

By Chris Newton

In order to prevail over Al Qaeda and Islamist terrorism, democratic countries need to win the support of the people in Iraq and Afghanistan, the moderate Islamic community, and its own electorates. This is the crucial battleground in the 'War on Terror'. However, many academics and commentators have concluded that the Islamists currently have the advantage in this area. Just as the situation in Iraq in 2006 demanded a review into US military strategy, the situation today requires just as important a review into the west's approach to strategic communication. This article examines the flaws in the current approach and provides suggestions as to how the west can establish a better 'strategic narrative'. It predominantly takes a UK perspective.

### **Losing the war of words?**

Scholars and analysts have not rated the west's efforts so far on this front. Indeed, the various opinions polls suggest that British public support for the war in Afghanistan is waning. Why? As David Betz suggested in an article on propaganda in 2008, the Islamist strategic narrative is more coherent than the west's. The Islamists tell a story of victimhood which its audience can relate to. It combines elements of truth, such as the Abu Ghraib incident, with fiction into an emotive narrative of western persecution and aggression. It disseminates its message across the world, using the internet and the media effectively. And as a result, regardless of how preposterous their claims are, the coherence of their argument makes it compelling to its target audience.

The western narrative, as David Betz showed, lacks coherence and is rather confused. The different objectives for the Afghan mission, ranging from getting rid of Al Qaeda to the elimination of poppy crops has confused people as to why we are really there. And given that the main military part of the 'War on Terror' is taking place in a distant land, the audience finds it difficult to relate Afghanistan to security in the UK and the west. What makes it even harder for a western narrative to gain currency is that so many of the public are cynical towards politicians and are consequently susceptible to anti-democratic, anti-capitalist, and anti-war narratives. This is because of the disintegration of unity and a lack of self confidence within western countries, especially the UK. Moreover, Islamist ideology is only one narrative that the west has to tackle in addition to the established narratives of Marxism and emerging narratives put forward by authoritarian rulers.

But is the west really doomed to fail here? David Betz contrasts the west's performance in the war on terror with western societies' marketing and public relations activities in business, fashion, and popular culture. Why can't we translate this success to the area where we need it most – war? In domestic politics, politicians hire public relations professionals to develop its own narratives about the state of the country and how they will change things. Political party offices hire people to monitor the words and actions of their opposition and they develop material that highlights inconsistencies and hypocritical actions. But for some reason, governments and news organisation are extremely poor at communicating to the public the inconsistencies of the Al Qaeda narrative.

### A new approach

The western approach to strategic communications needs to change and below are five ways in which the west can start that process.

1. *Launch an information offensive.* Firstly, western governments need to smash the credibility of Al Qaeda's narrative. Certainly, the theological flaws behind their beliefs need to be exposed. There is, however, some debate as to whether those outside the Islamic community should get involved in the theological debate. I believe that this is best left to moderate Muslims, although this does mean that the moderate voice within Islam needs to be heard more. The media has a responsibility to ensure that this happens and not to obsess about the extremist minority and controversial characters that are intent on causing trouble and division.

There are some things that those of us who are not part of the Islamic community can do. Firstly, commentators can highlight contradictions within the statements of key leaders and spokespeople. David Kilcullen, for example, in *The Accidental Guerrilla*, highlighted the contradiction between the Taliban's crackdown on opium when in government and the fact that they have allied themselves with drugs traffickers during the insurgency.

The west is also poor in highlighting the divisions with the Islamic community. The western media devoted huge amounts of coverage to anti-war protest marches and leading anti-war figures, and it has given platforms to those who have questioned the ethics of western policies. However, in late-2008 Al Qaeda released a video in which Ayman al-Zawahiri answered questions from people concerned about the tactics it was using. An example of a question included, 'who is it who is killing with your Excellency's blessing the innocents in Baghdad, Morocco and Algeria? Do you consider the killing of women and children to be jihad?' The video was unusually very defensive for Al Qaeda. The fact that they had to do this illustrated that Al Qaeda was battling to win the support of its target audience and whom it feels should be its natural supporters. Whilst this story was extensively reported in the specialist defence press, this is not enough. Who in the mainstream British media press reported it? One thing was for sure, it did not get nearly as much coverage as an anti-war protest.

2. *Highlight our successes.* Terrorism will be defeated through separating the moderates from the extremists, and persuading those that are vulnerable to get caught up in the terrorists' web that terrorism is not worth the effort. The War on Terror can be 'won' by effective intelligence. We should dwell on foiled plots just as much as our mistakes. If we do, we send out a message to would-be terrorists that they are more likely to end up in prison rather than achieving their aims.

3. *A joined up approach to strategic communication.* In the UK, it is vital that the communication strategy is coherent and co-ordinated across government. The new National Security Council structure which involves a number of government departments should make this easier at Cabinet level. However, it is essential that this applies to the work of the Research, Information,

and Communications Unit (RICU) which sits in the Home Office. The communications effort for the UK counter-terrorism effort must be co-ordinated with the communications effort carried out by the MoD for Afghanistan and elsewhere.

Moreover, the messages the government are sending out must be clear. The fact that the previous Labour government and then the current Coalition government have limited the main objectives in Afghanistan to solely security ones is welcome.

4. *Remember who is listening.* Politicians, journalists, and commentators need to always bear in mind that in this conflict, the war effort can be just as undermined by careless language just as careless military policy. Of course, what makes a democracy strong and unique is its freedom of speech and diversity of views, and the author is not suggesting that dissent or criticism should be curtailed. But public commentators should be at the very least sensitive to the fact that their words could either undermine the morale of British service personnel on the front line, or could give comfort to the enemy.

5. *Demonstrate resolve.* The prolonged nature of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, together with the financial crisis, and public cynicism with politics has led to a loss of confidence in democracy and capitalism. However, in order to prevail in this conflict we must retain faith in our way of life and our institutions. Mistakes should be recognised and never repeated, but it must also be shown that one of the key advantages of democracy is that governments are held accountable for their actions and, as what happened with the US approach to Iraq in 2007, changes in policy and strategy can lead to results.

Moreover, it must be recognised that this conflict is ultimately a battle of wills. It is therefore crucial that any withdrawals of coalition forces from Afghanistan are made from a position of strength and when the conditions on the ground allow them to.

### **The next war of ideas**

In addition to the 'War on Terror', it is also important that the west creates a strong narrative that endures well into this century. For, in addition to the threat posed by Islamism, Azar Gat describes a 'more significant, challenge [emanating] from the rise of nondemocratic great powers such as China and Russia'. Whilst it remains to be seen whether any rivalry will result in military conflict, the war of words between the perceived merits of democracy and autocracy has already begun. Authoritarian rulers are already expressing their desire to undermine the liberal democratic world order.

Most recently, in his speech to the UN, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said that after 'one hundred years of domination, the system of capitalism and the existing world order has proved to be unable to provide an appropriate solution to the problems of societies, thus coming to an end'. In 2007 at the Munich Security Conference, the then Russian President Vladimir Putin remarked 'one state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?' It is therefore extremely important that any pro-democratic narrative can withstand attack from

both its religious and secular critics.

In the important battleground of the intellectual war, 'the west' is still lacking a strong narrative to counter those of its enemies and competitors. The hurdles that need to be overcome are huge: divided societies, public cynicism to politicians, and a lack of self confidence. But as has been noted by academics, in other aspects of our societies the west has the knowledge, resources, and expertise in strategic communication. And so when it comes to preserving our security, western governments need to harness those skills more than ever.