

“The 9-11 War will not be won through any territorial conquest or individual’s capture. It will only end in the realm of perceptions. . . .”

America, Islam, and the 9-11 War

PETER WARREN SINGER

Few events are shared across an entire populace, where everyone has a story of where he or she was when they received the news. “9-11,” as it will always be known, was one of those rare, momentous days. Like the assault on Pearl Harbor or the Kennedy assassination, the attacks of September 11, 2001, forever seared in memory,

POLITICS

Global Trends, 2007

will define a generation of Americans. But 9-11 was more than that. As we look back on it more than five years later, we can now see that it was a force that reshaped global politics. It gave nearly every single global actor, whether states, international organizations, or NGOs, a new set of priorities to act on and new pitfalls to navigate.

For American foreign policy, 9-11 was a historic wakeup call, shocking it out of the seeming hangover that had defined the post-cold war decade. Security concerns replaced trade as the coin of the realm. Penny-pinching for the “peace dividend” was transformed into more than a trillion dollars spent on a “war” not against a country like the Soviet Union, but against a tactic: terrorism. A post-Somalia doctrine of “casualty aversion” was shattered by two major ground conflicts and more than 20,000 American casualties. And a political climate that was veering toward mild isolationism in 2001 became a bipartisan strategy of forward engagement on a global scale that many have described as near-imperial.

The five years since 9-11 are stunning in the array of actions and reactions that followed. One aspect, though, stands out. It is now clear that the attacks on the American homeland and the responses to them have created a new prism of

global affairs, a tension between a state and a religion that plays out on an international level as never before. Relations between the world’s undisputed superpower and the world of 1.4 billion Muslim believers can only be viewed as inexorably changed since 9-11.

FEAR AND SUSPICION

Over the past 200 years, relations between the United States and the diverse set of Muslim states and communities that make up the Islamic world have veered from positive to negative. The young American state’s very first embassy was located in the Muslim world (Tangier), but so was its first foreign incursion (the Barbary Wars). The ups and downs have continued in the centuries since, from the United States arguing against European colonial tendencies at the Treaty of Versailles following World War I to the oil embargo that followed the 1973 October War.

And yet, while America’s standing in Muslim states and communities has been on the decline for a while, driven mainly by the prevailing view in the region that Washington has failed to be evenhanded in the Arab-Israeli conflict, it has never been like it is today. We have entered a new global paradigm. From the historic heart of the Islamic world in the Middle East to the peripheries in Southeast Asia and in the West, a tension has built that is severe and palpable.

As is the case with many great powers, the United States has a problem of being unpopular abroad. But in the Muslim world, the issue is different and far deeper. The United States is not simply seen as being mean-spirited or unfair. Today, in the wake of the Iraq War especially, nearly 90 percent of the inhabitants of Muslim countries view America as the primary security threat to their country. Around 60 percent have said in polls that weakening the Muslim world is a primary objective of the United States in formulating its policies.

PETER WARREN SINGER is a senior fellow in foreign policy studies at the Brookings Institution. He is director of the Twenty-first Century Defense Initiative at Brookings.

At the same time, this trend is mirrored to an extent in the United States. Americans have long had concerns about radical groups within Islam (crystallizing with the Iranian hostage crisis), but the number of Americans who have a negative view of the entire religion of Islam itself has grown each year since the 9-11 attacks to now comprise almost half the US body politic. Indeed, a study commissioned by the Council on American-Islamic Relations found that the thing that Americans find most perplexing about Islam is their understanding that it “condones killing in the name of Allah.”

Perhaps more illustrative, though, is the cultural vibe that permeates relations and sets the context for the long term. For example, one of the most popular movies in Egypt this year was *The Night Baghdad Fell*, a black comedy that depicts an American invasion of Egypt, the destruction of Cairo, and a faux Condoleezza Rice in a sex scene. In NATO ally Turkey, the most popular film this year was the action flick *Valley of the Wolves*. It fantasizes about Turkish soldiers wreaking revenge on evil American troops who have just shot up a wedding and bombed a mosque. The wife of the Turkish prime minister attended the premiere.

Yet if, as a *Washington Post* article described, Americans are the “bullies, rapists, and mindless killers” of pop culture in the Muslim world, Muslims fare no better in their depiction in the airwaves of America. It is hard to imagine listening to five minutes of talk radio without hearing some sort of slam on Islam, while the villains of almost every new action film or television show invariably have a link to a Muslim terrorist group or cause. Former American diplomat William Fisher recently warned of an “uninformed and unreasoning Islamophobia that is rapidly becoming implanted in our national genetics.”

Consequently, 9-11 has become the portal into something far bigger. Global politics and US foreign policy are being shaped by a new dynamic, a schism between a nation and a religion driven by themes of hurt, fear, and suspicion. It is a contestation in the realm of ideas, but with a decidedly tangible security aspect. The conflict is not between two blocs locked in battle, nor is it merely about defeating a certain set of killers. It is as if George Kennan’s “Mr. X” writings on the cold war melded with Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations.” It is about a new global construct of mutual insecurity.

As with all things new, the terms and conditions are still being figured out. Some have suggested we name this the Global War on Terrorism. Others

have called it World War III or IV. Still others suggest it be called simply the “Long War” (the latter not only ringing a bit defeatist, but also revealing classic American impatience). Ultimately, we do not know what history will call this conflict; the final names selected for wars are often capricious and unpredictable. For now, we can best call it by its spark. More than five years in, the 9-11 War shows no sign of ending. The only certainty is that it will play out over the course of a generation or more.

THE NEW CONSENSUS

The 9-11 attacks were a self-evident violation of all moral and religious codes of conduct. Consequently, the United States should have been able to isolate Al Qaeda from the broader public in the Islamic world, and thus cut it off from the support and recruiting structures that would allow it to thrive. Yet, more than five years later, the United States finds itself isolated, and inversely has seen the stature of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda rise. While Washington and its allies have seized some of bin Laden’s lesser lieutenants and assets, the movement remains vibrant and its senior leadership largely intact.

The primary threat has evolved since 9-11 from a specific organization that was fairly centralized into more of a collection of self-organized, self-inspired, cellular entities. The 9-11 attacks were planned at the group’s highest levels in Afghanistan over the course of almost two years, with bin Laden’s hand in the tiniest of details. By comparison, bin Laden probably found out about the London bombings in July 2005 by watching television. And the only link that the 17-man terror cell recently rolled up in Canada had with Al Qaeda was by reading about it on the Internet.

We are witnessing the transformation of the Al Qaeda threat into the threat of Al Qaeda-ism. This evolution makes the deep and rapid deterioration of America’s standing in the Islamic world one of the greatest challenges the United States faces. The erosion of America’s credibility not only reinforces the recruiting efforts of its foes, it also effectively denies American ideas and policies a fair hearing among the wider populace—the “sea” in which any of America’s foes must “swim.” Winning the 9-11 War depends substantially on winning the war of ideas; unfortunately, by most available metrics, the United States is not winning that war.

For all the seeming contention in US foreign policy, somewhat of a broad consensus is building. While America’s public diplomacy problem

was initially denied, it has finally begun to receive recognition at the highest levels. In a January 2005 interview before his second inauguration, President George W. Bush acknowledged that declining US popularity in the Islamic world would be one of his greatest challenges in the subsequent four years. One result was the subsequent naming of a close confidant, Karen Hughes, to take over this effort. The act itself was the message; Hughes was expert in neither the issues nor public diplomacy, and indeed had no experience in international affairs. But her nomination was meant as a signal that the problem had been accepted as real and significant.

Likewise, while public diplomacy had once been derided as too soft to be considered with matters of state security, the Pentagon is now one of the leaders in pushing for a refocus on winning the war of ideas—or, as Department of Defense policy documents describe it, creating a “global anti-terrorism environment.” Outgoing Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld has suggested that when it comes to the war of ideas, “The US government still functions as a five and dime store in an eBay world. . . . The longer it takes to put a strategic information framework into place, the more we can be certain that the vacuum will be filled by the enemy.”

Within discussions of the causes and appropriate responses to 9-11, experts from the region also have weighed in, and a consensus has formed around the importance of human development concerns to both the problem and any solution. The key catalyst was the Arab Human Development Report, first published by the UN Development Program in 2002 and again each subsequent year. The reports have touched off a crucial debate in both the United States and the Islamic world. Most critically, the reports are the products of regional scholars and, as such, have achieved an unprecedented level of legitimacy and recognition.

In exploring the recent rise of radicalism, the reports delve into just how far the region has fallen behind in development. The various data points are telling, and they go on and on. Sub-Saharan Africa has better Internet connectivity than the Middle East. The 22 Arab countries, including the oil-exporting Gulf states, account for a combined gross domestic product less than that of Spain alone. All 57 member states of the Organization of the Islamic Conference account for one-fifth of

the world’s population but their combined GDP is less than that of France. Almost half of the world’s Muslim population is illiterate. While there are a few bright spots (for example, the success that Malaysia has found in embracing globalization), overall, in the words of one of the reports, the region is “richer than it is developed.”

These development failures have combined with a regionwide freedom deficit that heightens the problem. Authoritarian governments predominate in the Muslim world, the only exceptions lying outside the historic Middle Eastern core. The accountability of public authorities is further hampered by the fact that most media rely on state support and can be described as, at best, only partly free. In the absence of either public accountability or deeply rooted traditions of self-governance, most regimes are prone to corruption, patronage, and clientelism.

The result is that state structures in the region are at best unresponsive and at worst incompetent when it comes to meeting public needs. This combination of human development gaps and broken

regimes goes a long way in explaining both the failing environment in which radicals thrive and the pool of simmering anger they are able to tap into.

It is also credited with the rise of political Islam as a potent force in the post-9-11 world. With authoritarians quite effective at clamping down on secular and liberal opposition (witness the regionwide suppression of human rights activists and journalists that rock the boat too much), Islamist groups in particular have been at an advantage in having both the safe ground of the mosque to organize from and strong credibility on the anti-corruption front. From Pakistan and Palestine to Yemen and Egypt, failing public services have created a vacuum filled by Islamists who provide food, shelter, health care, and education. This, combined with their opposition to the United States, has gained them what the regimes lack: political legitimacy in the eyes of deprived urban and rural masses.

The new consensus in US policy toward the Islamic world revolves, as a result, around the need to address socioeconomic deprivation as well as political repression. Such a strategy primarily calls for human development, with a strong emphasis on political and economic freedoms. “Reform” is now the catchword in American policy discussions regarding the Muslim world—to the extent

Nearly 90 percent of the inhabitants of Muslim countries view America as the primary security threat to their country.

that Secretary of State Rice has not made a single speech about the region without using it.

UGLY AMERICANS

While Louis Armstrong sang on his international tours to win hearts and minds during the cold war that we have to “accentuate the positive,” he also noted that we have to “eliminate the negative.” This leads to the continuing problem of implementation—how America carries itself in the world. While US officials know they have a problem, it is too often depicted as simply poor public relations. President Bush, for example, has suggested the United States is “behind when it comes to selling our own story.”

But a key lesson that any decent public relations firm will point out is that no amount of “selling” can move a bad product. Policies matter. Washington needs to show greater empathy for both sides, as well as at least a modicum of activity, on the Arab-Israeli peace process. It needs to extricate itself from the corner it has painted itself into with its prison at Guantánamo

Bay and its detainee policies. And it must be willing to face the realities of a “stay the course” policy ill-suited for an Iraq that is spinning out of control.

At the same time, how the United States engages and communicates with the world also matters. Washington is widely perceived as lecturing without listening, arrogant, and uninterested in the opinion of others. While there was great fanfare about Hughes’s appointment, the follow-up has been less than stellar. Public diplomacy has remained in spin mode, too often treating the endeavor like an extension of an election campaign. Hughes’s limited forays have been rife with photo-ops (when asked for a public diplomacy “success story,” senior staffers at the State Department cited Hughes’s attending a cooking class with students in Germany), and staged meetings with pre-screened groups of elites. Her speeches in the region too often stand as a guide on how not to communicate with the Muslim world, veering from pandering references that lack local cultural awareness to finger-wagging lectures.

As Hughes and her aides gain on-the-job experience in public diplomacy, this trend may reverse. But it is important to point out that any one official is not the problem. Since winning the 9-11 War requires reversing the present wholly nega-

tive reception given to the United States and its policies, public diplomacy must be redefined as an imperative at all levels of government, not an afterthought. Cultural awareness must clearly be built up across the foreign policy apparatus.

For example, although the launch of a new initiative to build foreign language skills starting in fiscal 2007 is a nice, though belated, start, the actual funding will yield at most 4,500 graduate study fellowships, spread out over multiple languages (ranging from Chinese and Arabic to Korean and Farsi). It remains a drop in the bucket in relation to America’s overall strategic needs. Meanwhile, the administration is missing opportunities to mobilize the Arab and Muslim American community. Just as political donors and corporate cronies often join governmental foreign travel delegations, core groups of cultural advisers could be assembled to accompany US government officials to help guide them through regional

nuances and pitfalls.

Within all of these activities, dialogue is key. Any public diplomacy program-

ming must include an element for reaction and feedback. (For instance, every trip to the region by senior officials should include meetings with elites, with students, and with local civil society, and every speech should include time for open questions and answers.) And wherever possible, programming should be jointly developed with local partners, to improve credibility and enhance local impact.

A successful strategy must also be far more nimble in seizing opportunities to demonstrate American good intent and seriousness of engagement. Washington was quite generous, for instance, toward the regions struck by the 2004 Asian tsunami, and saw an uptick in its standing in Muslim Indonesia as a result. Yet, when an earthquake in 2005 slammed Pakistan, the response from the US government was meek at best. Overall, the United States committed just \$26.4 million in aid and said it might give more up to a \$50 million limit. That is roughly 3 percent of the amount the government gave for the tsunami relief and reconstruction effort.

By contrast, a “who’s who” of radical groups quickly started a wide range of aid efforts in Pakistan. Affiliate groups of Lashkar-e-Taiba ran a field hospital replete with x-ray machines and operating room. Jammāt-e-Islami organized relief convoys

All radicalisms have a critical weakness: as long as they are not fed, they ultimately burn themselves out.

and refugee camps. And the Al Rasheed Trust (a group whose assets have been frozen in the United States because of its suspected Al Qaeda links) has been in the forefront of aid and publicity.

Finally, the United States must figure out how to integrate its own approaches to public diplomacy with those of other nations. For all the centrality of the United States to this conflict (illustrated by the fact that polling finds Jacques Chirac to be the most popular Western leader in the Muslim world—mainly for his perceived willingness to stand up to the Americans), there is a larger historic context of Western relations with Islam. Europeans, worried about their own Muslim populations, are also increasingly willing to get involved.

Indeed, American and European strengths and weaknesses complement each other. From their experience with integrating the Eastern European states, the European Union has far more expertise when it comes to the nitty-gritty details of political reform, economic advancement, and rule of law issues, while the United States has convening power that the Europeans can only dream of. Yet their respective efforts are not linked, and each suffers as a result.

STRATEGIC DILEMMAS

Questions of implementation, however, are not enough. Three major dilemmas of the 9-11 War await decision. Until Washington develops a strategy on how to solve them, they will hover above all policies. In the political conflict with radical Islam, no amount of achievement in the areas of consensus developed so far will matter much without their resolution.

The first is the issue that shadows democratic reform: the challenge of sparking change that is beyond America's control; or to put it more specifically, the seeming dilemma of Islamist groups and how to deal with their rise.

The political spectrum across the Muslim world is quite diverse. Regional contexts and concerns vary widely. For example, while the Israeli-Palestinian conflict overshadows any discussion of political reform in the Arab world, Indonesians often care as much or more about US policy toward the Aceh province. In addition, each area of the Muslim world has widely differing interest groups and demographic sectors. These include regime retainers (mostly members of the state bureaucracy and military), secular reformers (the liberal and leftist groups most oriented to Western modes, but typically lacking local power and

credibility), gradualist mainstreamers (the largest set of the professional and business class, who are generally disposed to change, but with a measured approach), Islamist social conservatives (who seek a greater role for Islam in society and are thus disposed toward democratic reform, but also quite anti-American), radical Islamists (who advocate overturning regimes and implementing the entirety of Islamic laws), and, ultimately, militant activists and terrorists themselves (who undertake or provide active support for violent action).

Unfortunately, US policy has often failed to appreciate the diversity of opinion and, worse, has held both secular reformers and social conservatives at arms length. Reaching out to like-minded reformers is simply a matter of increased support and often standing up to their repression by regime forces. The critical challenge is how the United States will deal with the rising power and popularity of Islamist groups, which are gradually winning over the "swing vote" that is the business class/mainstreamers.

Not only is building democracy a long-term proposition, but the process of change and its success are not in American hands. Others control the final actions of how it plays on the ground, including people with whom Americans are not fully comfortable. Thus, if the United States is ever to gain credibility for its reform push, it must be willing to engage with Islamist groups, including those such as the Muslim Brotherhood that are currently banned by America's authoritarian allies. It must also be willing to speak out against their violent repression. (Witness the May 2006 beatings in Cairo streets, where regime thugs attacked Brotherhood activists; they had gathered to protest the prosecution of judges who had questioned the regime's attempted rigging of elections.)

The United States certainly may not be able to persuade such groups to support US policies, but it is more important for America's overall goals to prevent their co-option by militant forces. Unfortunately, the United States so far has steered clear of the difficult challenges involved in engaging such groups. It also has frequently made the fundamental mistake of assuming that any and every Islamist group is inherently violent or Al Qaeda-oriented.

The United States must be flexible enough to open dialogues with the diverse set of social groups and actors on the ground. This may even mean seeking allies that have very different worldviews. The Marshall Plan's true brilliance was cleaving socialist-leaning parties and labor unions in West-

ern Europe away from the Soviet Union; President Richard Nixon went to Beijing not because he was a fan of Maoism, but to divide the communist bloc. Likewise, the United States will ultimately have to accept that Islamist political groups are among the most powerful and credible in the Muslim world.

Any group that accepts the procedures of democratic and transparent governance must be engaged, regardless of its ideology or past opposition to US policy. The red line is violent action. Only those groups that continue to maintain armed wings that engage in violence are the true threats that must be isolated.

Some worry that this might mean the creation of a permanent and backward-looking caliphate across the region. These fears are overblown. While the famous fear of “one man, one vote, one time” holds sway, we must remember that it never happened in the case that is most often cited for it. In Algeria in the 1990s, it was a military coup, not the Islamists, that made this scenario come true. Instead, in Jordan, Turkey, Morocco, and Indonesia, such groups have seen that they would not be able to maintain popular support unless they moderated.

Americans and their allies should have the same confidence that Kennan advised at the start of the cold war in his prescription for containing communism. Like the Soviet Union, the popularity of radical Islamist rule is greatest where it has not yet reached. Wherever it might take power, it “bears within it the seeds of its own decay.”

The long-term corollary to ensure that this proves correct is that the United States must become serious in its promotion of development and democracy, with budgeting and programming expanded to the level of challenge found in the region. Enhanced coordination with the European Union and Japan not only would assure additional funds; it would also improve the legitimacy of the enterprise by making it multilateral. This is crucial given the level of anti-Americanism in the region and the absolute necessity of avoiding a “Made in America” stamp on any socioeconomic development and democratization project.

The United States and its allies should place a premium on the principle of justice in the political sphere, which resonates strongly with both secular and Islamist social conservative constituencies. Justice is a value at the core of Islam, while a push purely for democracy often is negatively associated with US interests and the experiment gone awry in Iraq. Most important, any support for democracy has to be synchronized with a simultaneous push

for genuine constitutional change. A common mistake of the past has been to accept cosmetic changes or the holding of a vote as signs of democratization. They are not. Constitutional reform to allow freedom of association and speech, an independent press, the formation of political parties, and the ending of emergency laws (each of which are supported by all the actors on the political spectrum except the two extremes of regime retainers and terrorists) should be at the heart of the agenda. Governments should be pressed to set actual timelines for reform measures and held accountable for achieving them.

ISLAM'S REFORMATION

The second strategic dilemma lies in the underlying meaning of “reform.” Part and parcel of the 9-11 War are deep debates taking place within Muslim states and communities as to the shape and teachings of Islam itself in the twenty-first century. The issues range from the role and status of women, and wrestling with globalization and technology, to perhaps the most critical, *ijtihad*.

This last question concerns how to interpret Islamic law regarding modern-day matters not clarified in the Koran or other texts. It opens up a debate on freedom of thought, rational thinking, and the quest for truth through an epistemology that includes science, human experience, and critical thinking. Many liken the current debate to a Muslim equivalent of the Reformation in Europe during the 1500s to 1600s. If the analogy has merit, one must also expect the possibility of violent reactions when existential and political matters collide.

One of the most important aspects of this debate is a tension between the historic core and the periphery of the Islamic world, which the United States has yet to figure out. Many of the most vibrant discussions of the role of Islam in the twenty-first century are occurring in places like Indonesia, Malaysia, and among Muslim minority communities in Europe and the United States. Islam not only has a different historic founding in these areas, coming through trade and immigration rather than conquest, but it also typically operates in a context of greater freedom of expression. This means arguments over such matters as how to be both a good Muslim and a good citizen are far richer in the periphery than in the historic core, where the debates have either ossified or veer toward stultifying polemics.

The power of persuasion is ultimately stronger than that of secret police. But the historic core retains influence far greater than that of the border

regions, for two reasons. The first is the convening influence and traditional power of the Arab world. The location of the holy sites in the Middle East; the dominance of a few historic centers of learning, such as al Azhar in Egypt; and the monopolization of Arabic over Islamic jurisprudence all give the Middle East core leverage in Islamic debates. The second reason is the viral effect that money coming from oil-rich Gulf states has in funding conservative movements and schools that seek a sort of counter-reformation against less austere local traditions.

Nevertheless, a backlash is emerging, or at the very least strong subregional cleavages are. In Southeast Asia, for example, along with rampant anti-Americanism, anti-Arabism also is growing. The region is comparatively prosperous, stable, and democratic (certainly compared to the Middle East core), and it is growing tired of being treated as a periphery suitable only to be lectured at. Indeed, the Indonesian government minister for religious affairs recently commented at a conference on Islam in the Age of Globalization that he was “fed up with these Arabs.”

Likewise, even inside the various Islamist groups, there is regional discord. Fierce feuds have broken out between the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world and radical Islamists coming from the Deoband school in South Asia, as well as in Europe between second- and third-generation European Muslim leaders and those straight from the Middle East.

The United States certainly cannot drive such cleavages, nor should it overtly try, recognizing the Medusa-like effect its positive gaze will have on the credibility of any local movement. But it should be attentive to them, ready to engage positively with efforts aimed at moving forward the reform debate within Islam from the periphery to the core. The important point is that, ideally, US policy toward the region would be recognized not only for its consistency and credibility, but also as having depth of understanding, empathy, and nuance in how it engages a diverse world.

As an illustration, much has been made of the Muslim religious educational institutions known as madrassas, with many US officials and commentators describing them as “schools of hate” that must be shut down. This misses the fact that only an extremely small percentage of the madras-

as in places like Pakistan are affiliated with radical groups. In other states, such as Indonesia, they are mostly government-linked and many are in fact local sources of moderation that seek to counter the growing outreach of the pesantren, which are boarding schools more likely to be funded by radical outsiders. In Arabic-speaking countries, “madrassa” is simply the ordinary word for school. As a result, when Washington talks about shutting down “madrassas,” it is viewed as striking against moderates in some countries and education in others, and rarely as focusing merely on radicals.

THE TICKING TIME-BOMB

The third and final strategic challenge central to the political conflict with radical Muslims is a huge demographic wave we are just starting to feel within the Islamic world. A key but often ignored political fact of the region is its youth. Roughly half the Arab population—along with 54 percent of Iranians and 52 percent of Pakistanis—is younger than 20. By contrast, only slightly more than one-quarter of the populations of the United States, the European Union, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan is under 20.

Between 2000 and 2050, the region’s population is projected to roughly double, with a growth rate of about 130 percent. Within the same 50-year time frame, developing countries as a whole are projected to grow by a total of 67 percent, while the global population growth will be 54 percent. This growth will certainly change the region in a variety of ways. For example, by 2035, little Yemen will be a population powerhouse, becoming the second-largest Arab country, with 85 million residents, just behind Egypt’s 92 million. Sudan and Saudi Arabia likely will be third and fourth with 55 and 49 million, respectively.

Yet the real problem may not be in overall growth, but in the population structure. In a phenomenon commonly known as the “youth bulge,” greater percentages of the population will be in the younger segments of the population than is the norm. In Yemen, the youth population, ages 15 to 24, is expected to grow from 3.3 million in 2000 to 21 million in 2050. In Saudi Arabia, the youth population increase will be from 3.9 million to 10 million within the same period. Iraq and Syria are

The United States will ultimately have to accept that Islamist political groups are among the most powerful and credible in the Muslim world.

also expected to witness significant growth in the size of their youth populations. The impact of this demographic trend would be huge regardless of the context. With stagnant political systems and weak infrastructure, this rising pool of youth will lack opportunities needed to fulfill their aspirations. They represent what the World Economic Forum has called a “ticking time-bomb.”

If the regimes in place were able to produce enough jobs, the youth bulge conceivably could create economic growth (what is known as a “demographic dividend”). For example, many East Asian countries experienced such demographic shifts in the 1960s and 1970s and the availability of a larger work force became an engine for higher productivity and growth. The Islamic world, however, is presently unprepared to create such employment opportunities. Just to stay at the current level of stagnancy, Muslim majority states would have to create 100 million new jobs over the next 15 to 20 years.

Needless to say, this is a recipe for disaster. Unless the international community is able to help launch an ambitious program of capacity building and quality improvement in their education and employment systems, a significant proportion of the coming generation will face conditions that political economist Omer Taspinar describes as an Al Qaeda recruiter’s dream. “Hundreds of millions will be poorly educated and lack the necessary skills for employment. They will be living in crowded mega-cities and will become attractive recruits for radical groups and organizations that are alienated from the global economic, social, and political system.” This generation will grow up angry and likely viewing the United States as the home of Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib.

The US strategic agenda must be one that deals with the underlying anger that comes from disappointment with the comparative lack of political, economic, and social opportunity for youth. The only environment in which terrorist groups will be undermined and the United States seen as credible would be one in which US policies are clearly understood as located on the side of change in the region, not on the side of a failing status quo. America’s best chance is to be a generator of opportunity.

Undergirding political reform efforts and the standard aid and development programming must be an array of innovative, youth-centered outreach activities that create layers of networks of local partners and affiliates in the public and private

sectors. Examples might include linking vocational training to employment programs and enhancing access to the Internet and other technologies that provide information and encourage debate. The unfortunate truth, however, is that there is no ready and easy policy response to the dark combination of demographics and hate. The storm will simply have to be weathered, moderated, and modulated wherever possible.

THE WAR OF PERCEPTIONS

More than five years into the 9-11 War, America’s political challenge in the Islamic world remains the same as the day the war started that clear morning in September. An ideology of hate has targeted America’s security. In the years since, efforts to inject fear and suspicion into relations with an entire region and religion have proved fruitful. Most of the Muslim world hates or at least fears the United States. In turn, the distrust is reciprocated. Many of the trend-lines only seem to be worsening, and the divide is growing.

The past half-decade has been a loss for both the United States and the wider Muslim world. But the current crisis need not be permanent. All radicalisms have a critical weakness: as long as they are not fed, they ultimately burn themselves out.

It is a vexing realization, but success in the 9-11 War will come when America realizes that victory lies both within the reach of its policies and yet beyond its control. In the forces of terrorism the United States faces very real and exceptionally dangerous security threats, to be sure. But the outcome in geopolitics depends on a mutual judgment in the realm of ideas. That is, the 9-11 War will not be won through any territorial conquest or individual’s capture. It will only end in the realm of perceptions, when the United States and the Muslim world see each other not as in conflict but as working toward shared goals.

As America’s 9-11 War strategy begins to take shape over the coming years and decades, it will be useful to hearken back to the advice Kennan provided at the start of the last “long war” the United States faced. Fully expecting the cold war to last for decades, he called for a strategy that was “long-term, patient” and “cool and collected.” As he wrote, “The decision will really fall in large measure on this country itself. The issue . . . is in essence a test of the overall worth of the United States as a nation among nations. To avoid destruction the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions. . . .” ■