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# UNCONVENTIONAL APPROACHES TO AN UNCONVENTIONAL THREAT: A COUNTER-EPIDEMIC STRATEGY<sup>1</sup>

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*“As we continue the battle against al Qaeda, we must overcome a movement—a global movement infected by al Qaeda’s radical agenda.”*

George J. Tenet, former Director of Central Intelligence

*“The challenge of terrorism is...akin to fighting a virus in that we can accomplish a great deal but not eradicate the problem. We can take steps to prevent it, protect ourselves from it, and when an attack occurs, quarantine it, minimize the damage it inflicts, and attack it with all our power.”*

Richard N. Haass, former Director of Policy Planning, U.S State Department

## A NEW STRATEGIC CHALLENGE

It is clear in the wake of the London bombings that we are still trying to grasp the nature of the new strategic challenge we face and how best to counter it. There is no better indication of this than the complete lack of consensus or common lexicon about what to call the threat. Is it “global terrorism,” “Islamic terrorism” “al Qaeda and its affiliates,” “Sunni Jihadists,” “Islamist radicals” or “terrorist extremism.” This is not just a semantic issue; words and names have vital operational import. Without clarity on who, precisely, is our adversary, we are unlikely to ever develop a clear and comprehensive understanding of its objectives, strategy, and operational character. And without such a common understanding, it will be difficult if not impossible to conceive of an effective, let alone collective, response. Yet, nearly four years after 9/11, it is our assessment that there is neither a broadly accepted understanding of the challenge we face nor a comprehensive long-term strategy to counter it.

Our preference is to classify this broader challenge as “Islamist militancy.” Like the 9/11 Commission we feel it important to use the modifier “Islamist” — a politico-religious movement within the Muslim world — as distinct from “Islamic” — the culture and religion of Islam.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the 9/11 Commission, however, we prefer the simpler, less loaded term “militancy” to “terrorism.”

Using the term “militants” to refer to those who either employ or espouse violent means in pursuit of political ends not only avoids the notoriously slippery definitional problems associated with terrorism but it also serves to underscore that the challenge is both multi-dimensional and more

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broad based than purely those who actually carry out terrorist attacks.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Islamist militancy has three main constituent groups whose memberships are constantly evolving and overlap in significant ways. There are first, the transnational jihadist groups that have a global agenda (principally al Qaeda and its affiliates), second, the nationalist insurgent groups with essentially a local agenda (for example, Hamas, Hezbollah, and some of the Kashmiri groups) and third, the miscellaneous groups and networks that

directly and indirectly support these organizations. Distinctions among these groups are difficult to discern. Indeed, increasingly new organizations and groups are emerging that share common traits with overlapping agendas. Figure I, below, provides a general snapshot of the principal actors in 2005. The diagram is not meant to be exhaustive, but merely illustrative of the phenomenon and its key constituent elements.

FIGURE I



Islamist militancy does not represent a conventional national security threat — that much is clear and generally understood. The struggle we find ourselves in is neither like World War II nor the Cold War with their more or less clearly defined combatants, “front lines,” and rules of engagement. Therefore, the standard toolbox of international, state-oriented security responses has limited utility.

Neither does it represent a conventional terrorist threat that typically has a distinctive, often singular, identity with reasonably clear political goals, organizational structure, and area of operations. Therefore, the key to success is usually conventional counter-terrorist responses with their emphasis on apprehending an organization’s leaders and rolling up networks or cells of activists and supporters through improved intelligence gathering and sharing. In contrast, Islamist militancy represents *a transnational, highly dynamic, increasingly decentralized, religiously-inspired movement propelled by a diverse collection of non-state actors that operate clandestinely, or in some instances openly using unorthodox tactics and weapons*. The growing trend, exhibited in London, Madrid, and elsewhere, toward the emergence of localized, self-organizing militant groups largely acting independently of higher operational direction, highlights further the limits of conventional counter-terrorism responses.

Not surprisingly, an increasing number of experts now advocate drawing on the strategies and tactics of unconventional or “irregular” warfare to meet the challenge. The threat is portrayed as a global insurgency that requires a commensurate *global counter-insurgency* (COIN) campaign. There is some logic to this as elements of the challenge reflect characteristics of a classic insurgency. Certainly, al Qaeda’s stated goals of expelling “Jews and crusaders” from the Muslim world and cleansing it of apostate regimes — all with the objective of reestablishing a purified Caliphate, can be viewed as an insurgency of sorts. The recognition that success ultimately hinges on winning “hearts and minds” in the Muslim world is also a critically important attribute of a counter-insurgency response.

Yet, just as classic counter-terrorism measures have their limits, so a strictly counter-insurgency approach has its shortcomings and even liabilities. Describing the phenomenon as a global insurgency dangerously exaggerates the threat by assuming a degree of organization and unity among its various actors that currently does not exist. The COIN approach also risks conflating many kinds of Islamist struggles and perversely even serving to legitimize them. Unless suitably adapted, the standard COIN framework with its simplistic distinctions between “enemies,” “friends,” and “uncommitted” could make matters worse especially if military or “kinetic” responses come to dominate.

With these concerns in mind, we have been drawn to an even more unconventional approach to countering Islamist militancy. This approach views the challenge as one would a global public health threat or epidemic. As such, it draws on the scientific principles and practices of epidemiology as well as the insights from a growing body of research on social contagion phenomena such as fashions, fads, rumors, civil violence, and revolutionary ideas.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, social scientists increasingly have looked to epidemiology to understand a variety of social contagions, and here, Islamist militancy is no different. For it is the spread of Islamist mili-

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tant ideology, of this body of ideas, that animates the broader phenomenon. Taken in this context, ideology plays a critical role in understanding the spread of Islamist militancy, particularly within the context of the “war of ideas.” However, ideas do not propagate in a vacuum, but rather their infectious appeal often results from an amalgam of factors.

It is no surprise, therefore, that many have in fact employed disease metaphors to describe the challenge of Islamist militancy. Thus,

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references to terrorism being a “virus” or al Qaeda “mutating” or “metastasizing” are common. Similarly, the image of madrassas and mosques being “incubators” of a “virulent ideology” is frequently invoked. Such metaphors have a visceral appeal in that they help to convey a dangerous and, moreover, darkly insidious threat. For some, it sets — implicitly at least — a more realistic

goal for what can be practically achieved to eliminate this scourge. Just as very few diseases have been completely eradicated, so the likelihood that terrorism or political violence will be rendered extinct is remote. The best outcome is for it to become a manageable, low probability, albeit sometimes deadly, nuisance much like many other social ills.

Beyond its metaphorical appeal, there are more practical attractions to an epidemiological/public health approach. Three stand out:

- First, epidemiologists observe rigorous standards of inquiry and analysis to understand the derivation, dynamics, and propagation of a specific disease. In particular they seek clarity on the origins, geographical, and social contours of an outbreak: where is the disease concentrated, how is it transmitted, who is most at risk or “susceptible” to infection, as well as, why some portions of society may be less susceptible or for all intents and purposes, immune. Applying the same methodological approach to mapping and understanding Islamist militancy can yield immediately useful guidance on where and how to counter it.
- Second, epidemiologists recognize that diseases neither arise nor spread in a vacuum. They emerge and evolve as a result of a complex dynamic interactive process between people, pathogens, and the environment in which they live. Indeed, the epidemiologic concept of “cause” is rarely if ever singular or linear, but more akin to a “web” of direct and indirect factors that play a lesser or greater role in differing circumstances. To make sense of this complexity, epidemiologists typically employ a standard analytical device that “deconstructs” the key constituent elements of a disease. This model helps not only to understand the phenomenon in its entirety but also to anticipate how it might evolve in the future. As will be discussed below, the same systemic conception of disease can be adapted to understand the constituent elements of Islamist militancy and their evolution.
- Third, just as epidemiologists view disease as a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon so public health officials have come to recognize that success in controlling and rolling back an epidemic typically results from a carefully orchestrated, systematic, prioritized, multi-pronged effort to address each of its constituent elements. At the same time, however, it is also recog-

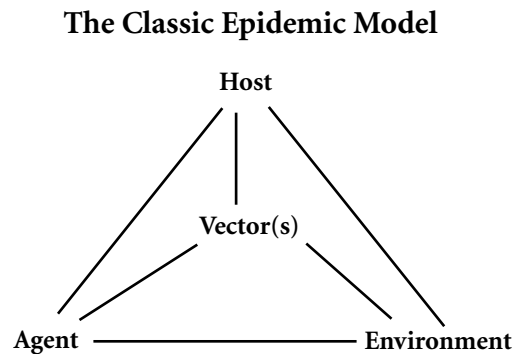
nized that significant progress or major advances can sometimes be precipitated by relatively minor interventions — or “tipping points.” Again, there are lessons and insights to be learned here for orchestrating a global counter-terrorism campaign.

Before turning to what a global campaign to defeat Islamist militancy might look like were it to follow a public health or counter-epidemic approach, it is necessary to understand how epidemiologists typically try to understand disease and how this can help us understand the challenge we face.

## THE EPIDEMIC MODEL

As indicated above, epidemiologists employ a standard approach or model to study epidemics that deconstructs an outbreak into four key components recognizing that in reality they are all dynamically inter-connected (see Figure II).<sup>5</sup>

FIGURE II

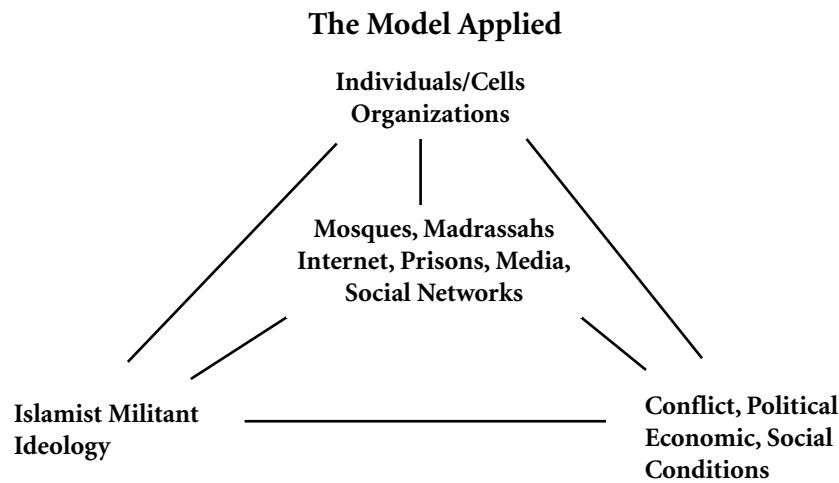


In simple terms, the agent refers to the pathogen (e.g., a virus or bacterium) that causes disease. The host refers to a person infected by the disease (“infective”) while the environment refers to a variety of external factors that affect both agent and host. At the center of the triad are the “vectors,” the key pathways or conduits that help propagate the disease.

Islamist militancy is clearly not a disease in a comparably clinical fashion. Whereas those who fall victim to disease are typically passive and unwitting receptors of the pathogen, Islamist militants, to a lesser or greater extent, willingly decide to play an active role of some kind. Yet, if we accept that their actions are in large part driven by information and ideas that they have been “exposed” to in one way or another and which they have found to be attractive and compelling — “infectious” in other words — so that they in turn seek others to share their views and join with them in their actions, then the phenomenon of Islamist militancy can be seen to have epidemic-like qualities. It too, therefore, can be deconstructed using the classic epidemic model as follows (see Figure III).

Thus, so applied, the agent is Islamist militant ideology. Specifically, two primary “strains” can be identified: (1) a transnational, Salafist/jihadist ideology as espoused by al Qaeda;<sup>6</sup> and (2) a nationalist/insurgent Islamist militant ideology as espoused by groups such as Hizballah, Hamas, and some of the Kashmiri militant groups. Each of these ideological strains is characterized by a specific set of underlying motivations, goals, and scope. The host is the person or group infected

FIGURE III



by the virus, i.e., an Islamist militant organization, cell, or individual. The environment refers to key factors specific to the Muslim world that promote exposure to Islamist militancy — conflict, political repression, economic stagnation, and social alienation being the leading influences. Vectors in this case refer to a variety of known conduits that are used to propagate the ideology and associated action agendas such as mosques, prisons, madrassas, the Internet, satellite television, and diasporic networks.

Several policy relevant benefits accrue from conceiving of Islamist militancy in this fashion. First, it captures the key elements of the challenge in a systemic fashion rather than in a disaggregated, unconnected way that so often bedevils analysis and understanding. Second, it is a dynamic model that acknowledges that the phenomenon is not static but constantly evolving with the emergence of new strains, new “hosts”, new “vectors”, and changing environmental conditions. Third, it provides insights into how Islamist militancy may evolve in the future.

Unlike a disease outbreak, however, where those infected typically (though not always) are motivated to report their condition to seek treatment, it is clearly more difficult to assess the size and spread of Islamist militancy. A combination of indicators (for example, the number of attacks conducted, attacks thwarted, militants killed or incarcerated, jihadist web sites, dissemination of training materials, etc.) suggests that the phenomenon is expanding as well as mutating in the ways indicated earlier. Attitudinal surveys within the Muslim world toward the United States and the West more generally would also suggest that the pool of “susceptibles” — those at risk of becoming Islamist militants — is large and expanding in certain countries. The overall picture can be depicted in the following way (see Figure IV, next page).

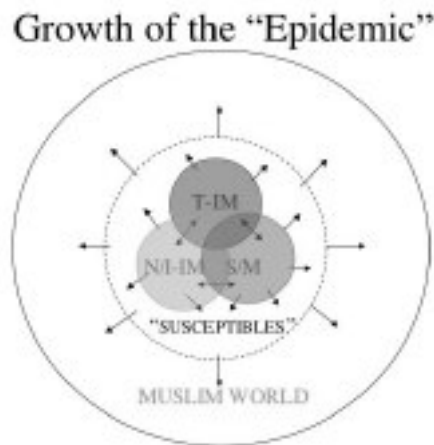
### THE COUNTER-EPIDEMIC APPROACH

Faced with the outbreak of an infectious disease, public health officials typically employ a three-pronged strategy to counter the threat:

First, *contain* the most threatening outbreaks to prevent them from gaining enough mass and momentum to overwhelm public health responders and threaten public order. Standard measures include quarantining specific areas to contain the movement of infectious individuals, eliminating or decontaminating identifiable vectors of transmission, and, if an antidote exists, treating and rehabilitating individuals that have succumbed to the disease. By containing and contracting the number of “infectives,” the pathogen can be effectively eradicated, though such successes are rare as indicated earlier.

Second, *protect* those that are most vulnerable or susceptible to the disease (the High Risk groups) as well as those that are most critical to a functioning society (High Value groups). The most effective countermeasure is selective or targeted immunization programs. Interestingly, not everyone need be inoculated to achieve what is known as “herd immunity” — essentially the level at which the probability of an infected person being in contact with a non-immunized person is

FIGURE IV



very low if not zero. If an effective vaccine is not available, then other protective strategies are employed including encouraging “safe practices” through public education to reduce the probability of exposure and the rate of new infection.

Third, *remedy* the environmental conditions that fostered the emergence of the disease in specific areas and its subsequent spread. Many types of interventions are conceivable from the local to the global depending on the nature of the threat.

Adapting the same basic strategic imperatives of a counter-epidemic campaign to the threat posed by Islamist militancy would immediately translate into the following operational priorities:

- Containing and contracting the activities of the most “virulent” Islamist militant organizations — the transnational jihadist groups with global reach and apocalyptic agendas — as well as those who could gain a meaningful operational presence in areas of significant strategic interest. This would include most notably Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia,

Egypt, Palestine, the Caucasus and the Muslim diaspora communities of Western Europe as well as areas in the vicinity of key global financial/economic infrastructure assets.

- Protecting the “high risk/high value” communities of the Muslim world. Judging from open source accounts, a disproportionate number of the officers and foot soldiers in the transnational jihadist cause come from a few countries — Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Yemen, Pakistan, as well as the European diaspora communities. The high value communities consist of the educational, religious, political, and security sectors of countries where Islamist militant organizations could make the largest inroads as well as the growing number of transnational cultural, business and media networks that affect the lives of many millions of Muslims throughout the larger *ummah*.
- Remedying the key environmental factors that foster Islamist militancy. The most important would appear to be the ongoing conflicts or insurgencies involving Muslims and non-Muslims that help validate the central jihadist argument that Islam is under attack and which also serve as recruiting magnets and training grounds for them — notably, Iraq, Palestine, Kashmir, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and several smaller conflicts in central and southeast Asia. Social alienation within the European diaspora communities along with public corruption, political repression, and economic stagnation in key areas of the Muslim world are widely viewed as additional factors.

These strategic imperatives can be further translated into specific programs or initiatives, again drawing on the principles and practices of a counter-epidemic campaign:

### *Containment Measures*

In addition to limiting the operational reach and capabilities of the most threatening Islamist militant organizations using standard counter-terrorism measures and discrete special intelligence/military operations, containment initiatives would extend to placing greater emphasis on disrupting

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**Given the practical limits to such efforts in an open society, greater attention should also be given to nurturing and propagating what can be termed an “ideological antidote” to the key tenets of Islamist militant ideology.**

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and restricting the untrammelled use of key vectors — the Internet, satellite TV, prisons, schools, mosques, etc. — by Islamist militant organizations. Some vectors can be physically shut down, others “decontaminated” of unwanted infectious agents.<sup>7</sup> This appears now to be a largely haphazard, after-the-fact effort rather than a systematically planned, internationally executed campaign.

Given the practical limits to such efforts in an open society, greater attention should also be given to nurturing and propagating

what can be termed an “ideological antidote” to the key tenets of Islamist militant ideology. This can include a broadly gauged campaign to denounce and de-legitimize jihadist propaganda and practices such as beheadings, or the killing of innocent civilians, including fellow Muslims as well as more discrete efforts aimed toward a specific group or community. The former includes mobilizing moderate religious figures to issue fatwas condemning the ideology and tactics used as a perversion of Islam, as well as encouraging key leading opinion makers, cultural leaders and mass media figures to do the same.<sup>8</sup> Such efforts have been made but not in an extensive or concerted



way.<sup>9</sup> More targeted activities include exploiting the ideological contradictions or schisms within the transnational jihadist movement to foment internal dissension and possible defection. There are reports, for example, of successful counter-ideological efforts in Yemen that have in turn yielded operational success in rolling up a local al Qaeda network.<sup>10</sup>

Although many Islamist militants are beyond such intellectual suasion — essentially the health care equivalent of treatment and rehabilitation — this may not be the case with some groups and organizations. Local national-insurgent movements, in particular, may be susceptible to a “rehabilitative” process in much the way that other terrorist organizations have abandoned armed struggle. The evolving role of groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, for example, suggests the possibility of their integration into their respective political systems. The provision of amnesties to insurgents willing to lay down arms, as in Afghanistan, constitutes another element of rehabilitation. And in Iraq, reports suggest a growing rift between the nationalist Iraqi elements of the insurgency and foreign jihadists, in part as a result of the latter’s indiscriminate targeting of civilians.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Protective Measures***

Whereas the containment measures are directed primarily at those already “infected,” protective measures are aimed at those most at risk as well as those who play important societal functions. With better understanding of why certain groups and individuals become first sympathetic to, then supportive of, and, finally, actively engaged in, Islamist militant causes, it is conceivable that targeted programs to effectively “immunize” at risk groups could be designed. There are numerous cases in other areas where key populations have been targeted in ways designed to turn off their receptiveness to specific ideas, messages, and unhealthy or anti-social practices. This is accomplished in ways that include appeals to common sense, personal safety, peer group acceptance, religious edicts and societal norms, among others. In some cases, the tactics used are not unlike real vaccination programs that work on the principle of exposing uninfected populations with a weakened or attenuated version of the virus so that the body learns to identify and reject the real thing. Political campaigns, for example, often expose key undecided voters to the arguments of opposing candidates in some cases for ridicule but more often to “arm” them with convincing reasons to be skeptical when they hear the same arguments from those candidates.<sup>12</sup>

Similar public programs aimed at undermining the appeal of militant Islamist ideology could be designed and implemented in many different arenas from schools to mosques to mass media outlets. With the exception of the Muslim communities of western Europe, however, these are clearly not initiatives that the United States, and the West more generally, should lead or be openly associated with. The United States can, however, prod allies and partners in the Muslim world and provide discreet assistance.

Such “ideological immunization” efforts aimed at high risk communities should not just be about providing a negative image of militant Islamism, however. Ideally it should also offer a positive and compelling alternative vision for the future. Indeed, the two efforts can be mutually reinforcing. Again, the same arenas and conduits — schools, mosques, mass media outlets — have a critical role to play and thus efforts designed to mobilize and strengthen moderate voices in these sectors should be an indispensable component of the overall effort.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Remedial Measures***

Many of the previous initiatives will be harder to accomplish or likely fail if parallel efforts are not also taken to remedy some of the key environmental conditions that promote Islamist mili-

tancy in the Muslim world. For reasons discussed earlier, an intensified effort should be made to resolve or at least tamp down the violent conflicts that have a particularly strong resonance within the Muslim world. Besides reducing their direct role in jihadist recruitment and training, conflict resolution efforts will help invalidate their propaganda and buttress moderate support.

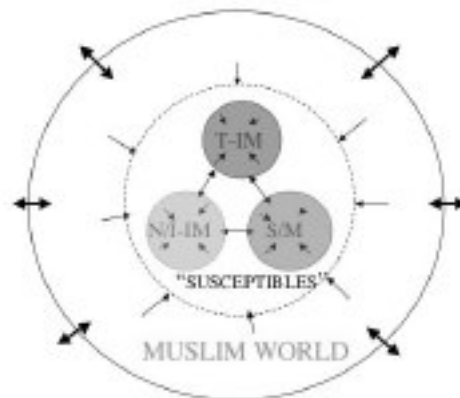
The implementation of political reforms focused on good governance, particularly greater transparency, accountability, and the rule of law, will also play a key role in neutralizing Islamist militant ideology that calls for the overthrow of corrupt regimes. Likewise, greater civil liberties, including broader freedoms of association and expression, as well as the freedom to form political parties and other associations, will help to level the political playing field and allow “healthy” outlets for dissent. Particular emphasis should be placed on institution building so as to preserve democratic gains from being undermined by autocratic regimes or exploited by non-democratic opposition forces. Facilitating the political participation of peaceful, moderate Islamists can also help to develop an effective counterweight to Islamist militants and their violent tactics.

The implementation of economic reforms designed to spur growth and bolster job creation will likewise help to ease popular disaffection, particularly among the region’s disproportionately young population. In addition, economic reforms that create an environment that is more appealing to foreign investors will help the Muslim world to integrate more effectively into the broader global economic system and help bridge the gap in relative performance.

The combined effect of these containment, protective, and remedial measures will be to reverse over time the negative trends discussed earlier. As Figure V, below, depicts, the effect will be to divide, isolate, and weaken the Islamist militant organizations and marginalize their operational impact. The pool of “susceptibles” would also shrink in relation to the rest of the Muslim world, which through the various remedial efforts would become a more “healthy” and integrated part of the larger globalizing world.

FIGURE V

### Countering the “Epidemic”



As with any global health campaign, success in countering the challenge of Islamist militancy will depend on a sustained commitment over many years, if not decades, by a broad coalition of like-minded states acting in partnership with a multitude of non-governmental actors. There is no quick or easy cure.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 This paper draws on a larger body of USIP sponsored research on “Rethinking the War on Terror: A Counter-Epidemic Strategy.” The views expressed herein are the authors’ own.
- 2 See *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 362, fn. 3.
- 3 We recognize, therefore, that there are also peaceful Islamist organizations.
- 4 See, for example, Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (USA: First Back Bay, 2002); Joshua M. Epstein, “Modeling civil violence: An agent-based computational approach” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 99, suppl.3, (May 14, 2003), pp. 7243-7250; Luis M.A. Bettancourt, Ariel Cintron-Arias, David I. Kaiser, and Carlos Castillo-Chavez, “The Power of a Good Idea: Quantitative Modeling of the Spread of Ideas from Epidemiological Models,” *Santa Fe Institute Working Paper*, February 6, 2005.
- 5 Two key references were consulted for this section. B. Burt Gerstman, *Epidemiology Kept Simple: An Introduction to Traditional and Modern Epidemiology* (New Jersey: Wiley Liss, 2003) and Leon Gordis, *Epidemiology* 3rd Edition (Philadelphia: Elsevier Saunders, 2004).
- 6 Numerous sources provide background on the Salafist/Jihadist ideology. These include: Quintan Wiktorowicz, “The New Global Threat: Transnational Salafis and Jihad,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol VIII, No. 4, December 2001, pp.18-38; Christopher M. Blanchard, “Al Qaeda: Statements and Evolving Ideology,” *CRS Report for Congress*, February 4, 2005; *Anonymous, Through Our Enemies’ Eyes: Osama Bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America*, (Washington, D.C.: Brassey’s Inc., 2002); Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- 7 For example, in February 2005, London’s Finsbury Park mosque, once a bastion of radicalism, was reclaimed. A new board of directors ousted the mosque’s radical cleric, Abu Abdullah, and literally changed the locks. See Lizette Alvarez, “Britain’s Mainstream Muslims Find Voice,” *The New York Times*, March 6, 2005. Similarly, measures must be taken within prison systems to curtail and ultimately cease recruitment. See Cutherbertson, p. 20 for specific recommendations.
- 8 Alvarez, *ibid.* Mainstream Muslims in Britain have also taken steps to isolate Islamist militants and strengthen ties between moderates and the British establishment.
- 9 See David E. Kaplan, “Hearts, Minds, and Dollars,” *US News and World Report*, April 25, 2005.
- 10 See James Brandon, “Koranic Duel Eases Terror,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 4, 2005.
- 11 Sabrina Tavernise, “Marines See Signs Iraq Rebels are Battling Foreign Fighters,” *The New York Times*, June 21, 2005.
- 12 See Matt Bai, “The Framing Wars,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 12, 2005. See also Bettancour, Arias, et. al., p. 10.
- 13 In Jordan, for example a broad curriculum review is taking place that emphasizes more moderate and progressive interpretations of Islam. See Hassan M. Fattah, “Jordan is Preparing to Tone Down the Islamic Bombast in Textbooks,” *New York Times*, June 12, 2005. A number of European governments are also exploring options for having greater influence over the training of imams who preach in European mosques. See Elaine Sciolino, “Europe Struggles to Train New Breed of Muslim Clerics,” October 18, 2004.