COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

POLICY INNOVATION MEMORANDUM NO. 33

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From: Max Boot and Michael Doran

Re: Political Warfare

The United States is in a long-term struggle for influence in the Middle East with competitors such as Iran, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, the Muslim Brotherhood, and various Salafist organizations. All have their own differences, but they are united in promoting visions of society that are at odds with American interests and ideals. Yet the U.S. government lacks the tools to contest this struggle for "hearts and minds." The armed forces and intelligence community are skilled at using drone strikes to eliminate the leaders of terrorist organizations. But the United States does not have a political strategy to capitalize on short-term gains achieved by air strikes. It is time to develop such a strategy and to call it by its rightful but long-neglected name: political warfare.

THE PROBLEM

The U.S. government has gotten out of the habit of waging political warfare since the end of the Cold War. Instead, the U.S. government focuses on public diplomacy aimed at "telling America's story"—the mandate of the State Department's Office of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. But selling the virtues of the United States—the central concern of public diplomacy—was far more important in the Cold War than it is today. Back then, the United States sought to persuade countries that its system was superior to the Soviet Union's. Today, the battle taking place in the Muslim world is not about how Muslims view the United States, but rather how Muslims view themselves. This is a multifaceted struggle over identity, power, and authority that pits moderates against extremists, but also tribe against tribe and ethnic groups against the state. The attitudes of Muslims toward the United States are, more often than not, a function of how U.S. power shapes the local struggles that define their lives.

The United States has the potential to influence such struggles in a positive direction, but it is not skilled at doing so, as two examples drawn from the authors' experience illustrate. Imagine that an Iraqi filmmaker approaches an American official seeking support for a film about how Shiite-dominated democracy functions in Iraq. Such a film could undermine Iran's Shiite theocracy—an American interest. But the State Department's public diplomacy office would

likely reject such a project because it has nothing to do with promoting American society. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), in all likelihood, would not support it either; nor should it, because most filmmakers would not want to become covert operatives. Consequently, the film might never get made. Or take another example: imagine that a pro-American Iraqi politician approaches an American visitor and asks for funding for his electoral campaign. Like many of his colleagues, he has been offered millions of dollars from Iran, but he does not want to accept Iranian money. Yet the United States is not offering to fund him. So, he will not have the funds to contest the election, and the Iranian-backed candidates will win. While the United States could congratulate itself for its dedication to the principles of democracy, it has simply ceded strategic territory to Iran.

The problem is that no government agency—not the State Department, not the Pentagon, and not the CIA—views political warfare as a core mission. This gap is partially filled by the National Endowment for Democracy, the International Republican Institute, and the National Democratic Institute, entities created during the Reagan administration to promote democracy abroad in an overt manner. But these organizations primarily focus on the procedures of democracy—training activists to conduct campaigns and elections—rather than trying to influence substantively who assumes power. That has rightly allowed them to maintain a neutral reputation but also leaves a yawning gap in the U.S. government's capabilities.

BACK TO THE FUTURE: A NEW|OLD APPROACH

The Obama administration could learn from the example of the early Cold War, when the U.S. government first organized itself for political warfare. This concept was defined in a May 4, 1948, memorandum produced by the State Department's policy planning staff under George Kennan:

> Political warfare is the logical application of Clausewitz's doctrine in time of peace. In broadest definition, political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. Such operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures (as ERP—the Marshall Plan), and "white" propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of "friendly" foreign elements, "black" psychological warfare and even encouragement of underground resistance in hostile states.

During the Cold War, the U.S. government waged political warfare through a variety of mechanisms, including covertly funding noncommunist political parties in Europe and Japan, covertly starting magazines and organizations to organize artists and intellectuals against communism, and providing financial and logistical support to dissidents behind the Iron Curtain. At its worst, the policies of the Cold War supported strongmen with scant legitimacy, such as Cuban president Fulgencio Batista and the shah of Iran, engendering anti-American "blowback." But at its best, the United States aided fighters for freedom behind the Iron Curtain and beyond, helping win the Cold War.

It is the latter tradition, neglected for too long, that should be rediscovered. Reinvigorating the U.S. government's capability to wage political warfare will not cost much—in all likelihood less than the $37 million price tag of a single Reaper drone—but it will require mobilizing autonomous bureaucracies to act in concert. In particular, this will require overcoming the normal balkanization of government operations in which al-Qaeda specialists focus only on al-Qaeda, Iran specialists only on Iran, and public diplomacy specialists only on buffing America's image. Waging effective political warfare will require crosscutting skill sets.

It will be necessary, therefore, to modify the U.S. system so that decisions made at the top, such as countering Iranian or Muslim Brotherhood influence, will be implemented by the interagency process in Washington and by country teams at various embassies. Achieving this goal will require significant organizational innovation.

ADAPTING THE COUNTERTERRORISM MODEL

Fortunately, a model already exists. The counterterrorism apparatus created in the wake of 9/11 provides a good example of what should be built—or, rather, expanded. As a first step, President Barack Obama should take a keen interest in the problem and appoint a highly respected coordinator for political warfare, to be located in the National Security Council. Without the personal support of the president, this initiative will fail.

Second, the president must create a strategic operational hub—an interagency coordinating body that pulls all of the local efforts together—housed in the State Department. Under an executive order signed by President Obama in 2011, the State Department has already created a Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications that is designed to "coordinate, orient, and inform government-wide foreign communications activities targeted against terrorism and violent extremism." This is a good step in the right direction, but it does not go nearly far enough. The effort should aim to counter not only terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda but also organizations such as the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah, even in their nonviolent manifestations. In addition, the effort should involve much more than just overt messaging directly from the U.S. government. The goal is to integrate a variety of elements of national power, some of them clandestine, to shape the Middle East.

Third, the president must direct the top-level government officials— the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, the administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the CIA director—to create political-warfare career tracks, which would result in the training and promotion of specialists in this area. Without separate career tracks, the bureaucracies will stigmatize and ostracize individuals who find political warfare rewarding and attractive.

Once an effective institutional framework is in place, the U.S. government can get to work helping intellectuals and political leaders in countries from Pakistan to Mali. Some activities could be carried out overtly, others covertly. There is an obvious need to be sensitive to the taint of "Made in America" in the Middle East, but this fear need not paralyze the United States, since moderate leaders in the Muslim world are already accused of being American stooges even if they have no U.S. support. Some would actually welcome open U.S. backing; others would accept aid if it were funneled through intermediaries. Such operations must be conducted carefully so as not to run afoul of the 1948 Smith-Mundt Act, which prohibits the State Department from making any attempt to influence domestic opinion. But even in the Internet age it is possible to ensure that the messaging is aimed overseas and not at home.

CONCLUSION

"Political warfare" may be an alien-sounding concept in 2013, but that is precisely the problem. The United States will never best its rivals and enemies without enhancing its capacity to exert influence in countries whose futures are up for grabs. That this can be done successfully should be clear from the experience of the Cold War, even if there are many differences between the situation then and now. It is high time to rediscover lost skill sets and get to work countering the attempts of various anti-American actors to shape the world—and in particular the Muslim world—in their own image.

It will be difficult to measure the outcome of a political warfare campaign—hard metrics are easier to come by for kinetic targeting than for political-influence operations, which is why American leaders naturally prefer the former to the latter. But U.S. enemies, from Iran to al-Qaeda, work hard and often effectively to shape public opinion with influence operations, not just with the use of force. Unless the United States counters their efforts in kind, it is likely to find the greater Middle East developing in a dangerous direction.

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