Battling for Consciousness

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The Battle over Consciousness: More Important than Ever

The battle over consciousness has always been a part of confrontations between states and societies, but its relative weight in these confrontations has risen considerably in recent years. Several developments account for this new balance. First, the "industrial war," in which conventional armed forces face one another in a mutual attempt at destruction and territorial gains, became a fairly rare event, particularly for advanced Western armies that enjoyed a decisive advantage in this kind of encounter. Moreover, it became clear that military gains in such wars did not in fact ensure victory in the confrontation as a whole, but only changed its features, and in a way that increased the importance of the battle over consciousness. Second, wars of terrorism between states and armed organizations (usually state-supported, and occasionally state-like themselves) that have come to replace the "industrial wars" as the most common type of confrontation naturally focus on the attempt to influence perception (terrorism is just that: the attempt to instill fear and a sense of powerlessness in the mind of the object) and thereby achieve territorial and political assets, because it is clearly impossible through this kind of warfare to take direct control of territory or cause decisive damage to an army. Third, the growing power of the media and the revolution in the speed of application (especially as the use of the internet expands) have made the media an element that is not subject to the control of regimes, and thus is all the more difficult for liberal democracies and even autocratic regimes to regulate.

Terrorist organizations in general and radical Islamic groups in particular were among the first to understand the change in the nature

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of the battle over consciousness. They therefore focused the physical battle (terrorism and other activities) on moves designed to serve the battle over consciousness, so that gradually the growing synergy between the two resulted in their becoming complementary halves that together make up the whole of the confrontation. By contrast, liberal democracies, including Israel, ran into enormous difficulties when attempting to adapt their conduct to the new reality. While the new dominant concept in the United States' way of thinking about war "among the people," which deals to a large extent with the effort to capture the hearts and minds of the people, stresses the importance of involving all government elements in the war (the so-called "whole-of-government approach"), it still largely classifies the battle over consciousness as a separate effort, undertaken primarily by civilian entities. Such efforts have been pretentiously labeled "strategic communication" and "public diplomacy," but are not viewed as justifying the investment of significant national resources or their full integration as a leading element of the confrontation. In the West this component is still viewed as "psychological warfare," something that is intended first and foremost to improve one's capabilities of attaining military goals.

The Three Spheres of Battle

The battle over consciousness is multi-dimensional. The main sphere is the population among which the armed organizations operate. These organizations usually invest most of their efforts in this sphere, where they primarily confront internal rivals (as in the case of the Palestinians), and to a lesser extent liberal democracies. At the same time, the sphere of the battle over society in the liberal democracies involved in the confrontation and the sphere of the battle in the international arena not directly involved in the confrontation are also of great importance. The contest in each of these spheres has its own distinguishing characteristics requiring specially tailored efforts. Nonetheless, because of the relative transparency of the different spheres of battle, considerable coordination between the different messages is required.

As a rule, the message of the radicals opposed to liberal democracies claims that they are the victims of a cruel, cynical, corrupt, and powerful enemy that exploits and oppresses all members of their society, whom

they purport to represent (and which enjoys the cooperation of the radicals' adversaries at home). Therefore, the message contends, their struggle is not only just but is also justified in using unconventional tools, such as terrorism or non-conventional weapons, and the radicals themselves ought not to be viewed as responsible for having chosen this path. At the same time, they claim, not only is the struggle against the enemy not hopeless, but its success is ensured and is merely a matter of time. This combination of claims, directed at various target populations in specifically measured doses, stands to be well received for a number of reasons. First, it is always possible to demonstrate its validity. If liberal democracies succeed in the physical battle, this is proof of the message that stresses their power. Merely surviving in the face of such an enemy is an important achievement. Any deviation of the liberal democracies from their own rules of warfare, based on international law, is stark proof of their cruelty and hypocrisy. Conversely, any achievement by radical elements underscores the certainty of their final victory, inevitable given the cruel, defiled, corrupt, cowardly enemy as well as the unlimited willingness of the radicals to suffer and sacrifice (the idea of suicide is to a large extent intended to strengthen this message) and have those civilians identified with the enemy camp pay a steep price.

The second reason is the basic asymmetry in the rules of the game in everything having to do with the battle over consciousness. Liberal democracies are committed to rules of political responsibility; refrain from manipulating the media; lack an internal consensus, which preempts the broadcast of a uniform message; suffer from bureaucratic and political awkwardness, which slows down processes of learning and change; are given to leaks; are closely watched by the media; and have insufficient knowledge infrastructures and human resources for a battle over consciousness. By contrast, the radicals who see the rules laid down by liberal democracies as elements of the current world order they are interested in changing may not have direct control of main media tools and their resources may be relatively small, but they do not hesitate to manipulate the media and are hardly committed to the notion of political responsibility or any kind of accountability. Their relatively single-minded opinion allows both the presentation of a uniform message and rapid adjustment of activity in the battle over consciousness in response to changes in reality and available means.

Third, in each of the battle spheres one may point to the unique advantages enjoyed by the radicals. In the battle over consciousness among the population from which they emerged, the radicals have a distinct opening advantage. In addition to the fact that this population identifies with whoever is seen as its authentic representative, the radicals' political thought shares a common language with popular terminology and the native political system. In addition, the population is exposed to developments – both because of the limitations of language and because of the effectiveness of the radicals' apparatus in the battle over consciousness – first and foremost through filters and prisms loyal to the radicals (e.g., prominent clerics and media such as al-Jazeera) or subject to their direct control. The ability of liberal democracies to penetrate this sphere is quite limited and is based to a great extent on the relatively moderate elements in the population that are usually wary about challenging the radicals' basic assumptions and are not as effective as the radicals, partly because they suffer from weaknesses similar to those of liberal democracies. In this context, President Obama's speech was an event of great importance, because through it America managed for a moment to appear effectively in this sphere's confrontation arena. It is still too early to judge the extent to which this foray will prove useful in the long term.

In the battle over the consciousness of the populations of those liberal democracies directly involved in the confrontation, the radicals and their enemies enjoy more or less equal capabilities. At issue is the relevance of the radical message, which threatens the population that is not eager to plunge into an extended confrontation when it is doubtful it would achieve victory at a reasonable price (in lives and the scope of financial investment). Liberal democracies, characterized by a sense of accountability, tend to feel responsible even for an alienated population that defies social and governmental norms. These factors join the primary forgers of public opinion – academics, intellectuals, and major opinion makers in the media – who are not, of course, controlled by the regime, but often feed on one another and herald the radicals with hardly any criticism, in contrast to their highly negative and often hostile attitude to their own government. The direct ability the radicals have to disseminate their messages to the population thanks to the

freedom of expression and freedom of the press in Western countries constitutes another important tool.

In liberal democracies that are directly involved in the confrontation, these advantages are offset to an extent by the natural commitment of the population to rally against those seeking to harm it. However, in the battle over the consciousness of the international community not directly involved in the conflict, the radicals enjoy the aforementioned advantages though with fewer reservations. It is enough to observe the manner in which the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation in the leading Western – including American – media was portrayed in Operation Cast Lead to understand the significance of this phenomenon. To this one must add the growing influence of populations from the same origins as the radicals who reside in the liberal democracies not directly involved in the battle over public consciousness.

An astounding example was demonstrated by the French journalist Charles Enderlin, the Israel correspondent for the France 2 television station, who in late September 2000 covered the death of the Palestinian child Muhammad al-Dura. In a recent documentary by the German station ARD dealing with the al-Dura controversy, Enderlin was asked about the possibility that the Palestinians were actually using staged violence for television consumption ("Pallywood," as coined by prominent blogger Prof. Richard Landes). He replied:

> This is not staging, it's playing for the camera. When they threw stones and Molotov cocktails, it was in part for the camera. That doesn't mean it's not true. They wanted to be filmed throwing stones and being hit by rubber bullets. All of us — the ARD too — did reports on kids confronting the Israeli army, in order to be filmed in Ramallah, in Gaza. That's not staging, that's reality.[1]

The Battle's Main Themes

In practice, the battle over consciousness focuses on two principal contexts. One is the public's perception of the chances each side has to achieve its goals and the scope of investment and suffering required to attain them. To a large extent, this context deals with the battle over perception of the stamina of the two parties involved in the confrontation. In general, the radicals are convinced that the stamina of the society they ostensibly represent is greater than that of their decadent

enemy, and they do not hesitate to broadcast this message and anchor it in what they perceive as the hesitant, conciliatory, and weak conduct in liberal democracy's society and regime. In general, there is a positive correlation between the physical battlefield and the war over social stamina: the better the results are on the physical battlefield, the easier it is to create a perception of stamina, and vice versa. Nonetheless, the correlation is not a simple one, and its effectiveness depends on how well the battle over consciousness is conducted, and the connection that is drawn with the physical battlefield.

For example, how the United States in effect conceded the mission in Iraq because of the escalation of the wave of terrorism there in 2006 may serve as an excellent test case. American consciousness was trained to think – by means of al-Qaeda's propaganda machine and leading American media, as well as considerable assistance from internet activity opposed to President Bush – that there was no viable exit from the difficult situation in Iraq. The bipartisan commission of inquiry established by Congress, headed by former secretary of state James Baker and Congressman Lee Hamilton, hurried to declare in a report supported by several research institutions – that in turn were basing themselves on the same messages – that there was no choice but to reduce drastically America's military presence in Iraq. This position remains imprinted on American consciousness to this day, and seems to have had a considerable effect on the outcome of the presidential elections. Those leading the physical military campaign did not share this opinion and suggested an alternative, focusing not on reducing but rather on increasing the forces (the surge) and expanding the military activity as a basis for the battle over consciousness of the leaders of the Sunni tribes. President Bush chose this option, which proved itself to a large extent on both the physical battlefield and the battlefield of perception in Iraq, along with essential improvements in the synergy between the two. Nonetheless, the dissonance vis-à-vis American perceptions of the war was never repaired, and therefore despite the changes in Iraq, the understanding about the necessary policies did not change and al-Qaeda's achievements in 2006 remained unchallenged both in theory and also in terms of their impact on American policy. An additional example in this context is the Second Lebanon War, where Hizbollah's messages resonated with the Israeli media and created

a perceptual image only loosely based on reality. This has become increasingly clear over the three years since then, and in particular in the results of the Lebanese parliamentary elections in June 2009.

The second context concerns the justness of each side's goals and the means to achieve them. In other words, here is a confrontation over how – in the consciousness of the different target populations – the narrative each side uses in order to justify its objectives is perceived, and the measure of legitimacy of the policy to attain the goals derived (which is linked to the public images of the respective sides' leaders). For example, Israel succeeded in fostering widespread supportive international consciousness for the narrative whereby it must cope with a security threat to its very existence because of its neighbors' hostility, the attempt by Iran to attain nuclear weapons, and the terrorism wielded against it. At the same time, it earned little legitimacy for many of its steps to confront the security risks (e.g., the separation fence, targeted killings, security blockades, roadblocks, and so on), primarily because these measures are reputed to cause suffering to a large population and be disproportionate when compared to the level of threat, even though in practice it is clear that Israel takes the suffering liable to be caused to an entire population into account when it tries to determine how to act in order to maintain its security. Beyond this, one of the most significant challenges Israel faces is the need to highlight the gap between the narrative used by the Palestinians for their own internal target population and the narrative presented to the international community. Unlike the direct correlation between the physical battle and the levels of social stamina, the correlation between the physical battle and the battle over consciousness regarding the justness of policies and measures is much more complex and requires careful management. How the perceptions of the international community evolved during Operation Cast Lead is a good example of the damage that the lack of such coordination is liable to cause.

Cyberspace as a Battlefield for Perception

In recent years, cyberspace and the internet in particular have become increasingly important in the battle over consciousness. In this dimension of the battle the direct involvement of liberal democracies and established regimes is relatively limited. However, it offers a

great deal of freedom of action for the armed organizations, which view it as an essential tool for shaping public opinion, especially among the young, alongside its use for operational purposes, given a limited ability to use conventional mass media. (Today some of the organizations such as Hizbollah and Hamas, having already attained quasi-state status, operate radio and TV stations, yet continue to expend much effort on cyberspace activity because of its importance, especially with regard to target foreign populations.) Radical organizations have consistently demonstrated their ability to adapt quickly to changes in the world of communications and take advantage of breakthroughs and opportunities. For example, years ago they exploited the ubiquity of the tape recorder, which nullified the ability of developing countries to prevent the masses from listening to undesirable messages (or even Oriental music in Israel), and later took advantage of the proliferation of non-state satellite television stations (starting with CNN and followed by al-Jazeera and its competitors in the Arab and Muslim world). Therefore, the speed and efficiency that characterized their adjustment to the possibilities created by cyberspace in the battle over consciousness were to be expected.

Unlike liberal democracies, radical organizations attribute supreme importance to the battle over consciousness in general and cyberspace in particular. Therefore in this area their activities are coordinated with their leadership and their operational wings. They sponsor many internet sites; some are news sites of their own media, forums, and chat sites, and others are sites belonging to organizations that are spin-offs from the main organizations, including sites of their operational terror branches. Each is directed at a different target audience and represents a particular component of the overall message. So, for example, Hamas operates some twenty internet sites, Hizbollah about fifteen, al-Qaeda several dozens directly and hundreds of sites related to it indirectly, and so on. The organizations aim most of their messages at the populations they purport to represent, but other target audiences are not neglected and hence the websites appear in different languages: English, Spanish, French, Persian, Russian, and Hebrew. A report prepared by the Senate's Homeland Security Committee in May 2008 entitled *Violent Islamist Extremism, the Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat* laid out in detail the extent of the phenomenon and its severity. It revealed

that al-Qaeda exploits the internet not only for propaganda but also for recruitment and virtual training camps, virtual mosques, and virtual schools, so that the internet allows al-Qaeda to bypass the limitations that the international community tries to impose on its activities. Al-Qaeda also uses the internet to connect activists with their supporters, to acquire and impart ideology and operational skills, and to raise funds.

In pursuit of their internet activities, radical organizations take advantage of the international community's weakness in protecting the web as well as liberal democracies' commitment to freedom of expression and the willingness of internet service providers to cater to anyone without vetting their clients thoroughly, despite sporadic attempts to curb their activities.

What Can and Should Be Done?

In order to challenge the radical organizations squarely in the battle over consciousness it is necessary to forge a joint effort at both the national and the international levels and combine prevention and reaction with initiative and creativity. The goal is to realize maximum synergy with the operational campaign and take full advantage of intelligence, both to identify activity of the radical organizations and to boost our own activity in the battle over consciousness in general and in cyberspace in particular. What has been done to date in this field is very little, and in no way reflects the enormity of the challenge and its importance to modern warfare.

There is an obvious difficulty in publicly analyzing the means of action required in this context. Some of the activities that have already been undertaken can serve as examples (the attempts to convince international internet service providers to refrain from offering services to illegal entities, while creating an appropriate infrastructure in international law, and establishing official and semi-official internet sites providing reliable information). Other activities require an insightful, systemic analysis of the battlefield. The important role played by blogging as a system for disseminating unedited information and for overseeing the work of the institutionalized media has been demonstrated time and again in recent years. Thus, for example, bloggers were the ones to reveal the Photoshop changes that Reuters

had made to illustrate Israeli attacks in Lebanon and forced the agency to apologize. Sites to spread visual information such as YouTube and Twitter and social network sites such as Facebook open up a vast world of opportunities for both sides, and it is critical to prepare thoroughly and quickly to meet these challenges.

Clearly, the use of intelligence in the battle over consciousness in general and in cyberspace in particular must be cautiously applied and necessitates the development of an appropriate and updatable doctrine that would on the one hand ensure effectiveness by tapping the full potential of the capabilities through quick, expert use, but would on the other hand insist on the reliability and trustworthiness of the contents, safeguard the sources and the information, and above all prevent any possibility that intelligence would be used for political purposes. At the same time, it is clear that just as in any battle, high quality intelligence is a necessary condition for success. Intelligence must identify and understand the factors that affect the cultivation of consciousness in the different playing fields, track the enemy's doings, and provide reliable timely information in order to foil the hostile messages and formulate counter-information.

Notes
1   Richard Landes, "Revisiting 'Al Durah' in Time of Iranian Media Control," June 23, 2009 http://pajamasmedia.com/blog/revisiting-al-durah-in-time-of-iranian-media-control.