



# “AWAKENING” BEYOND IRAQ

## *Time to Engage Radical Islamists as Stakeholders*

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*The “Anbar Awakening” of Sunni tribal leaders and their supporters that began in September 2006 near Ramadi seemed to come out of nowhere... It was the result of a concerted plan executed by U.S. forces in Ramadi.<sup>1</sup>*

—Major Niel Smith, “Anbar Awakens”

**P**RESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH declared after 9/11 that his foreign policy would place special emphasis “on fighting a global war on terrorism and engaging in preemptive strikes.”<sup>2</sup> He stressed that deterrence “means nothing against shadowy networks with no nation or citizens to defend.” Bush also suggested traditional containment was impossible when rogue states with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) can deliver them on missiles or transfer them to terrorists.<sup>3</sup> This reasoning led him to conclude that terrorists seek the capability to harm us and our friends, and “we will oppose them with all our power.”<sup>4</sup> This worldview made the U.S. much more inclined to use preventive force.<sup>5</sup> As evidenced by the invasion of Iraq, such inclination to use preventive force has been costly.<sup>6</sup>

Today, progress is being made in Iraq, in part because of an alternative strategy that was pioneered in June 2006 by the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division. It became known as the “Anbar Awakening,” and key elements of this strategy focused on conducting kinetic operations, providing civil security through forward presence, training host-nation security forces, developing human and physical infrastructure, engaging in public diplomacy, and most importantly, *co-opting local leaders*.<sup>7</sup> In the early stages of the insurgency, many of these tribal sheiks “directly and indirectly supported former-regime nationalists insurgents against U.S. forces,” and had even established an alliance of convenience with Al-Qaeda forces.<sup>8</sup> The adoption of the Anbar strategy elsewhere in Iraq appears to have had a positive impact on the overall security situation in Iraq.<sup>9</sup> This raises the question of whether the United States can replicate the success in Anbar by embracing a similar strategy in its global approach to radical Islamist groups, perhaps leading to a global awakening among these groups.

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PHOTO: Under the concealment of smoke, Soldiers from 1st Armored Division move to their next objective while looking for weapon caches, 3 September 2006. (U.S. Air Force, TSGT Jeremy T. Lock)

The purpose of this paper is to argue that such opportunity *may* exist, but the U.S. must be willing to “accept risk in order to achieve results.”<sup>10</sup> For example, some U.S. officers who did not belong to the 1st Brigade Combat Team were concerned that armed local tribal militias working with the brigade would later haunt them by subsequently fighting against U.S.-trained Iraqi security forces in the future.<sup>11</sup> This concern remains, as demonstrated in one case when U.S. and Iraqi recently exchanged gunfire with “Sunni security volunteers” in Baghdad over the arrest of one of its leaders of the local Awakening Council.<sup>12</sup> Others have highlighted that giving non-governmental actors (i.e., local tribal militias) the power to legally use violence in Anbar undermines the U.S. effort to establish rule of law in Iraq. They also warned that attempts to disarm them in the future may be difficult, and it is unclear whether they will “abide by the [new] system.”<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the significant contribution of the Anbar strategy in reducing the violence in Iraq, especially after the troop surge in 2007, calls for accepting some risks via U.S. engagement with radical Islamist groups.<sup>14</sup> In the end, bold engagement like the one seen in Anbar could result in a similar “awakening” by many radical Islamist leaders who have grown wary of Al-Qaeda’s violence, often against other Muslims.

The following discussion examines the feasibility of the current U.S. strategy against terrorism and proposes an alternative strategy that promotes bold diplomatic engagement with the radicals of the Muslim world.

## **Feasibility of the Current U.S. Strategy**

The current U.S. strategy to counter terrorism is problematic because it seeks global cooperation while not every nation perceives the same intensity of threat. For example, most Asians believe the war on terror is “largely irrelevant,” most in Latin America feel the war has “little to do” with their security concerns, and Sub-Saharan Africa is more concerned about abandonment by advanced countries than they are about terrorism.<sup>15</sup> At the other extreme, many countries in Europe have long experience with terrorism, and question America’s reliance on the military means to fight it, specifically the *legitimacy* of the war in Iraq.<sup>16</sup> Finally, in the Middle East, the perception persists that

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America continues to prop up corrupt regimes in exchange for oil.<sup>17</sup> This perception was reinforced during the early stages of the Iraq invasion when it was apparent that the only ministry the U.S. military protected was the oil ministry.<sup>18</sup> Tellingly, since the war in Iraq, approximately 90 percent of the Muslims view the U.S. “as the primary security threat to their country.”<sup>19</sup>

Second, use of covert action and the invasion of Iraq have raised an interrelated mix of political, constitutional, and ethical concerns. Although most Americans understand the need for our government to protect the homeland from terrorists, many also expect the government to respect our enduring values of individual freedom, democracy, and human rights.<sup>20</sup> Bush probably weighed these concerns, but still felt compelled to issue a “Presidential Finding” to authorize covert action to “break up terror cells, assassinate terrorists, capture and interrogate Al-Qaeda suspects, gain access to and disrupt financial networks, eavesdrop, and a variety of other activities.”<sup>21</sup> When one considers the intensity of threat perception resulting from 9/11, Bush’s decision is understandable and perhaps expected. Nevertheless, knowing the existing tension between national security and democracy in the Nation, it was only a matter of time before national security demands subsided and concerns for democratic norms ascended again.<sup>22</sup>

As some of our covert activities were exposed (e.g., programs for assassination, rendition, and secret prisons) public scrutiny increased both at home and abroad.<sup>23</sup> For example, some renditions have raised ethical questions because officials sent some of the terrorist suspects to their countries of origin, many of which reportedly torture prisoners. Thus, the U.S. government is accused of knowingly being complicit in torture.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Bush’s decision to allow wiretapping of U.S. citizens without warrants in terror-related cases was severely

criticized for violating the Fourth Amendment. Eventually, his administration agreed to work within the limits of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the decision to forgo one last UN resolution against Iraq prior to the invasion sapped U.S. legitimacy, and the problem was magnified when inspectors failed to find WMD in Iraq.<sup>26</sup> The consequences of these policy choices have had a negative impact on U.S. credibility, legitimacy, and influence—the essence of soft power.

Third, besides the immeasurable loss of U.S. soft power, pursuit of the current strategy has accumulated measurable costs as well. Human losses as of August 2007 were approximately 100,000 Iraqi civilian lives, and displacement of over two million.<sup>27</sup> The war in Iraq and Afghanistan had also killed 4,578 U.S. military personnel and had wounded more than 30,000 as of 13 November 2007.<sup>28</sup> In terms of dollar costs, the U.S. spent a total of \$604 billion from 2001-2007 on the war on terror. Some projections for war costs from 2008-2017 range from \$570 billion to \$1.055 trillion, depending on the number of deployed troops to Iraq.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the Army alone has received \$38 billion to reset over 300,000 pieces of equipment and has requested \$13 billion per year as long as it remains in Iraq at current levels, and for a minimum of two more years after its withdrawal from Iraq.<sup>30</sup> Finally, the January 2007 decision to increase the strength of the Marines by 27,000 and Army by 65,000 troops will cost another \$102 billion.<sup>31</sup> These are huge costs by any measure, and the monetary expenditure is clearly unwelcome during the current recession. By 2007, the culmination of all these concerns led many Americans “to believe that the costs had outweighed the benefits.”<sup>32</sup>

### Alternative Strategy

America can limit its use of force and better effectively engage Muslims, including those potential reformists within radical Islamist groups. Instead of trying to impose U.S. will and *control* international politics, it should act less and determine more ways to *shape* the environment. First, after stabilizing Iraq, the United States should consider significantly reducing its military presence in the Muslim world, and rely more on intelligence and law enforcement cooperation to pursue Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. Second, the

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U.S. should reserve the use of military power to defend Muslim states from aggression, similar to the way it defended Kuwait from Iraq in the early 1990s. Third, if America decides to take military action, it should always attempt to minimize the cost and maximize legitimacy by participating in a UN-mandated coalition. Fourth, the United States should continue to support humanitarian operations to build good will, such as Operation Unified Assistance during the Tsunami of December 2004 and after the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan. In fact, the United States could even leverage its current efforts to build interagency capacity for reconstruction and stabilization to help developing Muslim countries build their infrastructure and improve governance.

Most importantly, America needs to have more faith in democracy, and allow others room to fashion their own political future. This process will take time in most countries, and the United States must



U.S. Air Force, TSGT Mike Buytas

**U.S. Army SGT Kornelia Rachwal gives a young Pakistani girl a drink of water as they are airlifted from Muzaffarabad to Islamabad, Pakistan, aboard a CH-47 Chinook helicopter, October 2005.**

learn more strategic patience.<sup>33</sup> This means that in many countries in the Muslim world, elections could result in radical Islamists taking significant part in governance. For America to truly champion democracy, it must resist the historical urge to back pro-U.S. leaders at the expense of democratic values. Unless the United States is willing to engage *all* who have won the right to participate in the political process through legitimate elections, it will continue to face an uphill battle in its attempts to promote democracy. For example, when the former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice outlined her vision for transformational democracy, which highlights activities promoting democracy overseas, the Chinese claimed the United States was using “the pretext of promoting democracy to intervene in other countries’ domestic affairs,” and the Malaysians argued, “U.S.-style democracy may not be applicable in the present day emerging world environment.”<sup>34</sup> Although America has successfully promoted Western democracy in post-War Germany and Japan, it is unlikely that it will have another opportunity to completely reshape another country.<sup>35</sup>

It is time the United States let the political process play out overseas, and be willing to engage all the political actors, to include those with anti-U.S. sentiments and radical views. The government may discover many ostensibly hostile nations are willing to at least tacitly cooperate to achieve peace and stability. They may be willing to become stakeholders in the process if America is willing to respect their views and recognize that they too have a stake in shaping the future.

### **Case of the Muslim Brotherhood**

Many in America have labeled the Muslim Brotherhood as “radical Islamists” and “a vital component of the enemy’s assault force . . . deeply hostile to the U.S.”<sup>36</sup> However, Robert S. Leiken and Steven Brooke argue that although questions persist about the Brotherhood’s commitment to the democratic process, their discussions with the group’s leaders in Egypt, France, Jordan, Spain, Syria, Tunisia, and the United Kingdom suggest they “all reject global jihad while embracing elections and other features of democracy.” More importantly, “there is a current within the Brotherhood willing to engage with the U.S.”<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, U.S. policymakers continue to view

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the group and the Islamist movement in general as a monolithic threat.<sup>38</sup> The U.S. government needs to recognize that engagement with groups like the Muslim Brotherhood presents an opportunity for an alternative strategy, and it is possible to create stakeholders for peace and stability within their ranks. America may have lost such an opportunity in October 2006 when Kamal El Helbawi, an imam whom Leiken and Brooke describe as a “figure known for his brave stand against radical Islam,” was forced off a flight en route to a conference at NYU. Helbawi’s public humiliation reinforced the extremist position that it is useless to engage the Americans.<sup>39</sup> The government must recognize that there is “almost infinite variety of political orientations,” and we need to adopt a “case-by-case approach” to determine when engagement with radical Islamists is “feasible and appropriate.”<sup>40</sup>

### **Other Radical Islamist Groups**

In addition to the Muslim Brotherhood, other radical Islamist groups, some affiliated and others that are not, already participate in the political process through elections in Algeria, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Jordan, Kuwait, Pakistan, Sudan, Tunisia, Turkey, and Yemen.<sup>41</sup> Other notables include Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian Territories.<sup>42</sup> Some would argue that America should never engage Hamas or Hezbollah because they are terrorists and they refuse to recognize Israel. Others point out that the reason Hamas does not recognize Israel is because Israel does not recognize Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian territories. The fundamental issue is that key actors in the region are unwilling to engage unless their preconditions are met, and as a result, the cycle of violence in the Palestinian territories and Lebanon is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.<sup>43</sup> The point is, preconditions for negotiations generally do not work, and

whether the United States likes it or not, there are many radical Islamist groups that already take part in the political process in many countries. Unless America is willing to engage them, we will not be able to influence and moderate their behavior, and ultimately resolve our differences.

In fact, *The Economist* recently came to similar conclusions. It highlighted the fact that Hamas controls the Gaza Strip and its 1.5 million inhabitants, and unless they are part of the negotiations, “no two-state solution can be made to stick.”<sup>44</sup> However, Bush refused to meet with Hamas during his visit to the West Bank in January 2008.<sup>45</sup> His administration “slammed former President Jimmy Carter for talking to Hamas.”<sup>46</sup> At about the same time, Dr. Mahmoud al-Zahar—a founder of Hamas—wrote an article in *The Washington Post* welcoming Carter’s engagement with Hamas. He said, “No peace plan, road map or legacy can succeed unless we are sitting at the negotiating table and without any preconditions.”<sup>47</sup> Although he went on to lay out preconditions for a “peace process” with Israel, one of his key points was that Hamas had gained legitimacy through the January 2006 elections, which were validated by “hundreds of independent monitors.”<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, to weaken the U.S. position toward Islamic extremist groups, the Bush administration sent mixed signals by engaging Kim Jong Il to resolve the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula.<sup>49</sup> This occurred despite the fact that the United States has accused North Korea of helping Syria “build a secret nuclear reactor.”<sup>50</sup> The reality is that the U.S. policy remains inconsistent when dealing with extremist groups and rogue states. It is no secret that the U.S. government has already negotiated with terrorists and state sponsors of terrorism, such as the PLO, Irish Republic Army, and Libya; now may be the opportune time to engage groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and Hezbollah to move the peace process forward in the Middle East. Instead of isolating these groups, America should adopt a strategy to create stakeholders for peace and stability by inviting a select group of reformist leaders from various Islamist extremist groups to America to promote mutual understanding, and permit our diplomats and other government officials to engage them in order to identify those willing to compromise.



AFP Photo, Gail Tibbon

**Former U.S. president Jimmy Carter, an observer in the Palestinian parliamentary election process, looks out from a window of a polling station in the West Bank town of Azariya on the outskirts of Jerusalem, 25 January 2006.**

## Engagement and Its Cost

In the end, a strategy of engagement would allow the United States to exploit a key vulnerability of Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups: their violence toward the innocent. Their worldview centered on killing is likely to alienate nearly all potential supporters, to include members of radical Islamist groups who desire political legitimacy.<sup>51</sup> A recent Gallup Poll found that despite “intense political anger at some Western powers, Muslims do not reject Western values wholesale.” Muslims from Saudi Arabia to Morocco and from Indonesia to Pakistan indicated their admiration for democratic values such as freedom of the press and government accountability. However, globalization of American popular culture and projection of its military power for preventive wars is perceived as a threat to Islam. In short, many Muslims view the tension as a struggle over policy, not principles. From their perspective, “it looks like a global civil rights struggle much more than another clash between superpowers.”<sup>52</sup>

These conditions suggest commitment to engagement free of ideology can succeed. There is risk and it will take strong political will to make it a reality, but given the failures of Bush’s strategy in lives and treasure, such perceived costs are hardly a bad bet. The

government needs to reallocate resources from DOD to other Departments, especially State, to enhance our diplomatic engagement, public diplomacy, and reconstruction and stabilization capabilities. The State Department suffered significant personnel cuts in the 1990s, and it simply does not have the people to fill its 7,500 positions around the world. It is in the process of repositioning about 200 diplomats from Washington, D.C. and Europe to the Near East, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The system is further strained by long-term requirements for Afghanistan and Iraq. More money is needed to train our diplomats in foreign languages and cultural studies and to properly man our diplomatic missions overseas. Moreover, our diplomats need to involve themselves in the interagency process in Washington.

The U.S. government also needs to give its new director of Foreign Assistance more authority over the 18 other federal agencies with foreign assistance funding to better align our developmental assistance with our policy objectives. It should also improve public diplomacy. Arguably, public diplomacy has become the “weakest part of U.S. foreign policy and is in need of significant reform.”<sup>53</sup> One option is to designate a person in charge of public diplomacy, similar to the former director of the U.S. Information Agency. The government must improve strategic communications planning and synchronize this effort across the interagency.

If this proposal for engagement sounds too naïve and risky, consider the cost of another large-scale military intervention in the Middle East. The former U.S. Ambassador to Israel and Assistant Secretary of State, Martin Indyk, has already warned that “one of the few ways that the current Palestinian-Israeli impasse might be addressed” is through international military intervention in the Palestinian territories.<sup>54</sup> Such posturing is clearly not in America’s interests, and it is time we seriously considered more creative policy actions that husband American power rather than squander it.

## **Preventive Military Action and the Future**

America should stop using potential terrorist threats to justify and espouse the failed strategy of prevention. All instruments of national power, including diplomatic efforts, should be engaged

commensurately when dealing with global terrorism, rather than persisting in reliance on force. Countering threats from non-state actors and radical Islamist groups should primarily be the work of international law enforcement and diplomacy. They should occur under the principles of law and not through the rubric of so-called “preemptive” war, which in fact was preventive and therefore in violation of all the norms of the Just War Tradition. In hindsight, the ideological doctrine of forcibly spreading democracy, and the Presidential Findings authorizing morally questionable covert activities that also emerged from the Bush administration’s self-definition of Just War, compromised key principles embodied in the Constitution.

America claims to wage war as a global struggle, but this perspective fails to resonate in many countries because of the gaps in our mutual threat perceptions. This unilateral approach has turned much of the Muslim community against the United States, and many are trying to communicate that they do not oppose democratic principles, but rather an array of its contradictory policies. Islamist groups who are willing to become stakeholders in peace and security in the Middle East by cooperating with the West have to be given an audience. The current U.S. strategy has resulted in significant loss of lives, both ours and theirs, and it has been a huge drain on our national treasure. It is no longer sustainable. The first bold step toward strategic engagement may already have been taken, first in Anbar and then elsewhere in Iraq by U.S. forces. Many of the Iraqi tribal leaders that had initially opposed U.S. forces had been labeled “extremist,” but now they are working against Al-Qaeda.

These facts do not mean diplomacy alone will do the job. America still needs to target terrorists with focused lethal operations, but it needs to rely more on intelligence and law enforcement agencies. It needs to rebuild the State Department and enhance public diplomacy capabilities to seriously engage the Muslim community to cultivate mutual understanding for long-term peace and stability. Successful implementation could result in an “awakening” beyond Iraq, and in the end, more stakeholders may embrace peace and stability in the Middle East. Without fresh thinking, the American people may have to prepare for another military intervention in the Middle East. **MR**

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