LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

Scholars Crossing

7-2005

The Politics of Perceptions

Stephen R. Bowers
Liberty University, srbowers2@liberty.edu

Frederick E. Schulize
St. Andrews University - U.K.

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/gov_fac_pubs

Part of the Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons, Political Science Commons, and the
Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons

The politics of perceptions

Information operations in the global war on terrorism

By Stephen R. Bowers
and Frederick E. Schultze

With the end of the initial phase of combat activity in Iraq, the challenge for U.S. policy-makers became more political, less military. The efforts of anti-government forces to destabilize Iraq and the region quickly gave rise to the realization that a significant perceptual gulf divides the United States and most of the Middle East.

The continuing bloodletting in Iraq is occurring in an environment in which the need for effective information operations has become paramount. In a recent example of the power of information — in this case, unsubstantiated information — recall the anti-U.S. violence that was triggered by a brief report in Newsweek magazine that interrogators at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility had desecrated the Koran. In Afghanistan, 14 people died during four days of rioting. The retraction of those unsubstantiated allegations did little to undo the damage to America's image throughout the Muslim world.

INFORMATION OPERATIONS

Success for U.S. policy now requires recognition of cultural realities that are complicated by political and historical factors that have elevated disagreements between Arabs and Americans to the level of active warfare.

Critics of U.S. policy advance the argument that most of the world — including many of the U.S.' long-standing European allies — understands "the Middle East" and empathizes with Arab sentiments. In contrast, according to those critics, Americans fail to understand this region because of our emphasis on personal liberty (Middle Easterners generally emphasize the importance of collective identity) and because of our belief in separation of religion and politics (the Islamic position holds that religion and public life need not be separated).

The U.S. had very cordial relationships with both the Muslim and Arab worlds until the early 1950s. Goodwill toward the U.S. stemmed, in part, from the fact that the United States had no colonial past in the region. All other Western players, especially Britain and France, had bitter colonial legacies and were regarded with animosity.

Muslim critics of U.S. foreign policy claim that in the 1950s, there was a subtle change in U.S. internal politics, which subsequently became a permanent feature of its foreign policy. That the policy had changed became obvious with President Truman's policies toward Palestine. Subsequently, critics maintain, U.S. politicians inevitably backed Israeli agendas at the expense of Palestinian interests to capture Jewish votes and financial backing.

PERCEPTUAL DIVIDE

Many Middle Eastern critics of U.S. policy insist that the issue of why it is so hard for outsiders to understand the Middle East should be stated as why Americans and Israelis find it so hard to grasp Arab perspectives. Disagreements about the Iraq war have led critics to argue that most of the world other than the U.S. and Israel understands and empathizes with Arab sentiments. Bridging these Arab-American differences and misperceptions is critical to ushering in an environment supportive of the U.S. goal of a stable, pro-democratic Iraq.

While the cultural gap between the U.S. and some of our more recent European allies has significant ramifications in the global war on terrorism, the U.S.-Arab cultural divide is virtually ignored. This is particularly unfortunate, because Arabs and Americans share virtually identical values on core personal and political issues such as community, family, justice, accountability, participation and human rights, although these values are expressed very differently.

The key differences may be summarized as follows: For Americans, personal liberty is a core value; in contrast, Arabs willingly sacrifice individual freedoms in favor of the collective identity of their religious, family, tribal, ethnic or national groupings. In practice, this means:

■ Americans talk about the necessity for separating church and state while Muslims regard a union of the two as an absolute necessity.

■ Americans emphasize the codified legal rights of individuals within a formal democracy. Arabs see justice in terms of an implicit notion that a person, clan or tribe must be accorded dignity and honor.

■ The United States prides itself on being a nation of laws and clear rules. Arabs are likely to deal with people on the basis of relationships that are not codified but are constantly negotiated and renegotiated, based on implicit rules of fair reciprocal treatment. Arabs negotiate political relationships in private settings or tribal councils, many times conducted under religious auspices not governed by legal provisions.

These generalizations reflect profound cultural realities that make it difficult for Arabs and Americans to understand each other. They are complicated by political and historical legacies that underscore their differences. These contrasts are sharpened by advocacy influences such as the "Jewish lobby" in America. Mass media perceptions, reflected in reporting such as the Newsweek Koran desecration story, have an enduring impact.

POLITICAL REALITIES

The political dimension reflects contemporary events that can be traced back to the immediate post-World War II era. In most Arab minds, three principal issues are at play here. The first is their belief that the U.S. is too supportive of Israel and that our foreign policy is manipulated by an Israeli or Jewish lobby. This issue was affected by activities of the American government during the Cold War, the triple intervention in Egypt, the restoration of the shah in Iran in the 1950s, and the official American relationship with the Saudi royal family.
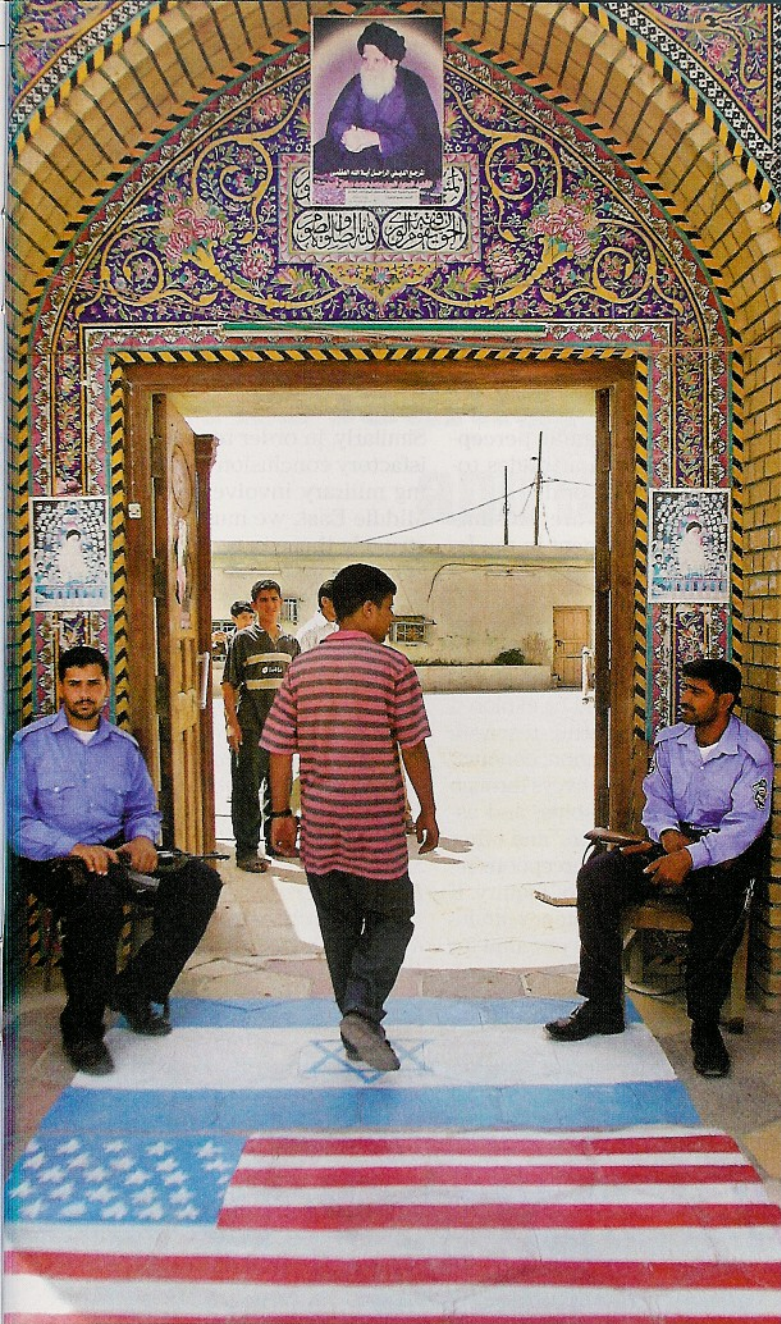
The second political issue is the U.S. role in Iraq, the first example of an American invasion, occupation and reconfiguration of an Arab country.

The third is the assumption that U.S. foreign policy has been hypo-

TECH. SGT. MIKE BUYTAS, AIR FORCE

Special Forces soldiers scan an area during a patrol in Iraq. Unconventional warfare techniques are better suited than conventional methods for battling the terrorists.

ESSAMAL-SUDANI, AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

A man steps on painted U.S. and Israeli flags as he enters a mosque in Basra, Iraq. The flags were painted in front of mosques thoughout the country to protest the alleged desecration of the Koran as reported, and later retracted, by Newsweek.

American. However, as U.S. policy changes, and pressure is brought to bear against Saudi Arabia and Egypt against a backdrop of democratic elections being held in Afghanistan and Iraq, this negative perception may diminish. The common Arab association of modern-day Israeli-American actions with historical subjugation of the Middle East is even stronger now that it includes fears among many Arabs and Muslims that their values and culture are targets of U.S. and Israeli policies. Violent reactions to the Koran desecration story were a strong indication of the belief in the Arab and Muslim communities that their values are under attack. The level of Arab distrust is still rising.

This contest has been further skewed by the failure of secular Arab nationalism and nation-state development and the continuing weakness of the nation-state as an instrument of effective governance. The failure of widespread secular education has prevented the creation of the type of citizens that have traditionally been considered essential for democratic stability.

These primary factors — religion, culture, politics and history — are major deterrents to foreign understanding of Arab perspectives and hamper U.S. policy in the region. They are becoming more intense and have transformed disagreements between Americans and Arabs into violence and warfare.

Of these factors, religion is paramount. While religion is often subsumed under the cultural rubric, such an approach obscures an important consideration. Although not everyone in the Arab and Islamic countries practices Islam, they share a common culture and an Islamic view of their place in history. This view fostered the rise of fundamentalism and a jihadist movement arguing that abandonment of Islamic doctrine led to the failure of contemporary Islamic society.

POLICY OPTIONS

In this environment, there is a need for greater emphasis on a broad range of special operations,

> **Success for U.S. policy requires recognition of cultural realities that are complicated by political and historical factors.**

particularly in the areas of information warfare, civil affairs and psychological operations. The immediate need is for carefully targeted covert actions involving a small military component, such as Army Special Forces or other specially "missioned" operators and "black ops." Their tactics might be controversial but, if used judiciously with effective oversight and orientation, they could be an effective, low-cost, high-impact counterterrorism prophylactic.

Unconventional warfare techniques are far better suited than conventional methods for battling the terrorist elements we face today. Obviously, the key element here involves delineating between eradicating or limiting terrorist activity and the broader policy options involved in undertaking such endeavors.

To be truly effective, the war on terrorism must be divorced from grand policy or at least be strictly limited to a specific function. Because of the innate political component of terrorism, however, this may be difficult, if not impossible.

Certain psychological-operations themes are especially attractive: an emphasis on the Iranian role in current Iraqi affairs and identification of Iran as a terrorist manipulator. Exploitation of the long-standing Iran-Iraq animosity would reduce the visibility of the U.S. in Iraq and offer a new enemy for popular consumption.

Of more immediate concern, however, are Islamic attitudes toward the United States and its policies. The Gallup organization conducted surveys in nine nations with large Islamic populations in an effort to explore Islamic attitudes toward the U.S. Gallup concluded that only 18 percent of the respondents believed that Osama bin Laden was responsible for the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and only 9 percent felt that the attacks justified U.S. military actions.

THE OTHER SHOE

An interesting counterpoint to this discussion is the question:

critical. Critics feel that a democratic America has supported undemocratic, autocratic Arab regimes when those regimes have supported U.S. interests. They feel that our desire for reform of Arab regimes is not genuine but is simply a way to stop Middle East terrorism.

The combination of these three political issues creates an Arab-American perception gap and distorts rational discussion of almost every other legitimate issue that is raised, such as political reform, women's rights, education or economic liberalization. This gap is central to current Islamic religious and political discourse, and motivates a significant portion of Is-

lamic terrorism, militancy and foreign policy choices made by Islamic countries.

Modern history colors relations among Muslims, Arabs, Americans and Israelis. Many Arabs see current American and Israeli policies as continuations of a bitter historical legacy in which colonialism exploited the Arab states. Arabs see the U.S. role in Iraq as comparable to Israel's role in Palestine. The Arab world regards both cases as evidence of military and political aggression.

Yet, in the eyes of our critics, there is an inherent contradiction in U.S. foreign policy because we tolerate repressive regimes if they are pro-

PERSPECTIVE

Why do Americans hate Muslims? In 2002, Chris Toensing, editor of Middle East Report, complained that Arabs and Muslims believed Americans were indifferent to Iraqi civilian casualties resulting from sanctions after the 1991 war and bombings during that conflict. Such indifference, they suggested, could only be the result of American hatred toward Islam.

U.S. government policy research should attempt to determine the extent to which Islamic attitudes toward the U.S. are driven by specific policies or by perceptions of the fundamental nature of Western society. It is unlikely that the responses would fall into an "either-or" dichotomy, so researchers would have to endeavor to determine the balance that exists between these factors.

A second concern is popular theories about why militant Muslims hate the United States. One of the most frequently heard is that Muslim militants hate America because they hate freedom and democracy. Accordingly, it is important to explore Muslim attitudes toward these key Western values. Many maintain that it is not a hatred of democracy but rather the desire for democracy that has made many Muslims hate a U.S. that they blame for perpetuating undemocratic politics in their world.

It is equally important to examine American global hegemony and the power-projection capabilities associated with that hegemony.

A related concern is Islamic perceptions of American attitudes toward the Islamic world. We must know how familiar Muslims are with U.S. involvement in the Islamic world and with American society itself. What are the primary sources of information upon which the target audience relies?

Initial efforts aimed at developing an effective information-operations campaign should involve collaborative arrangements with universities in the Middle East. The most effective avenue for such endeavors are private university-based contractors who will conduct research dealing with the following:

■ Are Islamic attitudes toward the U.S. driven by specific policies fostered by the modern, Westphalian concept of the nation-state system or by perceptions of Western society and its separation of the secular and religious realms?

■ Define and delineate attitudes toward key Western values.

■ What are Islamic perceptions of American attitudes toward the Islamic world?

■ How familiar are Muslims with U.S. involvement in the Islamic world as well as with American society itself?

■ How may perceptions of the U.S. be affected by local disputes such as the Iraq-Iran animosity?

These areas should be explored by evaluating existing research conducted in the region; conducting public opinion surveys through university partnerships; and assessing local scholars' and other influential people's perceptions regarding these areas of inquiry. If pursued with consistency, an information-operations program for this region would serve as an effective force multiplier and would place the global war on terrorism within its proper ideological context.

During the Cold War, it was President Reagan's skill in presenting the struggle between East and West as a war of ideas that made possible the resounding victory of freedom over oppression. Similarly, in order to reach a satisfactory conclusion to our ongoing military involvement in the Middle East, we must frame the struggle there in terms that will solidify support among prospective allies and leave no room for our adversaries to take advantage of either a tactical or semantical misstep. ■

Stephen R. Bowers is a professor of political science at James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Va., and is director of the Center for Security and Science/Nelson Institute. Frederick E. Schultze is a researcher at the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, St. Andrews University, Scotland.