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Dissuading Terror

Strategic Influence and the Struggle Against Terrorism

Kim Cragin • Scott Gerwehr

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Summary

The U.S. government has long used a strategic influence policy to promote its national security interests. The war on terrorism is no different. Conducting this war effectively requires our government to dissuade terrorists from attacking the United States, divert youths from joining terrorist groups, and persuade the leaders of states and nongovernmental institutions to withhold support for terrorists. This report addresses the role of strategic influence—its potential uses and limitations—in achieving these objectives.

The Parameters of Strategic Influence

The report begins with the question, “What can strategic influence campaigns hope to achieve?” We conclude from our review of the cognitive and social psychology literatures that campaigns have the potential to affect widespread attitudinal change in populations. In addition, influence efforts have the potential to modify the behavior—short and long term—of audiences. Cognitive and social psychology theory indicates, therefore, that strategic influence operations could contribute to the success of U.S. counterterrorism efforts.

Lessons learned from past U.S. influence operations, however, temper this optimism. Specifically, we draw lessons from three influence campaigns conducted by the U.S. government over the past 50 years:

- In post–World War II Germany, General McClure was responsible for “de-Nazification” efforts, which included control over almost every media outlet in Allied-controlled Germany.
- In Vietnam, the U.S. military utilized psychological operations extensively, from dropping pamphlets over enemy territory to using deserters’ testimonies against their peers.
- In Eastern Europe, the U.S. government provided support to indigenous anticommunist movements during the Cold War. Specifically, the Polish Underground printed subversive pamphlets and organized strikes, often using U.S. resources.

From these case studies, we conclude that influence campaigns are highly sensitive to operational environments.¹ Moreover, campaigns that do not take these sensitivities into account not only fail but are counterproductive.

Our analysis of the three case studies led us to the following general guidelines for developing effective influence campaigns as well as their possible application.

Match Operational Objectives, Message, and Delivery to the Audience

This first guideline requires a thorough understanding of the target population, incorporating both demographic data (e.g., age, sex, occupation) and psychographics (e.g., perceptions, interests, relationships). In the initial phases of the Vietnam War, for example, the U.S. government distributed numerous pro-American pamphlets to little or no effect. Local populations ignored the pamphlets’ messages primarily because they used inappropriate language and iconography. In contrast, during later phases of the *Chieu Hoi* (“open arms”) campaign, U.S. forces used defector testimonials—written and in-person—as part of their operations. The defectors understood the mind-set of the target audience (Vietcong forces), and face-to-face

¹ By “operational environments,” we mean contextual factors, such as the lack of extensive media networks in, for example, rural Yemen, as well as the cultural factors, such as the hierarchical and independent nature of local Yemeni tribes.

testimonials proved to be a more effective method of delivery than the pamphlets.

Incorporate Feedback Mechanisms into the Campaign

Feedback mechanisms are a key factor in the eventual success of an influence campaign. They also provide policymakers with a means of reducing the risk and uncertainty inherent in persuasion techniques. In post-WWII Germany, General McClure instituted frequent and varied polling, surveys, and face-to-face interviews to measure the effectiveness of his programs. This process allowed him to refine both the messages and methods of persuasion over time.

Metrics presuppose a certain degree of knowledge of the intended audiences, which is difficult to determine at the beginning of an influence campaign. The U.S. government was able to resolve this dilemma in the case of the Polish Underground by relying on indigenous institutions to monitor and, more importantly, interpret the campaigns' progress. Notably, both examples demonstrate how understanding the audience and measuring the outcomes are interactive processes.

Set Realistic Expectations

The persuasive efforts in our case studies were often limited by environmental constraints, poor understanding of the audience, and even time. Of the three studies, the most extensive and successful campaign was General McClure's efforts in post-WWII Germany. But our research suggests that it would be very difficult to duplicate this endeavor, primarily because McClure had the ability to control almost all the information outlets in Allied-controlled Germany. This degree of control—and eventually, the widespread conversion of society—is unlikely in today's information age.

Strategic Influence and the Struggle Against Terrorism

While theory and past experience indicate that strategic influence could aid the struggle against terrorism, its sensitivity to operational

environments makes the outcome of influence campaigns in the Muslim world uncertain. For this study, we examined Muslim communities in three countries—Yemen, Germany, and Indonesia—that had been home to Islamic terrorist groups prior to the groups attacking U.S. targets. In each of the following cases, local members of the terrorist groups were recruited by or already affiliated with al Qaeda:

- In Yemen, terrorists planned and conducted a maritime attack against the USS *Cole* in October 2000. In this case, al Qaeda operatives—Yemeni expatriates—recruited local militants to participate in the attack.
- In Germany, members of the “Hamburg cell” helped to orchestrate the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Al Qaeda leaders apparently recruited, nurtured, and trained members of the Hamburg cell for this attack.
- In Indonesia, members of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) killed tourists at a Bali nightclub (2002) and bombed the Marriott in Jakarta (2003). The JI is not an al Qaeda cell, but many members have trained in Arab-Afghani camps and the group has an anti-Western agenda.

Given what we learned from these case studies, what then can strategic influence hope to achieve specifically with regard to al Qaeda and the struggle against terrorism? From our analysis of these case studies, we arrived at three key types of audiences in the struggle against terrorism: *terrorists* who attack the United States, *radical institutions* that nurture the terrorists, and *sympathetic communities* that harbor and support the terrorists.

Within each of these categories, we conclude that a confluence of anti-Americanism, radical Islam, and general support for political violence provides an environment in which terrorists can be nurtured or persuaded to conduct attacks against U.S. targets. More importantly, strategic influence campaigns could help to disrupt this con-

fluence. Doing so has the potential, according to our analysis, to reduce future support for al Qaeda and like-minded terrorists.

New Challenges Ahead

Only a few years after the September 11 attacks, the U.S. government is still struggling with how exactly to wage a war on terrorism. It is doubtful that this report—or any other study—can provide a complete answer to this question. RAND analysts have been studying terrorism and counterterrorism tactics for more than 30 years. These studies include analyses of specific groups, such as Gordan McCormick’s work on the Shining Path.² They also include strategic analyses for understanding emerging threats, such as the study by Bonnie Cordes et al. in 1985 titled *A Conceptual Framework for Analyzing Terrorist Groups*³ or Ian Lesser et al.’s *Countering the New Terrorism*⁴ in 1999. Yet no one has discovered a “silver bullet” to remove the threat of terrorism.

It is also difficult to imagine that strategic influence could be the solution. Like terrorism, RAND analysts have long evaluated the potential strengths and weaknesses of U.S. military psychological operations. If there is one overarching theme to lessons learned in the past, it is that influence is a complex and difficult process—hardly a silver bullet.

Moreover, risks are associated with even simple persuasive campaigns. Programs designed to strengthen the momentum of an

² Gordan McCormick, *The Shining Path and the Future of Peru*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, R-3781-DOS/OSD, 1990; Gordan McCormick, *From the Sierra to the Cities: The Urban Campaign of the Shining Path*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, R-4150-USDP, 1992.

³ Bonnie Cordes, Brian Michael Jenkins, Konrad Kellen, Gail V. Bass-Golod, Daniel A. Relles, William F. Sater, Mario L. Juncosa, William Fowler, and Geraldine Petty, *A Conceptual Framework for Analyzing Terrorist Groups*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, R-3151, 1985.

⁴ Ian O. Lesser, Bruce Hoffman, John Arquilla, David F. Ronfeldt, and Michele Zanini, *Countering the New Terrorism*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MR-989-AF, 1999.

indigenous, nonviolent movement, for example, could reduce its credibility if discovered. Even successful counterpropaganda efforts that weaken a terrorist group's anti-Americanism could accidentally shift animosity onto an important ally. Accurate performance measures can provide decisionmakers with early warnings for adverse consequences. But it is important to acknowledge that strategic influence efforts—from diplomacy to psychological operations—have some uncertainty.

Yet just because strategic influence is not a silver bullet does not mean it is irrelevant. The U.S. government is already engaged in a number of influence campaigns, such as Radio Sawa, that attempt to deal with growing hostility toward the United States. Thus, the aim of this report is to outline how and in what circumstances influence campaigns can best be applied, particularly with regard to the struggle against terrorism.