011).

⁹ Leuprecht, “Winning the Battle,” 27.

¹⁰ Ibid.

UK were justified.¹¹ Finally, in a 2009 poll of Muslim countries conducted by The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, the percentage of respondents who believed that U.S. goals were hostile to Islam ranged from 62% in Indonesia to 87% in Egypt.¹²

Beatrice de Graaf suggests that terrorists and states are essentially conducting “influence warfare,” a battle to “persuade the different target audiences to rally behind them.”¹³ If the “battle of ideas” is in fact the most crucial front in the overall “war on terror,” then the U.S. is losing unequivocally. As a recent Presidential Task Force concluded, al-Qaeda remains a major threat “to the United States, not only due to its ability to conduct large-scale terrorist attacks against the United States and its allies, but also because of al-Qaeda’s demonstrated ability to spread its ideology and propaganda far and wide.”¹⁴ Over the last two years, the Obama administration has been highly successful at eliminating the leadership of al-Qaeda’s central operational core, including, most notably, Osama bin Laden.¹⁵ Yet, despite the contraction of the central organization that planned and executed the attack on 9/11, “al-Qaeda’s influence extends far beyond its operational reach, meaning that the terrorist group will remain a major security threat for years.”¹⁶ Al-Qaeda’s anti-Western, jihadist ideology has fueled terrorist groups, movements, and insurgencies in diverse areas across the globe. In particular, the

¹¹ Christian Leuprecht et al., “Containing the Narrative: Strategy and Tactics in Countering the Storyline of Global Jihad,” *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism* 5, no. 1 (2010): 44.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Beatrice de Graaf, “Why Communication and Performance Are Key In Countering Terrorism,” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—the Hague* (2010), <http://www.icct.nl/userfiles/file/ICCT%20Research%20Paper%20de%20Graaf.pdf> (accessed September 14, 2011).

¹⁴ “Rewriting,” 3.

¹⁵ Greg Miller, “Al-Qaeda Targets Dwindle as Group Shrinks,” *Washington Post*, November 22, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/al-qaeda-targets-dwindle-as-group-shrinks/2011/11/22/gIQAbXJNmN_story.html.

¹⁶ Ibid.

organization's Yemen-based arm, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, has attempted a series of terrorist plots in the U.S. and is being viewed by U.S. counterterrorism officials as an even greater threat than al-Qaeda's central core.¹⁷ In other words, while al-Qaeda central has begun to decline, the ideology and movement itself continues to surge. Ultimate success in the fight against al-Qaeda and its affiliates will thus require diminishing both their ideology and appeal. Only when their "capacity to regenerate by attracting recruits and sympathizers to its cause is severely weakened, and more crucially...its cause is regarded as discredited, can one begin to seriously talk about success."¹⁸ Yet, as the radicalization phenomenon becomes more dynamic and spreads with increasing complexity, comprehensive solutions are difficult to come by.

One increasingly popular solution among policymakers and academics, however, is the development of a credible counter-narrative. This policy prescription stems from the premise that, "in the marketplace of ideas, the West is losing market-share."¹⁹ U.S. counterterrorism documents and experts on radicalization have identified an overarching narrative that al-Qaeda strategically propagates. This narrative is composed of common themes that resonate strongly with deeply held grievances in the Muslim world.²⁰ Moreover, as Carl Ciovacco notes, al-Qaeda's leadership is adept at tailoring this overarching narrative to different audiences throughout the world in order to exploit local sensitivities.²¹ Al-Qaeda has also effectively utilized digital communication platforms like the internet, TV, and mobile phones to convey carefully constructed messages both

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Kumar Ramakrishna, "Delegitimizing Global Jihadi Ideology in Southeast Asia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 27, no.3 (2005): 345.

¹⁹ Leuprecht, "Winning the Battle," 25.

²⁰ Pauline Hope Cheong and Jeffrey R. Halverson, "Youths in Violent Extremist Discourse: Mediated Identifications and Interventions," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33 (2010): 1105.

²¹ Carl Ciovacco, "The Contours of al-Qaeda's Media Strategy," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32 (2009): 856-857.

seamlessly and instantaneously that ultimately reinforce this narrative. Thus, al-Qaeda's leadership has become highly skilled at utilizing discursive and visual communication strategies to promote recruitment and spread their appeal.

As a way of counteracting and defeating al-Qaeda's dangerous narrative, many experts on radicalization have called for the development of our own narrative. Such a counter-narrative could not only help undermine al-Qaeda's allure, but also perhaps help promote our own values and ideas. Yet, despite a growing consensus on the need for a counter-narrative, there is still widespread disagreement about how to pursue it. In particular, crucial questions remain unanswered regarding what the narrative should be. While some argue that the U.S. should create "stories" of its own as counter-narratives, others argue that it should limit its counter-narrative to discrediting and undermining al-Qaeda's distorted version of Islam.

This paper argues that the implementation of a counter-narrative strategy is crucial to the overall battle against al-Qaeda. Combating terrorism, much like terrorism itself, is ultimately a form of communication.²² As a result, a successful counter-narrative can help dry up the well of radicalization and recruitment that has kept al-Qaeda alive by counteracting the appeal of its "Global Jihad" narrative. Yet, rather than constructing a positive alternative narrative that aims to compete with that of al-Qaeda's, a more effective strategy would focus solely on undermining and delegitimizing al-Qaeda and its narrative on multiple fronts. In particular, a viable U.S. counter-narrative should aim to undercut both al-Qaeda's religious philosophy as well as the credibility of al-Qaeda as an organization.

This paper will be divided into the following sections. Part II will analyze the concept of the narrative as well as its importance in framing human thought. Part III will

²² De Graaf, "Why Communication," 1.

discuss al-Qaeda's narrative in particular and the reasons for its effectiveness. Part IV will investigate the U.S.'s failure to develop its own counter-narrative. Finally, Part V will offer a strategy for a potential U.S. counter-narrative.

II. The Importance of a Strategic Narrative

Much like the concept of “radicalization” itself, the lack of consensus regarding the definition of a “narrative” makes analysis difficult. As Casebeer notes, post modernism is an entire literary school of thought that is predicated on the idea that there is no set of necessary or sufficient conditions to form a narrative.¹ Nevertheless, the lack of definitional certainty does not detract from the importance of the narrative in warfare, and several compelling generalizations can be made.

Many scholars intuitively equate the concept of a narrative with a “story.”² Thus, Lawrence Freedman argues that narratives are “compelling story lines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn.”³ Casebeer and Russell echo this contention, defining a narrative as a story with a sequence of events linked by a plot.⁴ According to them, most stories or narratives follow a coherent, unified pattern exemplified by the Freytag triangle: “a beginning, a problem that leads to a climax, and a resolution of that problem.”⁵ Additionally, “most plots involve a hero or protagonist “striving to achieve some goal, usually despite the machinations of an antagonist, or villain. The structure includes a person, or group of persons, and a series of events driven by their attempts to achieve some objective.”⁶

Yet, other scholars argue quite compellingly that this analogy is an oversimplification; instead, narratives are something more powerful and complex than a story.

¹ William D. Casebeer, “Identity, Culture and Stories: Empathy and the War on Terrorism,” *Minn. L.J. Sci. & Tech.* 9, no.2 (2008): 654.

² Leuprecht, “Winning the Battle”; Tom Quiggin, “Understanding al-Qaeda’s Ideology for Counter-Narrative Work,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3, no. 2 (2009), <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/67/html> (accessed October 10, 2011).

³ Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs*, Adelphi Paper No. 379 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2006): 22.

⁴ Casebeer and Russell, “Storytelling,” 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

According to Christina Archetti, the “concept of narrative...contains a specific view of the way stories are created and the way they develop and affect human action.”⁷ Archetti borrows heavily from Stephanie Lawler’s social science research on narratives, which posits that narratives do not simply ‘carry’ a set of “facts”; instead, “they are ‘*social products*’ produced by people within the context of specific social, historical and cultural locations.”⁸ This is because narratives are a “collective reconstruction”: while it is promoted by specific actors, it is ultimately re-appropriated and retold “by a range of different actors with varying agendas and very diverse intended audiences. Each of them potentially sees a different ‘story.’”⁹ Moreover, the narrative’s continued existence depends on the wide-range of actors that embrace it and “collectively, continuously reconstruct it.” Thus, in this view, the narrative is not merely a story; rather it is a story that is continuously retold and reinterpreted by wider audiences. In this vein, Archetti analogizes a narrative to a brand, particularly for the way it varies both geographically and in the mind of audiences.¹⁰

Yet, regardless of whether or not narratives are conceived of as a story, or something more, their importance cannot be underestimated. Narratives are essential to international relations because they are a foundational element of human cognition. As Casebeer argues, narratives or stories “can restructure our mental spaces in ways that profoundly affect our reasoning ability and, ultimately, what we make of the world.”¹¹

One way this is achieved is through use of analogies and metaphors, which provide a

⁷ Christina Archetti, “Terrorism, Communication, and the War of Ideas: Al-Qaida’s Strategic Narrative as a Brand,”

(2010):http://salford.academia.edu/CristinaArchetti/Papers/153510/_Terrorism_Communication_and_the_War_of_Ideas_Al-Qaidas_Strategic_Narrative_as_a_Brand_ (accessed November 10, 2011).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Casebeer, “Identity,” 657.

frame of reference for how we see the world. As a simple example, Casebeer compares Islamic fundamentalism, metaphorically, to a disease.¹² Framing the concept in this way, in turn, “implies a series of actions that *ought* to be done in reaction to fundamentalism (e.g., combat its spread, focus on this public health problem by inoculating people against it, consider those who try to spread it as ‘evil agents up to no good’ or at the very least as modern day ‘Typhoid Mary’s.’).”¹³ By structuring human reasoning and perception, narratives act as a powerful interpretive lens for how people experience their external surroundings.

Furthermore, narratives can also be essential to the construction of identity.¹⁴ Just as narratives and stories can frame the way we perceive our external environment, they can also act as a potent frame of reference for who we are as individuals. In particular, narratives can be utilized to reinforce a sense of collective identity, “a social-psychological concept that explains the cognitive, moral, and emotional link an individual has to a group.”¹⁵ Collective identity, in other words “refers to ‘a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly.’”¹⁶ As David Betz argues, feelings of identity and belonging can be effectively expressed through a narrative or story that “communicates a sense of cause, purpose and mission” for a group of people.¹⁷ Moreover, through the use of narratives or stories, collective

¹² Ibid., 656.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Archetti, “Terrorism, Communication.”

¹⁵ Cheong, “Youths,” 1106.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ David Betz, “The Virtual Dimension of Contemporary Insurgency and Counterinsurgency,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 19, no. 4 (2008): 515.

identities can also be framed “to create an imagined community and solidify otherwise porous in-group boundaries.”¹⁸

In sum, narratives are integral to how human cognition functions; as Casebeer and Russell note, there is “*ample* evidence that stories influence our ability to recall events, motivate people to act, modulate our emotional reactions to events, cue certain heuristics and biases, structure our problem-solving capabilities, and ultimately perhaps even constitute our very identity.”¹⁹

Considering the central importance of story-telling to human thinking, it is no surprise then that narratives also play a crucial role in warfare and international relations in general. As Michael Vlahos argues: “[i]n war, narrative is much more than just a story. ‘Narrative’ may sound like a fancy literary word, but it is actually the foundation of all strategy, upon which all else – policy, rhetoric and action – is built.”²⁰ Governments construct strategic narratives to help achieve objectives. These narratives are “strategic” because they are “designed or nurtured with the intention of structuring the responses of others to developing events” and policy decisions.²¹

In particular, Vlahos maintains that a war narrative does three essential things:

First, it is the organizing framework for policy. Policy cannot exist without an interlocking foundation of ‘truths’ that people easily accept because they appear to be self-evident and undeniable. Second, this ‘story’ works as a framework precisely because it represents just such an existential vision...Third, having presented a war logic that is beyond dispute, the narrative then serves practically as the anointed rhetorical handbook for how the war is to be argued and described.”²²

¹⁸ Cheong, *Youths*,” 1108.

¹⁹ Casebeer and Russell, “Storytelling,” 5.

²⁰ Michael Vlahos, “The Long War: A Self-Defeating Prophecy,” *Asia Times*, September 9, 2009, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Front_Page/HI09Aa01.html.

²¹ Freedman, “The Transformation,” 22.

²² Vlahos, “Long War.”

Yet, governments are not alone in their strategic use of narratives; rather, non-state actors, including terrorist organizations, deliberately construct narratives too as a way of mobilizing potential constituents across borders, making a compelling case for their cause, justifying their actions, and developing ideas and tactics.²³ Moreover, terrorists also utilize narratives to preserve in-group cohesion, particularly through a rhetorical construction of collective identity. By emphasizing and reinforcing that perception of “a shared status or relation,” terrorist movements can further “garner support and power because the participants feel that they are all working toward common goals, have defined opponents, and have an integrated sense of being that is incorporated into movement ideologies.”²⁴

In fact, narratives can play multiple, critical roles throughout the life-cycle of a terrorist organization.²⁵ During the early stage where terrorist movements are born, narratives and stories can be crucial for things like providing incentives for recruitment, reinforcing pre-existing identities or creating new ones that do not exist, and laying the foundations for future growth of the organization.²⁶ Once the organization has matured, however, narratives can serve as “insulation against environmental change” or “‘top cover’ to allow the organization to adapt, change goals, or otherwise modify structure and function to ensure continued survival.”²⁷

In terms of radicalization and recruitment in particular, a narrative can serve as both a “driver” and an “enabler.” As the EU Counter-Radicalization Strategy contends,

²³ Betz, “Virtual,” 522.

²⁴ Cheong, “Youths,” 1106.

²⁵ Casebeer, “Identity,” 659.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 659-660.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 660.

“radicals are made, not born.”²⁸ Moreover, “radicalization is not something that happens only to others—the mentally ill person or the evil character. It is a psychological trajectory that, given the right circumstances, can happen to any person, group, or nation.”²⁹ In regards to jihadi radicalization, the four most common types of explanations are (1) socioeconomic marginalization; (2) social-identity marginalization; (3) religious fanaticism; and (4) political grievance.³⁰ All of these explanations “are a sub-species of grievance; each specifies something wrong with the world that needs to be changed.”³¹

Clark McCauley and Sophia Moksalenko, meanwhile, offer a more differentiated system of explanation based on social psychology that identifies 12 “mechanisms” of radicalization that lead to political violence. Each mechanism or pathway to radicalization occurs at either an individual level, a group level, or at a mass-public level.³² On the individual level, for example, there are multiple possible mechanisms of radicalization, including personal grievance based on harm to oneself or loved ones; love for, or attachment to, family or friends that are radicalized; fear of an external threat, which leads to an escape to group security; or instrumentalist motivations where individuals seek out thrill, status, or money.³³ Radicalization can also occur, or intensify, as a result of *group* mechanisms or *group* dynamics, where an individual sheds their previous notions of self in exchange for an identity that is defined by a group or social network. Thus, one “group mechanism” that McCauley and Moskaleno identify is “group

²⁸ “The EU Counterradicalization Strategy: Evaluating EU policies concerning causes of radicalization,” *Transnational Terrorism, Security, and the Rule of Law* (2008), <http://www.transnationalterrorism.eu/tekst/publications/EU%20Counterradicalization%20Strategy.pdf> (accessed September 14, 2011).

²⁹ Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and US*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

³⁰ Leuprecht, “Winning,” 30.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, at 31.

polarization, ” where groups of like-minded individuals become more extreme through reinforcement of shared preferences.³⁴ Likewise, “extreme cohesion” among groups often arises in response to isolation, threat, or inter-group competition, particularly among underground groups, cults, and combat squadrons.³⁵

The point is that there is not “any one profile of radicalization, nor one single pathway to terrorism.”³⁶ It would thus be fruitless, and even foolish, to attempt to isolate and identify one underlying cause of jihadi radicalization. Yet, while a strategic narrative may not always be the initial or primary instigator of radicalization in and of itself, it almost always acts as a factor in furthering or intensifying the radicalization process in some way by serving as a “rationalization to commitment for radical action.”³⁷ This is because narratives can tap into all of these pre-existing grievances and mechanisms of radicalization. They do so by acting as a framework or interpretive lens through which individuals and groups relate those grievances and mechanisms not only to themselves but also to others. And they structure our response to these grievances or mechanisms within the context of specific social, historical and cultural cues.

Thus, because of the powerful influence narratives hold over human cognition, terrorists deploy them strategically in many ways in order to further their goals and maintain or widen their support. Al-Qaeda is no exception to this phenomenon.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., at 32.

³⁷ Leuprecht, “Containing,” 50.

III. The Al-Qaeda Narrative

David Betz recently proposed that, “more than any other actor in the international scene so far, [Islamic insurgents] have mastered the arts of marketing for warlike purpose.”¹ Similarly, Brynjar Lia argues that al-Qaeda’s enduring influence can be explained by its “simple, popular message” that manages to resonate deeply with Muslim grievances as well its “powerful and captivating image” that “exerts an immense attraction on young people.”² The recognition that al-Qaeda’s narrative remains increasingly dangerous is not limited to academics, however; rather, policy makers are now regarding the narrative as one of the main drivers of Muslim radicalization around the world.³ In short, al-Qaeda’s strategic narrative has been singled out as a main reason for the unremitting supply of ready recruits.

As mentioned earlier, while al-Qaeda’s central organizational core may be in decline as a result of persistent U.S. targeting operations, al-Qaeda’s narrative has allowed it to morph and broaden “its reach through loose relationships with local offshoots.”⁴ According to Jean-Louis Bruguiere, France’s former top counterterrorism judge, the relationship of these local terrorist groups and insurgencies “with the al-Qaeda mother company works like a multinational.”⁵ While there is a strong *ideological* link, the local subsidiaries are *operating* increasingly independent of the dwindling central

¹ Betz, “Virtual,” 522.

² Brynjar Lia, “Al-Qaeda’s Appeal: Understanding its Unique Selling Points,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 2 (2008), <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/44/html> (accessed September 14, 2011).

³ Pursue, Prevent, Protect, Prepare: The United Kingdom’s Strategy for Countering International Terrorism,” (2009), <http://merln.ndu.edu/whitepapers/UnitedKingdom2009.pdf> (accessed November 10, 2011); “Rewriting,” 4.

⁴ Alfred De Montesquiou, “Official: Al-Qaeda like a fast food franchise ‘for terrorism,’” *USA Today*, June 7, 2009, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2009-06-07-al-qaeda_N.htm.

⁵ *Ibid.*

core.⁶ Thus, while the organization's central's leadership has markedly weakened, al-Qaeda's ability to export its narrative to distinct and geographically disperse groups has allowed it to maintain an increasingly robust movement. By adopting and espousing the al-Qaeda narrative, these al-Qaeda "franchises,"⁷ such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb, and al-Shabaab have contributed to the survival of al-Qaeda as a movement or ideology rather than a centralized, unified organization.

At the same time, al-Qaeda's basic narrative has remained remarkably consistent: at its core, al-Qaeda deploys a meta-narrative, or a global, totalized narrative schema that divides the world and all of history into an inflexible binary distinction between Islam and the "West," "us vs. them," "good vs. evil." As Leuprecht et al. point out, despite the multiple pathways that can lead to radicalization and terrorism, "the eschatological narrative remains the same: "The West is engaged in a millennial battle against Islam and Muslims must defend themselves – Islam is under attack and Muslims have an obligation to rise to its defence."⁸ Based on its literature and various statements, al-Qaeda's narrative, in its most general form, can be broken down into several subparts:

(1) Islam is under general unjust attack by Western crusaders led by the United States; (2) *Jihadis*, whom the West refers to as "terrorists," are defending against this attack; (3) the actions they take in defence of Islam are proportionally just and religiously sanctified; and, therefore (4) it is the duty of good Muslims to support these actions.⁹

Likewise, Leuprecht et al argue that this meta-narrative actually contains four separate narratives: the *political narrative*, which details the evils of the West; the *moral*

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ James Bliz, "Jihadist Terrorism: Al-Qaeda Franchises Are Still Cause for Concern," *Financial Times*, September 8, 2011, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/9b7baf86-d483-11e0-a42b-00144feab49a.html#axzz1k1ctfEy8>.

⁸ "Winning the Battle," 26.

⁹ Betz, "Virtual," 520.

narrative, which accused liberal democracies of inherent contradictions and blames them for the moral decay of society; the *religious narrative*, which justifies the struggle to defend Islam from the evil West; and the *social-psychological narrative*, which utilizes "a classic in-group/out-group strategy to brand as infidels those who do not buy into this syllogism, while promoting the brotherhood of arms as a means of countering social exclusion and of fulfilling a...sacrifice that compels the 'true believer.'"¹⁰ Again, this narrative is constructed and deployed strategically to position its targeted audience: al-Qaeda purposefully exploits political and social grievances as well as preexisting notions of collective identity in order to convey its purpose and recruit support.

Moreover, al-Qaeda readily appeals to concrete policy choices to support its narrative, including the American-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. military occupation of Saudi Arabia, the detainee-abuses at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, U.S. alliances with corrupt, authoritarian Middle Eastern dictators, and the continued U.S. support of Israel (and corresponding antagonism toward Palestinians).¹¹ Al-Qaeda's ability to connect their narrative to real-world events in order to exploit pre-existing grievances throughout the Muslim world also allows them to bolster their "case for the effectiveness of collective 'agency' to right 'injustice' conditions between 'us' and 'them.'"¹²

Yet, none of this fully explains how al-Qaeda recruitment successfully extends to far-off witnesses of those policies and grievances. Once again, in order to understand the wide-ranging resonance of al-Qaeda's narrative, it is useful to think of the concept of a narrative as more than merely a story. As mentioned earlier, Archetti argues that a

¹⁰ Leuprecht, "Containing," 43.

¹¹ "Rewriting," 4.

¹² Cheong, "Youths," 1106.

narrative should be viewed as a collective construction: while a terrorist “story” is promoted by organizational leaders, its continued existence and appeal depends on sympathizers and supporters who collectively re-interpret and re-tell that story within the context of local conditions.¹³ This collective construction is thus what transforms the story into a narrative.

Thinking of the concept of the narrative in this way may help elucidate why al-Qaeda has enjoyed such significant success at broadening their recruitment pool. As a Presidential Task Force on Confronting the Ideology of Radical Extremism concluded, al-Qaeda’s “ability to connect individuals’ local grievance to the global narrative” is instrumental to their wider success.¹⁴ Al-Qaeda’s leadership is very skilled at attracting support through tailored media statements that exploit regional sensitivities.¹⁵ As a result, they have effectively persuaded other terrorist groups that were focused on local targets to “shift their focus to the global struggle,” including, for example, “al-Qaeda in the Islamic Mahgreb (formerly known as the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat).”¹⁶ Ultimately, these tailored communication strategies, while successful at recruiting support from different locales, also serve to reinforce the global meta-narrative that al-Qaeda seeks to propagate.

Yet, al-Qaeda’s emphasis on “market segmentation”¹⁷ is also multifaceted: the organization not only tailors its narrative toward populations of specific regions but also toward distinct social groups. Cheong and Halverson, for example, contend that, despite popular conceptions of unsophisticated extremist groups, Jihadist terrorist organizations target Muslim youth with “an internally cohesive and preferred identity based on an

¹³ Archetti, “Terrorism, Communication.”

¹⁴ “Rewriting,” 4.

¹⁵ Cheong, “Youths,” 1105.

¹⁶ “Rewriting,” 4.

¹⁷ Betz, “Virtual,” 522.

Islamic revival bound to militant revolutionary action.”¹⁸ In particular, al-Qaeda adopts highly strategic discursive strategies that frame collective “youth identity” in highly specific ways, including youth as “a righteous vanguard,” youth as “a special pious group,” and youth as a vital “resource for the cause of jihad.”¹⁹ Thus, through strategic identity construction, al-Qaeda tailors their discursive messages to distinct social groups. In the case of young people, al-Qaeda aims to construct a particular vision of “youth identity” and bind that identity to their own grand narrative.

Because it is often tailored toward different cultures, nationalities, and social groups, al-Qaeda’s narrative has sometimes been compared to a brand, rather than simply a story. Archetti, for example, argues that, similar to a brand, al-Qaeda’s narrative “defines the objectives in the long term (vision), establishes what the identity is about (values) and justifies action in the short term (mission).”²⁰ Moreover, much like a brand, al-Qaeda’s narrative does not have an independent, objective existence; rather, it is continuously re-told, and thus, varies across countries, over time, and in the minds of audiences.²¹ This notion of al-Qaeda as a brand corroborates the concern among counterterrorism officials about the rising threat of al-Qaeda “franchises.”²² Likewise, the Presidential Task Force contends that, “[b]y appropriating the al-Qaeda brand,” and thus shifting their focus toward al-Qaeda’s vision of a global struggle, other initially localized terrorist groups “have become far more dangerous than they otherwise would have been” because of their increased operational capability and ideological commitment toward utilizing greater levels of indiscriminate violence in far-away areas of the world.²³

¹⁸ Cheong, “Youths,” 1110.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1106.

²⁰ Archetti, “Terrorism, Communication.”

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Miller, “Al-Qaeda Targets Dwindle”; Montesquiou, “Official: Al-Qaeda”.

²³ “Rewriting,” 4.

Indeed, al-Qaeda has created an entire subculture around their “image” as the most powerful and feared terrorist organization in the world. Just as branding depends on strategic marketing, al-Qaeda has become adept at utilizing digital media technologies to promote their narrative. As U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once noted,

Our enemies have skillfully adapted to fighting wars in today’s media age, but for the most part we, our country, our government, has not adapted. Consider that the violent extremists have established media relations committees – these are terrorists and they have media relations committees that meet and talk about strategy, not with bullets but with words. They’ve proven to be highly successful at manipulating the opinion of elites of the world.²⁴

Terrorist groups essentially utilize three forms of communication: discursive (words, language), visual images, and symbolic acts intended to send a message (including violence).²⁵ Yet, because of the internet and other forms of instantaneous digital technologies, terrorists are able to exert influence through these forms of communication with a degree of precision never seen before. Al Qaeda employs a range of strategic communication strategies, including interviews with key radical leaders, YouTube videos, Facebook, blogs, virtual chat rooms, online message boards, radical websites, conferences and traditional print media, all for the sake of legitimizing and promoting their movement.²⁶ This skillful use of low-cost, instantaneous communication that spans borders has given them unprecedented visibility and power among non-state actors.²⁷

Al-Qaeda has thus effectively propagated its strategic meta-narrative to far-reaching areas of the globe. Because its narrative is strategically tailored toward, and

²⁴ Leuprecht, “Winning the Battle,” 25.

²⁵ Cori Dauber, “VNSA Strategic Communications: Messaging and Media,” in *Protecting the Homeland from International and Domestic Terrorism Threats: Current Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives on Root Causes, the Role of Ideology, and Programs for Counter-Radicalization and Disengagement*, START, (2010): 228, http://www.start.umd.edu/start/publications/U_Counter_Terrorism_White_Paper_Final_January_2010.pdf (accessed September 18, 2011).

²⁶ Cheong, “Youths,” 1107.

²⁷ Archetti, “Terrorism, Communication.”

simultaneously reconstructed by diverse audiences, it could be argued that al-Qaeda's success depends in large part on the widespread credibility of its image or brand. In this regard, rather than an objective, rigid sense of principles, al-Qaeda's narrative resembles more of a "heuristic framework that offers guidance to local extremist groups" and individual supporters and sympathizers.²⁸

In sum, al-Qaeda's narrative must be recognized as an independent cause of radicalization and recruitment. If al-Qaeda's appeal was simply a function of American foreign policy actions, for example, support for the organization would vary in conjunction with any major changes in U.S. policy. Under this explanation, support for al-Qaeda should have decreased in 2007 after implementation of the troop "surge" in Iraq, when sectarian violence was reduced and the U.S. began shifting its counterinsurgency strategy toward reducing its aggressive tactics and winning over and protecting local populations. Yet, despite increased success in Iraq, support-levels for al-Qaeda and its goals among Muslims in Middle Eastern countries remained approximately similar between 2006-2008.²⁹ Additionally, support should have further decreased once President Obama formally ended the Iraq war, set a timetable for the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, and publicly backed populist uprisings against autocratic regimes in Tunisia and Egypt in the Arab Spring. Again, however, this is not borne out:

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Shibley Telhami, "2008 Annual Arab Public Opinion Poll," *Survey of the Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland, with Zogby*, (March 2008), http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/events/2008/0414_middle_east/0414_middle_east_telhami.pdf (accessed March 7, 2012); Steve Kull et al., "Public Opinion in the Islamic World on Terrorism, al-Qaeda, and U.S. Policies," *World Public Opinion*, (2009), http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/feb09/STARTII_Feb09_rpt.pdf (accessed March 7, 2012).

ratings of al-Qaeda by Muslims in the Middle East have remained largely unchanged since 2010.³⁰

In actuality, al-Qaeda's narrative often seems to find credence with distant witnesses of U.S. foreign policy. As discussed above, al-Qaeda's recruitment pool cannot be pinned down to a distinct geographical area or group of people; instead, it spans a diverse array of locales, cultures and social groups. There is thus no singular make-up or predictive variable that radicalized al-Qaeda followers share in common: literature on radicalization overwhelmingly indicates that factors like education, socio-economic status, criminality, religion, nationality, age, or gender are almost never predictive.³¹ In other words, there are multiple profiles of radicalized individuals, just as there are multiple mechanisms or pathways toward radicalization. Yet, what all of the recruits share in common is that they connect, in some way, to the al-Qaeda narrative. Again, while a strategic narrative may not always be the initial or primary instigator of radicalization in and of itself, it is almost always an independent cause in furthering or intensifying the radicalization process by serving as a "rationalization to commitment for radical action."³² While the causes of radicalization may be wide-ranging, it is the strategic narrative that acts as a *unifying* framework of explanation for vulnerable Muslims.³³ It does so by tapping into all of these pre-existing grievances and mechanisms of radicalization and providing "an emotionally satisfying story to make sense of the

³⁰ "Osama bin Laden Largely Discredited Among Muslim Publics in Recent Years," *Pew Research Center*, May 2, 2011, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/05/02/osama-bin-laden-largely-discredited-among-muslim-publics-in-recent-years/>.

³¹ Edwin Bakker, "Jihadi terrorists in Europe, their characteristics and the circumstances in which they joined the jihad: an exploratory study," *Netherlands Institute of International Relations*, (2006), http://www.clingendael.nl/publications/2006/20061200_cscsp_csp_bakker.pdf (accessed March 7, 2012).

³² Leuprecht, "Containing," 50.

³³ Alex P. Schmid, "The Importance of Countering al-Qaeda's 'Single Narrative,'" *National Coordinator for Counterterrorism*, (2010): 46.

world in which they live and their role in it.”³⁴ In other words, al-Qaeda’s success at radicalization and recruitment stems, in large part, from the success of its narrative.

Nonetheless, despite al-Qaeda’s glaring success at creating an entire subculture around its narrative or image, the U.S. has largely failed to counteract this phenomenon.

³⁴ Ibid.

IV. The U.S.'s Failed Counter-Narratives

A. The Bush Administration

Three weeks after 9/11, the U.S. State Department partnered with advertising executive Charlotte Beers to create the “Shared Values Initiative,” a campaign aimed at polishing America’s image abroad. Consisting mainly of print advertisements and five television commercials, these advertisements about happy Muslim Americans essentially aimed “to show Muslims abroad that the war on terror [was not] a clash on civilizations.”¹ In particular, the advertisements were designed to laud the freedom of opportunity in the U.S. and to show Muslims that Americans were not that different. To Beers, “anti-Americanism would dissipate once people realized what America [was] really like.”²

The program was a colossal failure; within one month, the State Department abruptly halted the “Happy Muslim” ads and Beers resigned. Instead of connecting with its targeted audience, the ads were ridiculed and derided by the Arab Press and dismissed by the broader Muslim population as suspicious and manipulative. As’ad AbuKhalil, a research fellow at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of California at Berkeley, stated that “[t]he premise of U.S. propaganda in the Middle East [was] that Muslims and Arabs are idiots — simple-minded, feeble-minded idiots.”³

This initial public relations disaster was one of many ultimately failed attempts by the Bush administration to mount a counter-narrative that could counteract the appeal of al-Qaeda and Islamic extremism in general. Bush’s appointment of Karen Hughes as the

¹ Michelle Goldberg, “To Know America is to Love America,” *Salon*, Dec. 19, 2002, <http://www.salon.com/2002/12/20/beers/>.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy was also largely unsuccessful. While her task was to once again confront ideological support for terrorism around the world by promoting a narrative of American values, Hughes, much like Beers, was criticized for her dearth of substantive experience or knowledge on the issues as well as her lack of relatability to Muslims.⁴ Moreover, upon her departure, the U.S. continued “to receive overwhelmingly negative ratings in the one area that was the primary target of public diplomacy efforts during Hughes' tenure: the Muslim world.”⁵ In fact, according to a PEW poll, in countries like Turkey, Pakistan, Jordan, Egypt, and Indonesia, views of the U.S. only eroded during Hughes's tenure.⁶ While this decline can hardly be pinned solely on Hughes, her attempt at promoting the U.S. image abroad was far from effective.

Other efforts to reach Muslims abroad, such “al-Hurra Television,” the U.S. 24-hour Arabic television news channel, have also been criticized as ineffective for similar reasons. In a U.S. Senate report entitled “U.S. International Broadcasting—Is Anybody Listening?—Keeping the U.S. Connected,” al-Hurra television was depicted as an expensive endeavor that is marginalized by competing news networks and thus little watched throughout the Middle East region.⁷ The Senate also cited a University of Southern California study, which concluded that al-Hurra's unpopularity stemmed from its lack of credibility.⁸ In particular, much like Beers's ads, the study concluded that the

⁴ Jennifer Parker, “Bush Loyalist Karen Hughes Resigns,” *ABC News*, October 31, 2007, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2007/10/karen-hughes-to/>; Fred Kaplan, “Karen Hughes Stay Home: What on Earth is She Doing in the Middle East?” *Slate*, September 29, 2005, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/war_stories/2005/09/karen_hughes_stay_home.html.

⁵ Richard Wike, “Karen Hills Uphill Battle,” *Pew Research Center Publications*, November 1, 2007, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/627/karen-hughes>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ “U.S. International Broadcasting—Is Anybody Listening?—Keeping the U.S. Connected : A Report to the Members of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, One Hundred Eleventh Congress, Second Session,” June 9, 2010, 8, 33, <http://lugar.senate.gov/issues/foreign/diplomacy/report.pdf> (accessed January 27, 2012).

⁸ *Ibid.*, at 33.

television network was viewed as a U.S. “propaganda tool,” because of its overwhelming tendency to be critical of the Arab perspective rather than the “Western viewpoint.”⁹

If anything, the most coherent, unified narrative that the Bush administration managed to produce actually proved to be counter-productive in the Muslim world. Following 9/11, President Bush pledged to strengthen democracy and advance global peace, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in the world. According to Bush, only by remaking the Middle East and spreading democracy, free markets, and self-determination would the terrorists and their extremist ideology of hatred be defeated. This emphasis on freedom and democracy by the Bush administration, known as the “freedom agenda,” arguably could have represented a viable American counter-narrative that would not only promote U.S. policy interests and perceptions of American intentions abroad but also challenge and destabilize al-Qaeda’s narrative.

Yet, the “freedom agenda” also became inextricably intertwined with the administration’s “war on terror” policy narrative. Immediately after 9/11, the administration cast the attacks, as well as the government’s forthcoming response, in grandiose, sweeping terms, all under the banner of “the war on terror.” According to Bush, the “war on terror” began with al-Qaeda, but did not end with al-Qaeda; rather, it only ceased when “every terrorist group of global reach [had] been found, stopped, and defeated.”¹⁰ Bush also branded terrorists as “enemies of freedom” and openly declared that “you are either with us or against us in the fight against terror.”¹¹ This discourse was highly successful at mobilizing support among the U.S. populace for the administration’s

⁹ Ibid., at 33-34.

¹⁰ “Transcript of President Bush’s Address,” *CNN*, September 21, 2001, http://articles.cnn.com/2001-09-20/us/gen.bush.transcript_1_joint-session-national-anthem-citizens/4?_s=PM:US.

¹¹ Ibid.

counterterrorism agenda as well as normalizing counter-terrorism policy in a country that had not been attacked domestically since World War II; indeed, “the current American discourse on the ‘war on terror’ has been so successful...that it has become embedded in the institutions of law enforcement, national security, the legal system and the legislative and executive processes.”¹²

However, in terms of the growing radicalization problem, this discourse has actually been counter-productive. Philip Heymann, for example, argues that one of the many policy weaknesses inherent to framing a terrorism problem as “war” is the unintended benefits that it offers our opponents.¹³ According to Heymann, “an undefined war on terrorism will look like a return of the Crusades to many Muslims. Even if it is plainly addressed to a particular organization, al-Qaeda, it grants that organization the dignity of parity with the United States and spares it the condemnation that the terms ‘terrorism’ and ‘crime’ evoke.”¹⁴ Not only did the “war on terror” discourse glorify terrorists by elevating them to the status of “warriors,” it also had the perverse effect of strengthening al-Qaeda’s narrative by reinforcing their binary worldview of Islam vs. the West, “good vs. evil,” “us vs. them.” In particular, the government’s “negative discourse of threat has not been limited to radical factions, but has become generalized over the whole Muslim population,” which has only intensified anti-Americanism and growing Muslim radicalization.¹⁵ Besides the staggering number of Muslims worldwide who believe that the “war on terror” is a war against Islam, Muslims are also overwhelmingly

¹² Leuprecht, “Winning the Battle,” 26.

¹³ Philip Heymann, *Terrorism, Freedom & Security: Winning Without War* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003), 26.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Froukje Demant and Beatrice de Graaf, “How to Counter Radical Narratives: Dutch Deradicalization Policy in the Case of Moluccan and Islamic Radicals,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33 (2010): 423.

hostile about the presence of American troops in Muslim countries. As Leuprecht et. al note,

A 2009 START poll asked “Overall, do you think the US having naval forces based in the Persian Gulf is a good idea or a bad idea,” those who answered “bad idea” ranged from 76% in Jordan to 91% in Egypt. A similar consensus emerges when respondents are asked whether they endorse the goal of al Qaeda to “push the US to remove its bases and its military forces from all Islamic countries: 87% of Egyptians, 64% of Indonesians, and 60% Pakistanis concur with this goal. If these are the popular attitudes among America’s apparent “allies” in the “Global War on Terror,” then the findings confirm that the current counter-narrative enjoys little legitimacy across the Muslims world.¹⁶

The perception of a “war on Islam” does indeed seem to be “well entrenched among substantive sections of Muslim populations in both the West and other parts of the world.”¹⁷ Yet, what Leuprecht et al. fail to suggest is that the U.S. counter-narrative has *unintentionally exacerbated* worldwide Muslim radicalization and bolstered the credibility of the al-Qaeda narrative.

Worse still, the U.S.’s “war on terror” *discourse* has acted in tandem with U.S. policy *actions* in the Middle East to mutually reinforce the al-Qaeda narrative and undermine America’s image abroad. Actions can often be more powerful than words, particularly in a security context; thus, a government’s counterterrorism “performance” can often be much more resonant than the explicit messages it tries to convey. According to Beatrice de Graaf, one of the crucial lessons learned from the German experience with left-wing terrorism is that the “declaratory policy of official narratives is less persuasive than the actual practical experience of terrorists and their sympathizers in their encounters with state and society – experiences gained from security measures, police approaches,

¹⁶ “Winning the Battle,” 27.

¹⁷ Ibid.

and uses of the law.”¹⁸ Events like the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, policies like extraordinary rendition and indefinite detention, and “malpractices” by organs of the state like detainee abuses in Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, all work in conjunction to fuel “the legends of injustice, oppression, and discrimination that form the bricks of a radical ideology.”¹⁹ Even U.S. drone strikes are no exception: while enormously effective at targeting al-Qaeda’s leadership, they have nonetheless bolstered bin Laden’s proclamations that the U.S. treats Muslim blood as mere “loot.”

Not only can U.S. policy actions fuel preexisting feelings of discontent, they can also undermine any positive policy messages that the U.S. is trying to convey. Regardless of the fact that the so-called “freedom agenda” became inextricably associated with the administration’s “war on terror” counter-narrative, the above-mentioned events and policy decisions, particularly the invasion and protracted war in Iraq, irreparably damaged the credibility and sincerity of America’s intentions regarding its freedom narrative. Moreover, in practice, Bush’s “freedom agenda” often gave way to political realities: not only did the Bush administration continue to support despotic Middle Eastern regimes like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, it also refused to acknowledge the results of democratic elections that it did not like, such as the 2005 Gaza elections.²⁰ Even if the “freedom agenda” constituted a potential counter-narrative in the fight against al-Qaeda on its own merit, the Bush administration had largely abandoned its overt emphasis on spreading freedom and democracy worldwide well before Bush left office due to the

¹⁸ Beatrice de Graaf, “Counter-Narratives and the Unrehearsed Stories Counter-Terrorists Unwittingly Produce,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3, no.2 (2009), <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/65> (accessed September 14, 2011).

¹⁹ Demant, “How to Counter,” 423.

²⁰ Adam Serwer, “Krauthammer and the ‘Bush Freedom Agenda’ Fallacy,” *The Washington Post*, March 4, 2011. http://voices.washingtonpost.com/plum-line/2011/03/the_middle_east_is_not_rising.html.

overwhelming perils and costs of the war in Iraq.²¹ This glaring lack of narrative alignment between words and deeds ultimately fueled al-Qaeda's narrative. As mentioned earlier, al-Qaeda incorporates these U.S. policy choices into their own narrative in order to point out the inherent contradictions of Western liberal democracies and blame them for the moral decay of society

If "combating terrorism is a form of communication as much as terrorism is itself," then the U.S. government under the Bush administration often failed "to be aware of the often implicit and unwittingly produced 'stories'" they told, both through policy discourse and policy actions. Al-Qaeda and like-minded terrorist groups exploit and distort these "messages," and ultimately use them as "fodder for their ideology."²² Moreover, under the Bush administration, the U.S. government's counter-narrative strategy seemed to suggest that America could combat radicalization simply by being America: from the Beers campaign to al-Hurra television to Bush's freedom agenda, there was an implication that radicalization and anti-Americanism in the Muslim world would decline once U.S. values were projected and America's true colors were openly exposed. Ultimately, however, these counter-narratives were a huge failure. At best, they were viewed as U.S. propaganda; at worst, they were corroboration and fuel for al-Qaeda's violent anti-Western narrative. In terms of narrative strategy, al-Qaeda seemed to understand better than the U.S. that it is not only what we think we do or say, but how our words and performance are "received and perceived by various audiences."²³

²¹ Andrew Bacevich, "The 'American Century' Has Ended," *Salon*, November 14, 2011, http://www.salon.com/2011/11/14/the_american_century_is_over/singleton/.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ De Graaf, "Unrehearsed," 9.

B. The Obama Administration

Fortunately, the Obama administration has taken significant steps at eliminating the ill effects borne out of the previous administration's counter-narratives. Obama started by eliminating Bush's "war on terror" narrative which had the unintended and perverse effect of strengthening al-Qaeda's narrative by reinforcing their dichotomous worldview of Islam vs. the West, "good vs. evil." Upon entering office, "the Obama administration recognized the importance of public opinion in the Islamic world and the need to reset perceptions of the United States and its policies - and build a counter-narrative."²⁴

Thus, in his Cairo speech, Obama utilized the opportunity to break from his predecessor. As Goodall et al. argue, while "Bush's rhetorical strategy was to divide the world into opposing forces of Good and Evil, and then demand that Muslims choose sides," Obama, by contrast, shifted this narrative framework and reframed "the challenges facing America and the Muslim world as one of rejecting that division in favor of a story of shared progress."²⁵ In his emphasis on a break from the previous administration, Obama also stressed a "new beginning" based on "mutual interest and mutual respect," and stated that "no system of government can or should be imposed upon one nation by any other."²⁶ Instead, he professed his commitment to governments that "reflect the will of the people."²⁷

²⁴ "Viewpoint: The End of a New Beginning," *BBC News*, September 26, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-15065204>.

²⁵ Bud Goodall, et al., "The Story Behind Obama's Cairo Speech," *COMOPS Journal* (2009), <http://comops.org/journal/2009/06/05/the-story-behind-obamas-cairo-speech/> (accessed January 22, 2012).

²⁶ "From Oslo to Benghazi: A Nobel Prizewinner's Voyage to Discovery," *The Economist*, May 24, 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/18442109>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Moreover, the Arab Spring in 2011, where democratic uprisings displaced the autocratic regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, and protests and demonstrations swept across the region, seemed to offer a viable counter-narrative to al-Qaeda in its own right. Not only did the Arab Spring complement Obama's counter-narrative for peaceful democratic change involving the will of the people, it also undermined al-Qaeda's narrative that the West and democracy is a "source of Islam's gradual decay—not its partner in progress."²⁸ More than ever before, al-Qaeda's narrative seemed like it was on the wrong side of history.

Yet, despite the fact that popular uprisings continue to occur in countries like Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen, Obama has been criticized for "failing to find his voice" ever since the fall of the Mubarak regime in Egypt.²⁹ According to Jackson Diehl of the Washington Post,

In the past half-year Obama has given two big set-piece speeches about the events in the Middle East, at the State Department and the United Nations. In both cases he made headlines for what he said about the frozen Israeli-Palestinian conflict, rather than the revolutionary change underway in Arab states. Outside those addresses the President has rarely spoken about the roller-coaster of change underway in Egypt, or the violent repression in Bahrain, or the pivotal civil conflict in Syria. Months of presidential silence go by, while the press shops at State and the White House issue perfunctory statements.³⁰

Part of the reason for Obama's lack of "voice" may be that, as always, political realities or necessities can interfere or even trump any official counter-narrative. Although the regimes in Yemen and Bahrain "are clinging bloodily to power," their pro-American stance and usefulness "to the United States (Yemen helps to hold al-Qaeda at bay and Bahrain hosts the Fifth fleet) [have made] it much harder for [Obama] to align...interests

²⁸ Goodall, "The Story."

²⁹ Jackson Diehl, "Obama is Lagging on Egypt," *The Washington Post*, December 11, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/obama-lagging-on-the-arab-spring/2011/12/08/gIQApQzCoO_story.html.

³⁰ Ibid.

with values.”³¹ Additionally, the U.S.’s eventual military intervention in Libya to support the populist uprising also made it harder for Obama to “maintain the counter-narrative of peaceful democratic change” and non-interference.³² As mentioned earlier, actions often speak louder than words, particularly in the security context: events like the Libyan intervention, the unrelenting occupation of Afghanistan, and the U.S.’s veto of Palestinian UN membership, have all reinforced al-Qaeda’s narrative of a war between Islam and the West.

The continued difficulties of sustaining a viable U.S. counter-narrative are evident in recent polling data of Muslims in the Middle East. According to the Pew Global Attitudes Project, the Arab Spring failed to improve the U.S.’s image in the Muslim World.³³ “Instead, in key Arab nations and in other predominantly Muslim countries, views of the U.S. remain negative, as they have been for nearly a decade. Indeed, in Jordan, Turkey and Pakistan, views are even more negative than they were one year ago.” Additionally, “concerns that have driven animosity toward the U.S. in recent years are still present – a perception that the U.S. acts unilaterally, opposition to the war on terror, and fears of America as a military threat.”³⁴ Worse still, another Pew poll suggests that Muslims in predominantly Muslim countries believe that relations with “Westerners” are “ [as] bad as they were five years ago,” with Muslims in the Middle East and Asia generally seeing “Westerners as selfish, immoral and greedy – as well as violent and fanatical.”³⁵ All of this suggests that al-Qaeda’s narrative is far from discredited; in fact,

³¹ “From Oslo to Benghazi.”

³² Ibid.

³³ “Obama’s Challenge in the Muslim World: Arab Spring Fails to Improve U.S. Image,” *Pew Research Center*, May 17, 2011, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/05/17/arab-spring-fails-to-improve-us-image/>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ “Common Concerns about Islamic Extremism: Muslim-Western Tensions Persist,” *Pew Research Center*, July 21, 2011, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/07/21/muslim-western-tensions-persist/>.

another poll found that among Muslims in the Middle East, with the exception of Jordan, ratings of al-Qaeda were for the most part unchanged.³⁶

Overall, despite a promising start in Cairo, Obama has generally been unable to implement a sustained, unified counter-narrative strategy. Instead, there often seems to be a lack of direction—or a “narrative gap”—on “matters related to the conflict formerly known as the global war on terror.”³⁷ Encouragingly, the administration took the huge step of releasing a “Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States,” in December 2011.³⁸ Moreover the Strategic Implementation Plan (SIP) devotes a section toward developing a policy that counters the ideologies and narratives that legitimize violent extremism while also promoting American ideals—an area the administration admits is “central” to U.S. efforts, but “also the most challenging area of work.”³⁹ In particular, the document advocates “not only challenging justifications for violence, but affirming American ideals of inclusiveness and opportunity as well.”⁴⁰

But the document offers surprisingly little, either in terms of concrete policy ideas or ways to implement those ideas. For example, while the SIP calls for increasing “the capacity of communities to directly challenge violent extremist ideologies and narratives,” most of the discussion focuses on broad policy prescriptions, like facilitating and expanding “Community Awareness” programs, and connecting Muslim community

³⁶ “Osama bin Laden Largely,” *Pew Research Center*.

³⁷ Bud Goodall, “Narrative Closure Eludes Obama in Latest Speech,” *COMOPS Journal* (2010), <http://comops.org/journal/2010/09/01/narrative-closure-eludes-obama-in-latest-speech/> (accessed January 22, 2012).

³⁸ The White House “Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States,” (Dec 2011), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/sip-final.pdf> (accessed January 18, 2012).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, at 18.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

activists with technology experts, “private sector actors, civil society, and communities interested in countering violent extremist narrative.”⁴¹ Little is said however about developing a credible and comprehensive counter-narrative strategy that could serve as a framework for these policies. While the document briefly advocates “[l]earning from former violent extremists, specifically those who can speak credibly to counter violent narratives, provide insights to government, and potentially catalyze activities to directly challenge violent extremist narratives,” nothing is provided on what this strategy would entail or how it would be executed.⁴² Likewise, while the SIP argues for building “a strategy to leverage new technologies” and counter “online violent extremist radicalization,” it nonetheless concludes that, “because of the importance of the digital environment,” a separate, more comprehensive strategy will need to be developed for doing so.⁴³

Overall, the document, much like the U.S. under both the Bush and Obama administrations, fails to elicit any concrete, comprehensive counter-narrative strategy that can be sustained against al-Qaeda. With the U.S. arguably losing the battle of ideas as Muslim radicalization continues to persist and develop, many have called for the implementation of such a counter-narrative strategy. The next section will discuss whether this is a worthwhile policy endeavor at all as well as what that counter-narrative should consist of.

⁴¹ Ibid., at 18-19.

⁴² Ibid., at 19.

⁴³ Ibid., at 20.

V. A Strategic U.S. Counter-Narrative

The argument in favor of implementing a strategic counter-narrative is straightforward: (1) Narratives are crucial to the way human cognition functions; (2) As a result, terrorists deploy narratives strategically in order to widen their support and further their cause; (3) In the struggle against al-Qaeda, the U.S. is currently losing this “battle of ideas”; (4) Thus, the U.S. should deploy a strategic counter-narrative to counteract the appeal and resonance of al-Qaeda’s narrative.

Yet, the efficacy of such a solution cannot simply be assumed; more needs to be understood about what that counter-narrative would look like and whether implementation of that counter-narrative is even possible. Despite a growing consensus on the need for a so-called counter-narrative, widespread disagreement persists on what the substance of that narrative should be.

Arguments in favor of a counter-narrative strategy can be broken down into two general camps: (1) a “positive alternative” counter-narrative strategy; and (2) a “negative” counter-narrative strategy.

The first type of counter-narrative strategy would promote a positive alternative narrative to counter al-Qaeda’s movement. With a “positive alternative” counter-narrative strategy, the U.S. would develop its own independent narrative framework that would compete with that of al-Qaeda’s by putting forth its own vision of the world that highlights American values and ideas. Examples of a positive alternative counter-narrative include Bush’s freedom agenda and “war on terror” narrative, as well as Obama’s Cairo speech reframing the history between Islam and the West as one of shared progress. Conversely, the second type of counter-narrative strategy, known as a

“negative” counter-narrative strategy, would focus solely on attacking, discrediting and undermining al-Qaeda’s narrative. In other words, a positive-alternative counter-narrative strategy would challenge al-Qaeda’s narrative by proving its own independent narrative with ideas and conclusions. A negative counter-narrative strategy, on the other hand, would not establish an alternative, independent narrative at all; rather, it would challenge al-Qaeda’s narrative by directly attacking and undermining the beliefs and proponents of that narrative.

A. “Positive Alternative” Counter-Narrative Strategy

When President Obama addressed the Muslim world in his Cairo speech, he announced a

new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles—principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.¹

Obama also reached out to history, citing the important role that Islam and Muslims played in America’s story.² By “linking our history to the inclusion and contributions of Muslims, Obama incorporat[ed] all Muslims into the progress archetype, not as an invitation or an afterthought, but instead as a natural part of our historical progression.”³ Obama’s Cairo speech was a prime example of a positive alternative counter-narrative.

This counter-narrative provided a positive, alternative vision or social construction of the

¹ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on a New Beginning,” *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, June 4, 2009. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09> (accessed January 22, 2012).

² Goodall, “The Story Behind.”

³ *Ibid.*

world—“with it’s own beginning, middle, and resolution—that is equally plausible and equally parsimonious as the narrative it disputes” (al-Qaeda’s).⁴

According to Casebeer and Russell, two of the strongest advocates of a positive-alternative counter-narrative, the U.S. should counter the al-Qaeda narrative by developing a better alternative “story” that is adaptable and flexible: “such a ‘counter-narrative strategy’ will have multiple components with layered asynchronous effects.”⁵ Although Casebeer and Russell do not elaborate on what that “better” alternative would entail, they nonetheless encourage the use of certain tactics in creating that alternative. Thus, they suggest that the U.S. should engage in “myth creation” to “create an emotionally compelling background that...directly influences the susceptibility of a population to manipulation.”⁶ According to them, this manipulation is possible because successful myths “leverage heuristics and biases” that are prevalent in human cognition.⁷ Moreover, they argue that a counter-narrative should also utilize common story-telling techniques, including the use of protagonist and antagonists, tests for the protagonist, and a promise of redemption.

Yet, despite the potential strengths of a U.S. narrative that competes with that of al-Qaeda’s, such an approach of creating one grand, positive-alternative counter-narrative suffers from many inherent problems. To begin, it relies on an outdated communication model that “assumes, incorrectly, that communication is the transfer of ‘meaning from

⁴ Anne L. Schneider and Helen M. Ingram, *Deserving and Entitled: Social Constructions and Public Policy* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 160.

⁵ Casebeer and Russell, “Storytelling,” 1,

⁶ Casebeer, “Identity,” 663.

⁷ Ibid.

person to person' and that the message sent is the one that counts." ⁸ As emphasized earlier, narratives do not simply 'carry' a set of "facts"; instead, "they are '*social products*' produced by people within the context of specific social, historical and cultural locations."⁹ As Corman et al. suggest, "

a meaning cannot simply be transferred, like a letter mailed from point A to point B. Instead, listeners create meanings from messages based on factors like autobiography, history, local context, culture, language/symbol systems, power relations, and immediate personal needs. We should assume that meanings listeners create in their minds will probably not be identical to those intended by the receiver. As several decades of communication research has shown, the message received is the one that really counts ¹⁰

As an example, Corman cites Karen Hughes's 2005 "Listening Tour" of the Middle East, where she attempted to improve America's image by "inspiring audiences with a vision of American democracy" and freedom.¹¹ In pursuance of this strategy, Hughes said to a group of 500 Saudi women: "I feel, as an American woman, that my ability to drive is an important part of my freedom. It has allowed me to work during my career. It has allowed me to go to the grocery store and shop for my family. It allows me to go to the doctor."¹² Despite her good intentions to "highlight the freedoms that accrue to American women, particularly in comparison to the audience's government, which (among other restrictions) bans women from driving," the "message fell flat. Not only did Hughes fail to persuade the Saudi women, she inadvertently offended her audience."¹³

It is likewise naïve to assume that America can transmit a positive alternative narrative that will be received and interpreted in a consistent manner across different

⁸ Steven R. Corman et al., "A 21st Century Model for Communication in the Global War of Ideas: From Simplistic Influence to Pragmatic Complexity," *Consortium for Strategic Communication*, (2007), <http://comops.org/article/114.pdf> (accessed January 22, 2012).

⁹ Archetti, "Terrorism, Communication."

¹⁰ Corman, "A 21st Century Model," 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

audiences and countries. As Archetti explains, the “implication is a reification of the narrative, the belief that it has an objective existence outside the mind of audiences—a notion that clashes with the understanding of narrative as a social product only existing through its continuous re-telling.”¹⁴ A “positive alternative” approach tends to neglect the complexity and “sociological depth of the narrative concept.” It mistakenly assumes that a narrative can simply be sent from the sender to the receiver in order to trigger certain expected behaviours.

This is particularly true in an era of transparent and instantaneous communication technologies that are unconstrained by borders.¹⁵ With the advent of the internet, communication is no longer a process of transmitting messages from a source to a specific, well-defined audience; instead, it more closely resembles an ongoing dialogue or conversation with multiple audiences.¹⁶ Thus, even beyond the fact that the concept of a narrative has been oversimplified as a “story” or message”, it is simply not possible to plan out clear, objective messages and target them toward distinct audiences in the hopes of achieving a uniform change in attitudes and beliefs. As al-Qaeda has aptly understood, a narrative will ultimately mean different things to different people, as it is collectively reconstructed “across countries and terrorist groups, over time, and in the mind of audiences.”¹⁷ This is why al-Qaeda’s basic narrative has been compared to a heuristic framework: while al-Qaeda may have a meta-narrative that frames the basic contours of its ideology, it has been able to gain widespread appeal by tailoring that global narrative to specific local grievances and sensitivities as well as distinct cultures and social groups.

¹⁴ Archetti, “Terrorism, Communication.”

¹⁵ Archetti, “Terrorism, Communication.”

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

As a nonstate actor with local roots, al-Qaeda has enjoyed enormous success at branding and market segmentation, something that may simply not be possible from the likes of a governmental actor.

More fundamentally, this approach also grossly oversimplifies the dynamic process of radicalization. Implicit in the argument that the best way to counter al-Qaeda's narrative is to develop a positive-alternative counter-narrative, is the tacit assumption that it is possible to develop a single, all-encompassing counter-narrative that adequately addresses why an individual would choose to support al-Qaeda. Yet, as Jacobsen notes, an "examination of the reasons why, and the processes by, which individuals are radicalized, has made clear that...there is no single path that leads people to violent extremism."¹⁸ In fact, as mentioned earlier, Clark McCauley has identified at least 12 different mechanisms of radicalization, each one of which may exist on an individual level, a small-group level, or a mass-public level.¹⁹ Moreover, "multiple mechanisms are usually seen at work on the same individual, and the combination of mechanisms may be synergistic rather than simply adding independent pushes toward radicalization."²⁰ Radicalization is thus a complex and multi-faceted process; if there are multiple mechanisms of radicalization then "there is no single mechanism that, if controlled or eliminated, will control or eliminate radicalization."²¹ This is crucial when considering how to construct counter-narratives: assuming it is even possible to identify all of the mechanisms that lead to radicalization, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to develop

¹⁸ Michael Jacobsen, "Terrorist Drop-Outs: One Way of Promoting a Counter-Narrative," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3, no.2 (2009), <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/66> (accessed September 14, 2011).

¹⁹ McCauley, *Friction*.

²⁰ Leuprecht, "Containing," 48.

²¹ Leuprecht, "Winning the Battle," 32.

a *single*, over-arching narrative of America's vision of the world that could account for all of them.

Proponents of this strategy, such as Casebeer and Russell, also neglect the many different levels of sympathy and support that al-Qaeda attracts. Muslims do not necessarily agree on every tenet of the al-Qaeda narrative. Moreover, Muslims may agree with al-Qaeda's cause but disagree with their choice of tactics. Individual Muslims, for example, "may sympathize with the view that Islam is under unjust attack by Westerners and sympathize with the terrorists' desire to defend against this attack but still not...believe that terrorist actions are just and religiously sanctified and...that it is the duty of Muslims to support terrorist actions."²² It is thus difficult to imagine why the U.S. should target these individuals with the *same exact* counter-narrative as those who have fully committed themselves to religiously sanctified violence against civilians.

Yet another critical pitfall of this strategy is that a positive alternative counter-narrative can often take a backseat to political realities and necessities. The complexity and dynamism of modern international relations means that the U.S. is often forced to choose the least-worst alternative policy choice available when deciding how to act. As a result, U.S. actions can, and often do, conflict with any positive-alternative counter-narrative it propagates to frame its policies. This "gap" between U.S. actions and its official narrative inevitably opens the door to criticism of the U.S. for not living up to its word, or worse, lying about its intentions, which in turn fuels the preexisting discontent and mistrust. Thus, such a strategy runs of the risk of being perceived as a manipulation device or state propaganda. Unfortunately, this also plays right into the hands of al-Qaeda. Again, al-Qaeda's own narrative thrives when the group can distort and exploit

²² Ibid., 27.

any real or imagined inconsistencies between U.S. policy rhetoric and U.S. policy actions.

As mentioned earlier, these problems were apparent in the ultimate ineffectiveness of Bush's "freedom agenda." The same holds true for Obama's Cairo speech that emphasized peaceful democratic change and a U.S.-Muslim history based on shared progress: within one year of the speech, views of America in Muslim-majority countries had dropped to Bush-era levels and Muslims in predominantly Muslim countries reported that relations with "Westerners" were "[as] bad as they were five years ago."²³ Moreover, a 2011 Pew poll reported that ratings of al-Qaeda among Muslims in the Middle East were largely unchanged.²⁴ Part of the problem is that no narrative, no matter how powerful, can realistically reverse decades of discontent and distrust in a matter of two years.

But on a more fundamental level, state actions will always speak louder than any state-sponsored narrative that is used to frame those actions. The purpose of any policy narrative is to frame the way individuals perceive both external events as well as their sense of collective identity. But because such positive-alternative counter-narratives ultimately compete with the U.S.'s frequent involvement in Middle Eastern affairs, they can be easily forgotten, distorted, or discredited. As a result, neither of these positive alternative counter-narratives of the past two administrations have gained much traction at effectively framing U.S. policies toward the Muslim world and countering al-Qaeda's narrative.

²³ Michael Crowley, "One Year After Cairo: Obama and the Muslim World," *TIME*, June 4, 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1994146,00.html>; Common Concerns about Islamic Extremism: Muslim-Western Tensions Persist," *Pew Research Center*, July 21, 2011. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/07/21/muslim-western-tensions-persist/>.

²⁴ "Osama bin Laden Largely," *Pew Research Center*.

If anything, the way forward for the creation of a positive alternative lies in a *better* “consistency between rhetoric and deeds,” an “alignment” between values and actions.²⁵ As de-Graaf maintains, the unintentional and unconscious messages conveyed by U.S. policy actions can be much more powerful than any state-sponsored discourse. While it is virtually impossible to achieve total uniformity, a more *sustained focus* on consistency between rhetoric and deeds would still be much more effective at “shattering the myths and half-truths propagated by terrorists and their sympathizers” than a positive alternative counter-narrative that is inevitably misrepresented and manipulated by al-Qaeda, and dismissed as hypocritical propaganda by a skeptical Muslim public.²⁶

The most glaring flaw, however, is that, despite the widespread consensus on the need for a counter-narrative, those who advocate for a positive-alternative counter-narrative cannot seem to concretely articulate what the substance of that narrative would be. In particular, there still seems to be a misguided focus on “getting Muslims around the world to have a more positive view of the United States.”²⁷ Advertising campaigns and “listening tours” attempt to package and sell abstract values like freedom and democracy based on the false premise that the roots of Muslim radicalization lie in a common misunderstanding of American values and way of life. Yet, a narrative anchored in improving America’s image is not sufficient to form the basis of a counter-narrative strategy: a more “popular” America is not enough to resolve the many reasons why al-Qaeda’s narrative finds resonance in the Muslim world, nor is it enough to address the numerous mechanisms that can be responsible for radicalization.

²⁵ Betz, “Virtual,” 530.

²⁶ De Graaf, “Unrehearsed,” 9.

²⁷ “Rewriting,” 11.

What, then, should be done? Perhaps one solution is to do nothing: instead of adopting a counter-narrative strategy, the U.S. could simply wait for the al-Qaeda narrative and image to burn out. As Charlotte Linde maintains, a narrative's stability over time is not a given.²⁸ "Continuity is rather an accomplishment that involves a group's working and re-working of the past, its invoking, re-telling—often selective—for present purposes."²⁹ Brynjar Lia echoes this thought, arguing that, because all extremist ideologies possess a limited lifespan, al-Qaeda's image will inevitably fade.³⁰

Yet Lia's argument seems overly optimistic. Not all "extreme" ideologies inexorably die out; some transform over time while others simply become normalized or accepted. While Linde argues that a narrative's enduring stability should not be assumed, she does *not* claim that all narratives have a fixed lifespan. Even if al-Qaeda's narrative or image eventually burns out, its current widespread appeal to diverse groups of Muslims suggests that this so-called "inevitability" is far down the road.

Instead, the way forward in the battle of ideas lies in the implementation of a sustained, multi-pronged "negative" counter-narrative strategy.

B. "Negative" Counter-Narrative Strategy

While the efficacy of such a strategy has been relatively untested by U.S. policymakers, past studies of positive vs. negative political advertisements, and their effect on voters, lend credence to the potential viability of a "negative" counter-narrative strategy.

²⁸ Charlotte Linde, *Working the Past: Narrative and Institutional Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁰ Lia, "Al-Qaeda's Appeal."

1. Case Study: Political Advertisements

While theories on emotion often differ, there is a consensus on many of the causes and consequences of two particular emotions: enthusiasm and anxiety or fear.³¹

According to Ted Brader, “[e]nthusiasm is a reaction to signals that have positive implication’s for a person’s goals (i.e. things are going well). It reinforces commitment to those goals and strengthens the motivation to act or stay involved.”³² Anxiety or fear, on the other hand, “is a reaction to threat.”³³ Anxiety or fear “breaks a person out of routines, directs attention to relevant portions of the environment, and activates thinking about alternative courses of action.”³⁴

The theory of “Affective Intelligence” applies these psychological principles of emotion to the world of politics. Affective intelligence “hypothesizes that two fundamental systems (enthusiasm/satisfaction or depression/frustration) help us appraise emotions in political content and shape our political choices and actions.”³⁵ Along these lines, if people receive political information that is positive, they use “enduring political habits (partisanship, prejudices, social identity) to make sense of the information.”³⁶ On the other hand, if people receive threatening information “the use of enduring habits is interrupted, and [they] pay attention to alternative arguments and information.”³⁷

Moreover, in a series of experiments, Ted Brader confirmed that this theory of Affective Intelligence applies to political advertisements as well. According to Brader,

³¹ Ted Brader, “Striking a Responsive Chord: How Political Ads Motivate and Persuade Voters by Appealing to Emotions,” *American Journal of Political Science* 49, no.2 (Apr. 2005): 390.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ted Brader, “Campaigning for Hearts and Minds: How Emotional Appeals in Political Ads Work,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2006): 625.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

“enthusiasm-eliciting images and music, when added to a positive message, encourage fidelity to prior beliefs.”³⁸ In other words, political advertisements with positive messages “reinforce people’s prior views, beliefs, and attitudes.”³⁹ Negative ads that evoke emotions of fear or anxiety, on the other hand, tend “to serve the goal of vigilance.”⁴⁰ These ads provoke information-seeking by decreasing the salience of prior beliefs and encouraging “reconsideration of choices on the basis of contemporary evaluations.”⁴¹ It was negative ads, rather than positive ads, that tended to unlock “the grip that habit holds over people’s decisions “and spur individuals to “rethink their course of action.”⁴² Thus, while positive ads are likely to fortify prior beliefs and attitudes, negative ads can actually “*cause* changes in political choice”; in fact, according to Brader, there is some evidence to suggest that the effect of these negative ads “on prior beliefs is broader than previously observed,” affecting deeply socialized habits of party identification.”⁴³

These findings confirm what politicians and political consultants have known for years, namely that negative advertisements *work*. They work at provoking more “voter migration” than positive ads because they are better at causing individuals to reevaluate and even change preferences and behaviors.⁴⁴ Additionally, other studies have found that, because negative ads elicit higher levels of physiological arousal, they garner more attention and are better remembered by voters than positive ads.⁴⁵ In fact, studies have

³⁸ Brader, “Striking,” 402.

³⁹ Sherry Rauh, “The Psychology of Political Ads,” *CBS News*, October 22, 2008, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/10/22/health/webmd/main4539951.shtml>.

⁴⁰ Brader, “Striking,” 403.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, at 391.

⁴² Rauh, “The Psychology.”

⁴³ Brader, “Striking,” 401.

⁴⁴ “Young Voters Influenced By Negative Political Ads, Says Study,” *Science Daily*, Feb 12, 2008. <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/02/080212122046.htm>.

⁴⁵ Samuel D. Bradley et al., “Psychophysiological and Memory Effects of Negative Political Ads,” *Journal of Advertising* 36, no.4 (Winter 2007): 115-127.

also shown that the impact of negative political advertisements persists and even increases over time.⁴⁶ Typically, the persuasive impact of message erodes or diminishes as time goes on. With negative ads however, the impact on receiver's attitudes only grows and endures. This paradoxical result is known as the "sleeper effect."⁴⁷ Moreover, according to Lariscy and Tinkham, "even when the impact of the attack is suppressed by a direct defensive advertising message, or when it is suppressed by perceived low credibility of the attacking candidate, these defensive strategies or negative source effects are merely temporary."⁴⁸ Instead, this initial damage to the attacker will dissipate and the resonance of the negative attack will persist.⁴⁹

These findings are directly applicable to the counter-narrative context. While the effectiveness of a "negative" counter-narrative strategy has been relatively untested by U.S. policymakers, the lessons of political advertisements should shed light on the potential efficacy of such an approach. When compared with positive advertisements, negative political ads elicit more attention from voters; they are better remembered by voters; they have a longer and more lasting impact on voters; and most importantly, unlike positive ads which are effective at *reinforcing* prior beliefs, they cause individuals to *reevaluate* their reliance on preexisting beliefs and consider alternative arguments and information. To be effective at preventing the al-Qaeda narrative from resonating with individual Muslims, a U.S. counter-narrative strategy will need to capture the focus, attention and memory of their targeted audience, not only initially but also over time. And to be effective, a counter-narrative strategy must provoke Muslims to reevaluate the

⁴⁶ Ruth Ann Weaver Lariscy and Spencer F. Tinkham, "The Sleeper Effect and Negative Political Advertising," *Journal of Advertising* 28, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 13-30.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, at 14.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, at 26.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, at 29.

prior beliefs and attitudes that led them to associate with the al-Qaeda narrative, and seek out new information to challenge those beliefs.

Thus, rather than inventing its own “positive alternative” or “offensive” counter-narrative, the U.S. should implement a “negative” counter-narrative strategy that seeks solely to undermine al-Qaeda’s credibility on multiple fronts. Despite numerous and diverse opportunities to do so, the U.S. has largely failed to mount any viable effort at undercutting al-Qaeda’s narrative or image. This counter-narrative strategy can be roughly divided into two forms: a counter-narrative aimed at discrediting the credibility al-Qaeda’s religious philosophy and a counter-narrative aimed at undermining the credibility of al-Qaeda itself.

2. Discrediting al-Qaeda’s Religious Philosophy

The first approach involves not only rebutting al-Qaeda’s religious tenets but also offering alternative interpretations of key texts and speeches.”⁵⁰ According to Tom Quiggin, there are eight themes that appear regularly in “jihadist discourse,” each of which has two major interpretations: an al-Qaeda interpretation and “a more classical, mainstream interpretation.”⁵¹ Thus, by discrediting al-Qaeda’s religious beliefs and simultaneously emphasizing more mainstream understandings of Muslim texts and doctrines, the U.S. can undercut the inspirational component of al-Qaeda’s narrative and a key source of radicalization.

In fact, programs like this have already been implemented in other countries with varying degrees of success. For example, the centerpiece of Saudi Arabia’s counter-

⁵⁰ “Radicalization: The Role of the Internet,” *Institute for Strategic Dialogue* (2011), http://www.strategicdialogue.org/allnewmats/idandsc2011/StockholmPPN2011_BackgroundPaper_FINAL.pdf (accessed November 10, 2011).

⁵¹ “Understanding,” 21.

radicalization strategy, the “Counseling Program,” “seeks to counter-radicalize extremists and extremist sympathizers by engaging them in intensive religious debates and psychological counseling, supplemented with extensive social support.”⁵² Moreover, the program “presumes that the suspects were lied to and misled by extremists into straying away from true Islam” and thus, seeks to help them “return to the correct path.”⁵³ In particular, the Saudis have determined that many detainees have an incomplete understanding of Islam and a general lack of education; as a result, the “majority have been radicalized through extremist books, tapes, videos, and more recently the internet.”⁵⁴ Thus, by utilizing the help of independent Islamic scholars, Saudi Arabia hopes to correct these misunderstandings by engaging detainees in discussions about their beliefs and presenting evidence from religious sources that contradict these presumptions.⁵⁵ Preliminarily, this strategy seems to be working; according to Chris Boucek, as of November 2007, about 1,500 of the 3,000 prisoners who participated in the “Counseling Program” renounced their former beliefs and reentered into society.

Similar strategies have been adopted in European countries, including the Netherlands and local grassroots initiatives in London.⁵⁶ In the STREET (Strategy to Re-Empower and Educate Teenagers) program in Brixton, south London, for example, local police have partnered with strict Salafists to confront local Muslim individuals “who

⁵² Chris Boucek, “Counter-Radicalization and Extremism Disengagement in Saudi Arabia,” in *Protecting the Homeland from International and Domestic Terrorism Threats: Current Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives on Root Causes, the Role of Ideology, and Programs for Counter-Radicalization and Disengagement*, START, (2010): 370, http://www.start.umd.edu/start/publications/U_Counter_Terrorism_White_Paper_Final_January_2010.pdf (accessed September 18, 2011).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 371.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 373.

⁵⁶ Lorenzo Vidino, “A Preliminary Assessment of Counter-Radicalization in the Netherlands,” *CTC Sentinel* 1, no. 9 (2008); Robert Lambert, “Empowering Salafis and Islamists Against Al-Qaeda: A London Counterterrorism Case Study,” *Political Science & Politics* 41, no.1 (2008).

were becoming more observant to an Islamic orientation which potentially condoned crime and encouraged terrorist activity.”⁵⁷ The program relies on “established local social networks,” whether “formally in the STREET project or more informally through social contacts and interaction.”⁵⁸ STREET, with its “combination of ‘street skills’ and ‘religious integrity,’ has been particularly successful in counteracting the recruitment efforts of al-Qaeda-linked preachers in the area.”⁵⁹ In fact, al-Qaeda supporters in the area have recognized that they are in direct competition with these non-violent Salafists and have pursued a campaign to attack and undermine their credibility.⁶⁰ As Githens-Mazer argues, if the Brixton Salafists posed no threat to al-Qaeda’s recruitment program, they almost certainly would have ignored them as they have “ignored all other Muslim groups in the area. The fact that it mattered to al-Qaeda supporters to ridicule their most effective opponents on the streets and in the cafes where they competed for recruits served as a valuable performance indicator.”⁶¹

In all of these programs, the credibility of the messenger has proven to be one of, if not the most, crucial component. Any message that is perceived as state-sponsored will only be met with distrust and intransigence. In this regard, former terrorists as well as local religious figures and scholars can be especially powerful at delivering these messages.⁶² As Betz, argues this is ultimately an “intra-Muslim” debate and “not one

⁵⁷ Jonathan Githens-Mazer and Robert Lambert, “Why Conventional Wisdom on Radicalisation Fails: The Persistence of a Failed Discourse,” *International Affairs* 86, no. 4 (2010): 897.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, at 897-898.

⁵⁹ Lorenzo Vidino, “Countering Radicalization in America: Lessons from Europe,” *United States Institute of Peace: Special Report* (Nov. 2010): 7. http://www.usip.org/files/resources/SR262%20-%20Countering_Radicalization_in_America.pdf (accessed September 14, 2011).

⁶⁰ Githens-Mazer, “Why Conventional,” 898-899.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, at 899.

⁶² “Role of the Internet,” 9.

which we as outsiders can contribute to in a sophisticated and convincing way.”⁶³

Furthermore, according to Robert Lambert, the former head of the Muslim Contact Unit of the London Metropolitan Police who worked extensively with the STREET program, local Islamist who do not condone violence can act as “a firewall, preventing cognitive radicalization from becoming behavioral.”⁶⁴

However these programs have met resistance from parts of the UK government as well as certain segments of British society who are reluctant to partner with local Islamists, despite them being the most credible figures to counter al-Qaeda’s ideology. As Robert Lambert observes, “Salafis and Islamists are often viewed with deep distrust and hostility” and these groups are misleadingly conflated with al-Qaeda terrorism.⁶⁵ These stereotypes are unfortunate: “the fact that al-Qaeda terrorists adapt and distort Salafi and Islamist approaches to Islam does not mean that Salafis and Islamists are implicitly linked to terrorism...No more was Irish Catholicism a key pointer to Provisional IRA terrorism.”⁶⁶ In fact, Lambert argues that “only nonviolent Islamists have the credibility to challenge the narrative of al-Qaeda and influence young Muslims who might be on the path to violent radicalization.”⁶⁷ The Danish Security Services “share this view, arguing that in some cases, ‘it is precisely these individuals who have the best chance of influencing the attitudes of the young people who are in a process of radicalization in a non-violent direction.’”⁶⁸

Much of this stems from how we define the problem of radicalization, and thus, its corresponding solution in counter-radicalization: does the danger lie in the ideology

⁶³ Betz, “Virtual,” 511.

⁶⁴ Vidino, “Countering Radicalization,” 7 .

⁶⁵ Lambert, “Empowering,” 34.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Vidino, “Countering Radicalization,” 7.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

itself or the willingness to resort to political violence in the name of that ideology? As will be elaborated on later, it is not the attitudes or beliefs but the behavior, specifically the willingness to engage in terrorism, that must be addressed in any counter-radicalization campaign, including a counter-narrative strategy. By failing to partner with local Islamist scholars and figures who do *not* espouse violence in the name of their beliefs, the U.S. is missing a vital opportunity to counter the gross inconsistencies and distortions that fuel al-Qaeda's religious philosophy.

3. Undermining the Credibility of al-Qaeda Itself

Despite its potential effectiveness, many scholars and policymakers mistakenly assume that attacking al-Qaeda's religious ideology is sufficient enough to form a viable counter-narrative aimed at destroying al-Qaeda's appeal. Yet, this argument is just as shortsighted as the view that the U.S. can counter al-Qaeda's narrative with a single, all-encompassing positive counter-narrative. Such an approach overstates the importance of religion in al-Qaeda's narrative and categorically ignores the multiple and diverse paths that can lead to radicalization. As Oliver Roy noted,

To my knowledge, none of the arrested [al Qaeda] terrorists or suspects had Zawahiri or other books in their house, while they often have handbooks on how to make bombs or videos about 'atrocities' perpetrated against Muslims. Contrary for instance to the Hizb ut-Tahrir members, who always formulate their positions in elaborate ideological terms, Al Qaeda's members do not articulate before or after having been caught a political or an ideological stand (most of AQ suspects keep silent or deny any involvement during their trial, a very unusual attitude for political militants, who traditionally transform their trial into a political tribunal). We should certainly not discard entirely the fact that some quarters in Al Qaeda are writing or thinking in terms of ideology, but this does not seem to be the main motivation for joining Al Qaeda.⁶⁹

Echoing this concern, Leuprecht et al. argue, for example, that even the most basic aspect of al-Qaeda's religious philosophy, "that there is supposedly a war on Islam going on,

⁶⁹ Ramsay, "Relocatin," 42.

represents only a single mechanism of radicalization – group grievance. A completely effective attack on this grievance would yet leave eleven other mechanisms of radicalization in play.”⁷⁰ Leuprecht et al. further argue that the “perception of group grievance may often be the result of radicalization via other mechanisms rather than an independent cause of radicalization. That is, a radical group framing of group grievance may often be adopted or learned by members of a radical group who themselves joined for other reasons – including personal grievance, fear, or merely thrill-seeking.”⁷¹

As a result, a successful counter-narrative strategy will recognize that the psychological appeal of al-Qaeda does not stem solely from religious ideology. To be effective, a U.S. counter-narrative must also seek to undermine the credibility of the al-Qaeda brand. Again, a narrative’s strength depends largely on the credibility of those who propagate it, and al-Qaeda is no exception. By chipping away at the aura and the legitimacy that currently surrounds al-Qaeda, the U.S. can diminish its appeal as a potential outlet for individuals that are vulnerable to radicalization.

This strategy can take multiple forms, most of which have been untested in the post-9/11 landscape. First, a U.S. counter-narrative should emphasize al-Qaeda’s hypocrisies. This not only involves showing how the methods they adopt are inconsistent with their own beliefs but also highlighting the devastating destruction they cause as so-called “pious warriors” acting in the name of Islam. In particular, as Michael Jacobsen argues, an effective counter-narrative should “strive to demonstrate civilian and Muslim suffering at the hands of the terrorists. Showing the resulting deaths of Muslims and focusing on the hypocrisy of an ideology that purports to defend Muslims but kills them

⁷⁰ “Winning the Battle” 32.

⁷¹ Ibid.

instead is a worthwhile endeavor.”⁷² Such an approach would thus accentuate both the futility of violence against civilians as well as “the counter-productive consequences of their actions for the communities that they claim to defend.”⁷³ This is not a new concept; al-Qaeda has successfully exploited and distorted any disconnects between U.S. rhetoric and actions for years. In fact, the enduring viability of their narrative has depended, in large part, on this approach in order to reinforce their binary worldview of Islam vs. the West. The psychological power of this approach is thus abundantly clear. Moreover, al-Qaeda is particularly vulnerable because of the inherently contradictory nature of its tactics. Yet, while the opportunity is in plain sight, the U.S. has utterly failed to mount an adequate counter-narrative aimed at highlighting the gross hypocrisies that plague its enemy.

This type of approach also has a social-psychological foundation. In a process known as group polarization, “groups made up of like-minded individuals are likely to become more extreme in their shared preferences.”⁷⁴ Consequently, group dynamics tend to favor arguments and individuals that are more extreme. This phenomenon can also lead to intra-group competition among different factions and eventually fissures within the group itself, “such as the split within the IRA and the formation of two IRA splinter groups.”⁷⁵ As Michael Jacobsen notes, disillusionment has “historically been a major reason why militants have left their groups. Some of them simply felt that their groups’ fellow members or its leader had finally gone too far.”⁷⁶ It is no stretch to assume, then, that a counter-narrative that emphasizes al-Qaeda’s destructive hypocrisy would have

⁷² “Drop-outs,” 13.

⁷³ “Role of the Internet,” 9.

⁷⁴ Leuprecht, “Winning the Battle,” 31.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ “Drop-outs,” 13.

particular resonance with supporters and sympathizers who do not necessarily condone violence. In this regard, the U.S. would be wise to empower the voices of victims of terrorism, “whose voices are consistently silent and ignored but who have a strong and compelling story to tell about the futility of terrorism.”⁷⁷ These individuals can also undermine al-Qaeda’s “talk of being ‘at war’ by communicating the ordinary lives of the people they have killed.”⁷⁸

Another facet of the U.S. counter-narrative should aim to systematically deglamourize the al-Qaida brand. Lia argues that al-Qaeda “has created for itself a powerful and captivating image” as the “world’s most feared terrorist organization, which exerts an immense attraction on young people. In some countries in Europe, it has become ‘cool’ to be a jihadi.”⁷⁹ Echoing this thought, Bartlett et al. argue that the “idea of al-Qaeda is as important as the ideas it propagates. At least some of the appeal of terrorist activity is the notoriety, glamour and status that it brings.”⁸⁰ Today, the image of al-Qaeda as highly skilled, highly lethal, and systematically trained and organized continues to persist. As Daniel Byman and Christine Fair argue,

[i]n the years after 9/11, the images we were shown of terrorists were largely the same: shadowy jihadists who, even when they were foiled, seemed always to have come terrifyingly close to pulling off a horrific attack. We’ve all become familiar by now with the stock footage of Talibs in black *shalwar kameezes* zipping across monkey bars or, more recently, perfecting kung fu kicks in some secret training camp. Even in the aftermath of the botched Times Square bombing earlier this spring, the perception persists that our enemies are savvy and sophisticated killers. They’re fanatical and highly organized—twin ideas that at once keep us fearful and help them attract new members.⁸¹

⁷⁷ “Role of the Internet,” 10.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Lia, “Al-Qaeda’s Appeal.”

⁸⁰ “The Edge of Violence: A Radical Approach to Extremism,” *DEMOS* (2010), 39, http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Edge_of_Violence_-_web.pdf?1271346195 (accessed October 14, 2011).

⁸¹ “The Case For Calling Them Nitwits,” *The Atlantic*, July/August 2010, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/07/the-case-for-calling-them-nitwits/8130/>.

This aspect of al-Qaeda's appeal is particularly relevant to young people. Rebellious against the perceived values of the status quo is a common part of being young and the Muslim youth who join al-Qaeda "often seem to be seeking adventure, esteem in the eyes of their peers, and a sense of brotherhood and purpose."⁸² In fact, al-Qaeda purposefully reinforces the natural rebelliousness of youth through discursive strategies that emphasize the youth capacity to "comprehend the true divine guidance of God as *mujahideen* (warriors), in contrast to adults... whose hearts have been sealed to the true message of Islam because of their laxity, ignorance, or infidelity."⁸³

Removing the glamour from al-Qaeda should thus be a key component of the U.S. counter-narrative, particularly since the popular view of them "is wildly off the mark."⁸⁴ As Byman and Fair argue, while "some terrorists are steery and skilled...the quiet truth is that many of the deluded foot soldiers are foolish and untrained, perhaps even untrainable." By not only acknowledging this reality but emphatically publicizing it as well, the U.S. "could help erode the powerful images of strength and piety that terrorists rely on for recruiting and funding."⁸⁵

Likewise, the "reality of life as a terrorist" should be similarly demystified and stripped of its glamour and cool by "demonstrating the harsh reality of life in the underground."⁸⁶ According to Jacobsen, this tough reality, including life on the run, is a

⁸² Lt. Col. Carsten Bockstette, "Exploit Information Technologies: Use of Strategic Communication Calls for a United Response," *per Concordian : Journal of European Security and Defense Issues* 1, no.3 (2010): 18,

http://www.marshallcenter.org/mcpublicweb/MCDocs/files/College/F_Publications/perConcordium/pcv1n3eng.pdf (accessed October 7, 2011).

⁸³ Cheong, "Youths," 1118.

⁸⁴ Bartlett, "The Edge," 38; Byman, "The Case."

⁸⁵ "The Case."

⁸⁶ Jacobsen, "Drop-outs," 14.

key factor in driving individuals out of terrorist organizations, including al-Qaeda.⁸⁷ Simply put, life as a terrorist most often fails to live up to the hype. John Horgan, a psychologist who has interviewed terrorists from 13 diverse organizations, affirms this argument, claiming that the common denominator among terrorist dropouts is the widespread disenchantment.⁸⁸ As Horgan notes, “the reality didn’t live up to the fantasy...The reality is depressing, stressful and generally not what people expect.”⁸⁹ Thus, a counter-narrative can powerfully exploit this disconnect lying between expectations and reality by highlighting this common disenchantment.

Along these lines, a U.S. counter-narrative should also aim to deglamourize al-Qaeda and the “jihadi ‘cool’ brand” through strategic use of humor, ridicule, and satire. Bartlett et al., for example, point out that “satire has long been recognized as a powerful tool to undermine the popularity of social movements: both the Ku Klux Klan and the British Fascists in the 1930’s were seriously harmed by sustained satire.”⁹⁰ Similarly, Kristin Fleischer argues that humor, ridicule and satire “are legitimate tools of strategic communication” that “have a long history in warfare,” both offensively and defensively.⁹¹ According to J. Michael Waller, ridicule is effective in the context of counterterrorism, particularly because it cannot be refuted by the target, “it spreads on its own and multiplies with each retelling,” and it “divides the enemy, damages its morale,

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Amada Ripley, “Reverse Radicalism,” *TIME*, March 13, 2008, http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1720049_1720050_1722062,00.html.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ “The Edge,” 40.

⁹¹ Kristin Fleischer, “Ridicule as Strategic Communication,” *COMOPS Journal*, (2010), <http://comops.org/journal/2010/03/09/ridicule-as-strategic-communication/> (accessed November 7, 2011).

and makes [the organization] less attractive to supporters and prospective recruits.”⁹² It is no coincidence that all of the qualities Waller lists are also true for narratives as well; these characteristics thus make humor and ridicule a powerful psychological weapon.

Consequently, the U.S. counter-narrative should attack the respect and credibility of al-Qaeda by stressing “that most al-Qaeda-inspired terrorists are in fact incompetent, narcissistic, [and] irreligious.”⁹³ Based on current reality, this should not be overly difficult; tales of ineptitude are abound. In Afghanistan, one in two Taliban suicide bombers “manages to kill only himself.”⁹⁴ Simple terrorist plots aimed at the U.S., including the “underwear bomber,” and the “shoe bomber,” are bungled as a result of incompetence. Al-Qaeda operatives, promoted as “pious warriors,” are caught with graphic pornography or filmed engaging in “intimate relations” with donkeys and cows. Even bin Laden himself was found with an extensive digital archive of pornography at his compound in Abbotabad. The opportunities are there: humor, ridicule, and satire can help “undermine some of the myths built up around our enemies by highlighting their incompetence, their moral failings, and their embarrassing antics.”⁹⁵ As Waller notes, “being ridiculed means losing respect. It means losing influence. It means losing followers and repelling potential new backers.”⁹⁶

With any of these tactics, the credibility of the speaker is paramount. The U.S. government can certainly take the lead at emphasizing al-Qaeda’s hypocrisies, particularly the suffering and bloodshed it has caused among Muslims and civilians. Yet,

⁹² J. Michael Waller, *Fighting the War of Ideas Like a Real War*, (Washington, D.C.: The Institute of World Politics Press, 2007), 109, http://jmw.typepad.com/political_warfare/files/War_of_Ideas_Waller.pdf (accessed October 14, 2011).

⁹³ Barlett, “The Edge,” 40.

⁹⁴ Byman, “The Case.”

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Waller, “Fighting,” 109.

at some point, particularly with measures aimed at delegitimizing and deglamourizing al-Qaeda and the “jihadi ‘cool’ brand,” the U.S. needs to be worried that it will be perceived as “making fun” of Muslims. In this regard, the U.S. government will need to tow a fine line: while the U.S. government does not necessarily need to do the ridiculing and satirizing itself, it can certainly do a better job of publicly highlighting and emphasizing the events and actions that would *give rise* to such ridicule and satire. Perhaps this is partly what is meant in the U.S.’s Strategic Implementation Plan when it states that it “is important that we communicate to the American public the realities of what the threat is, and what it is not.”⁹⁷ For example, there would be no need for the U.S. government itself to ridicule and satirize bin Laden for the extensive stash of pornography found in his compound. Instead, the U.S. should simply be unafraid of exposing the true nature of its enemies by pushing issues like this to the forefront of public attention. Public satire and ridicule will flow naturally from such an approach.

On another note, because of widespread distrust in the Muslim world, the U.S.-government’s credibility with its target audience is limited. Rather than being the sole speaker for this strategy, the U.S. should also work to empower alternative messengers, including former violent extremists, non-violent Islamists, and Islamic moderates. Up to this point, the U.S. has largely failed at partnering with these individuals and utilizing their expertise and cultural knowledge. These individuals need to be brought to the forefront and placed in positions where they can exert influence and command attention. The U.S. cannot act alone; these types of individuals will ultimately enjoy more credibility than the U.S. government at demystifying, undermining and delegitimizing al-Qaeda and its narrative.

⁹⁷ “Strategic Implementation Plan,” 20.

VI. Conclusion

The question of what a counter-narrative should consist of is ultimately linked to the question of what we are trying to prevent. A counter-narrative, after all, is just one aspect of a broader counter-radicalization strategy which aims to prevent radicalization in the first place (as opposed to convincing fully radicalized individuals to de-radicalize).

As mentioned earlier, it is not the Islamist ideology that counter-narratives, and counter-radicalization campaigns in general, are focused on; rather, it is the willingness to resort to violence in the name of that ideology that must be addressed and disrupted. A distinction must thus be made between non-violent political behavior and violent political behavior. As Leuprecht et al. note, "[t]he former is of interest only if there is evidence that it presages the latter. For example, the movement for voting rights for women, and the civil-rights movement militating for racial equality, were both considered radical and engaged in some illegal political action. With the benefit of hindsight, however, would we judge them as a liability or as an asset to the body politic?"¹

In addition, there is a general consensus among cognitive psychologists that feelings and beliefs are a weak predictor of behavior. In other words, "behavior is not well explained by attitudes," and this phenomenon is borne out in the context of terrorism.² For example, polling data suggests that 5% of UK Muslims and 8% of U.S. Muslims believe suicide attacks can be justified; yet in either country, only a couple hundred terrorism-related arrests have been made.³

¹ Leuprecht, "Containing," 47.

² Ibid., 46.

³ Ibid.

There is thus a gap between “the Global Jihad narrative and Global Jihad violence.”⁴ A counter-narrative, designed to undermine al-Qaeda on multiple fronts, ultimately aims to exploit that gap. While this strategy may not offer a “positive alternative,” it will nonetheless widen the gap between those individuals who sympathize with the al-Qaeda narrative and those individuals who allow the al-Qaeda narrative to determine their behavior by destroying the credibility of the very organization that espouses terrorist violence in the name of Islam.

Narratives are fundamental to human cognition: they structure the way humans perceive events around them and can often help frame individual and collective identity. While al-Qaeda, and terrorist groups in general, have become experts on utilizing narratives to promote their cause, the U.S. has fallen way behind. In fact, America’s policy discourse has only exacerbated the situation. Terrorism is ultimately a battle of ideas. Only when the U.S. succeeds “in shattering the myths and half-truths propagated by terrorists and their sympathizers,” will it “manage to take the wind out of the sails that keeps terrorism alive.”⁵ While a counter-narrative represents only one aspect of a broader counter-radicalization campaign, it can nonetheless prove crucial to disrupting and defeating the recruiting pool that currently fuels al-Qaeda. This paper has offered a tangible and pragmatic solution toward constructing a viable counter-narrative. An effort at not only separating fact from fiction but also undermining the credibility of al-Qaeda on multiple fronts will most likely produce more results than constructing positive alternative “counter-narratives that will have little effect at best or are considered state

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ De Graaf, “Unrehearsed,” 9-10.

propaganda at worst—thereby further antagonizing radical elements in society.”⁶ It is time for the U.S. to take a more constructive approach to the battle of ideas that does not simply rely on the unadulterated appeal of American values. A negative counter-narrative strategy thus represents one crucial step at winning that decisive battle.

⁶ Ibid., 9.

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