

Combating Terrorism Through a Counter-Framing Strategy

By Robert Wesley

IDEOLOGY IS OF GREAT importance to understanding all social movements, and the global jihadist movement is no exception. Indeed, many policymakers and terrorism analysts have emphasized the significance of ideology for determining the outcome of the current conflict. Unfortunately, however, neither the conceptual intricacies nor the methods of analysis for a counter-ideology approach have been usefully articulated. Although it is true that ideology plays a major role in the communicative, mobilizing and indoctrinative aspects of this conflict, focusing counter-movement strategies around “countering ideology” is probably not the most promising vector of influence for Western state-level efforts.

This article presents some introductory argumentation found in a larger study on improving analytical methodologies for combating the global jihadist movement.¹ Governments should distinguish between the ideological tenets and framing practices of the jihadist movement, while concentrating on the latter to more efficaciously influence the protracted nature of the conflict. This distinction is an essential prerequisite to formulating a comprehensive and methodologically-sound grand strategy. The counter-framing approach essentially provides a set of concepts that allows both the analyst and policymaker to better understand how to reduce mobilization to both the ideology and the strategy of al-Qa`ida by influencing the connectivity between content and audience.

Before addressing the differing potential approaches to countering mobilization to the ideas and strategy of al-Qa`ida or the jihadist movement, it is helpful to touch on the definitional, congruency and differentiating aspects of the related concepts of ideology and framing as conceptualized in social movement theory. This is the first step

1 The author is currently writing a monograph on framing analysis and counter-strategies.

to understanding the difference between a counter-ideological and a counter-framing approach.

Operationalizing Ideology and Framing

Although the concept of framing processes as applied to social movements is widely understood, surprisingly a common conception of what constitutes “ideology” does not exist. In general terms, the framing process refers to how an organization or movement articulates its beliefs and strategy with the view of mobilizing support. The framing process approach developed by David A. Snow et al. was itself borrowed from John Wilson’s deconstruction of ideology, using the concepts of diagnosis, prognosis and rationale.² Therefore, what is the difference between the related concepts of ideologies and frames designed to mobilize collective action? Although both concepts involve the value and belief systems of an organization or movement, there are important distinctions that need to be elaborated in order to provide a sound foundation for developing counter-strategies.

Pamela Oliver and Hank Johnston provide a rough distinction, writing that “framing points to process, while ideology points to content.”³ Robert Benford and Snow elaborate further, mentioning that ideology can refer to a

fairly pervasive and integrated set of beliefs and values that have considerable staying power... In contrast, collective action frames function as innovative amplifications and extensions of, or antidotes to, existing ideologies or components of them. Accordingly, ideology functions as both a constraint and resource in relation to framing processes and collective action frames.⁴

2 David A. Snow, E. Burke Rochford Jr., Steven K. Worden and Robert D. Benford, “Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization and Movement Participation,” *American Sociological Review* 51:4 (1986); John Wilson, *Introduction to Social Movements* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

3 Pamela E. Oliver and Hank Johnston, “What a Good Idea! Frames and Ideologies in Social Movement Research,” *Mobilization* 5:1 (2000).

4 Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment,” *Annual Review of Sociology* (2000).

It also should be mentioned that ideologies, or specific value and belief sets, are not necessarily homogeneously accepted throughout an organization or movement. In fact, the history of social movements—including al-Qa`ida⁵—reveals that specific ideological components may not even be understood by all adherents nor articulated publicly. These facts problematize a purely counter-ideological approach. It is also true—and especially so in respect to the conflict against the jihadist movement—that individuals and organizations of many types and orientations may share a broader cultural ideology and yet disagree over collective action processes. For example, there are numerous relatively peaceful Muslim political, religious and social organizations, as well as individuals, who subscribe to general Salafist ideological tenets yet denounce violence as a form of expression or strategy. These facts further support the pursuance of an approach that negates these inconsistencies by focusing on the communicative links between organizational leaders and potential adherents, thereby forgoing the risk of getting bogged down in detailed ideological discourse—an area of which Western governments have shown little competence.

Indeed, the framing approach encompasses ideological developments, while moving beyond the mere description of their details to elaborate the process of how these developments are used for the benefit of organizational or movemental growth. The framing process also reaches beyond pure ideological discourse to include the strategic and interactive practices of movement adherents and their audiences such as potential supporters, governments and rival organizations.

An Argument for Counter-Framing

There is clearly a complex and dynamic interactive process within the jihadist movement that necessitates a specific analytical framework. It is fair to say that for the jihadist movement, in everything is ideology, yet not everything is pure ideology. To describe this intricate dynamic, the framing perspective is

5 See, for example, Vahid Brown, *Cracks in the Foundation: Leadership Schisms in al-Qa`ida from 1989-2006* (West Point, NY: Combating Terrorism Center, 2007).

immensely useful.

Analysis of ideology can determine what specific ideological developments have occurred, but there is no current framework (or methodology) from which to analyze why these developments matter. Framing analysis also helps better explain the process of ideological interactions—“how” and “why” efforts were successful or unsuccessful. Furthermore, it is not always possible

“Part of this strategy entails disruption of the further organizational development of al-Qa`ida from a network into a larger movement.”

to empirically observe ideological activities. As Snow and Benford point out, such activities could in fact be “mentalistic or cognitive” in nature, and thus difficult to assess.⁶

Distinguishing between the interactive processes of framing and ideological development is essential to understanding the communication processes of the jihadist movement and al-Qa`ida proper. To be sure, the movement is dependent on its ideological foundations to maintain cohesiveness in spite of its decentralized structure. It is also dependent on an active communications program that places a heavy emphasis on core framing activities to articulate its ideological foundations while mobilizing additional and essential support.

One of the objectives of the study from which this article is adopted is to provide a framework for monitoring and influencing the success of the jihadist movement’s communication practices and by extension the longevity of the overall conflict. At this juncture there is no existing analytical framework in open literature for understanding jihadist communications in the context

6 David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, “Clarifying the Relationship Between Framing and Ideology in the Study of Social Movements: A Comment on Oliver and Johnston,” *Mobilization* 5:1 (2000).

of their effectiveness. This study does not argue that ideology and its analysis can be ignored, but rather that viewing the prospects for Western state-level interventional activities through a counter-ideological lens is much less promising in terms of its success than an approach that focuses on framing analysis and its influence. Influencing potential acceptance and adherence to an ideology is difficult from a distance. In contrast, there is a much higher potential to disrupt the resonance of the message for these ideas and acceptance of the violent strategy designed to achieve them.

In conflicts where ideology plays a leading role, the ideas and broader ideologies involved can linger well beyond the cessation of violence, and thus the primary objective for any such strategy should be focused firstly on the removal or minimization of violent components. Part of this strategy entails disruption of the further organizational development of al-Qa`ida from a network into a larger movement. The second component of the strategy is to constrict mobilization of adherents to the network of organizations. This study argues that the best way of minimizing mobilization is to influence the linkages between organization members and potential mobilized adherents. These linkages are many, but most promisingly are the communication practices of the movement—specifically the relative salience and resonance of frames.

Furthermore, there are additional indicators that suggest a predominately ideology-focused approach is less encouraging. We can see from viewing the historical development of al-Qa`ida and the jihadist movement that this process of ideological development occurs gradually. Since this process is based on a somewhat—but still interpretative—pre-structured religious system, the process is less dynamic than the prognostic framing and alignment activities of the organizations involved. It also seems to be much less malleable and much more consistent over time.

The prospect of influencing intramovemental ideological change is probably low at the current stage in the conflict. Although this article is primarily concerned with Western state-level activities, it should be mentioned

that local authorities in predominately Muslim countries (such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Indonesia) have had some success in “encouraging” imprisoned leaders to revise the ideological foundations of their organizations.⁷ Although it is important to analyze ideological developments, without an active framing process the movement would not grow and mobilization would prove difficult. Thus, framing analysis is a crucial component of this conflict for both the jihadists and those wishing to minimize their success.

Al-Qa`ida and the jihadist movement’s recruitment and radicalization practices provide additional evidence of the importance of strategic framing activities to the vitality of the organization and movement. Recruits who join al-Qa`ida-linked groups have generally undergone some sort of ideological indoctrination process, many times in the form of classroom or camp-type environments, where doctrinal growth can be closely controlled. In more constrained operational environments such as those in Europe, smaller groups of peers—many times led by a more experienced “guide”—become an initial orientational community for potential recruits.⁸ Evidence from arrests in Spain and elsewhere in Europe indicate that strategic communications materials such as videos and literature were of central importance to the acceptance of jihadist ideology and strategy—or diagnostic and prognostic frames.⁹

The fact that many recruits have attempted to join jihadist groups without fully subscribing to or fully understanding jihadist ideology strongly indicates that an ideological conversion has not yet fully taken root. Since this “radicalization” process can take place at a later stage after initial enlistment or exploration, it seems axiomatic that mobilization is not necessarily based on a purely ideological acceptance, but

7 Examples of notable leaders include Sayyid Imam and Najih Ibrahim.

8 See, for example, Daniel Fried, U.S. Senate Subcommittee Testimony, April 5, 2006; Edwin Bakker, “Jihadi Terrorists in Europe: Their Characteristics and the Circumstances in which they Joined the Jihad,” Clingendael Security Paper, December 2006.

9 See, for example, Javier Jordan and Robert Wesley, “The Threat of Grassroots Jihadi Networks: A Case Study from Ceuta, Spain,” *Terrorism Monitor* 1:3 (2007).

rather on the successful mobilization result of either the framing processes of human operatives or of the more general framing processes of the wider communications efforts—such as the so-called “Media Jihad.” Indeed, evidence from internet chat rooms and other sources indicate that a level of mobilization (both mental and physical alignment) for the jihadist conflict theatres have occurred through communication efforts. These trends are yet another strong indication that the framing process—especially through strategic communications—is a vital link between the movement and its potential supporters.

Conclusion

It is important to emphasize the inextricable relationship between ideology and the framing process for a movement. For this reason, this study does not argue that one analytical or policy approach should be discarded completely in favor of another. What this study does argue is that for Western authorities wishing to impact the longevity of this conflict, a strategy needs to be developed that is focused on the linkages that enable the jihadist movement to sustain itself over the long-term. It is thus important to develop a method for assessing the success of this interactive process between the movement and potential adherents as well as providing a framework for influencing this interactive dynamic. Such an integrated analytical/policy feedback approach does not functionally exist. The counter-framing approach provides the most accurate and thorough method for optimizing grand strategy to better identify areas of opportunity for influence, while importantly providing a feedback mechanism to determine the effectiveness of the efforts of both sides of the conflict.

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strategies. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and are not of any affiliated organization.