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The argument against winning hearts and minds

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ABSTRACT

This commentary asks a provocative question: what if 9/11 conspirators were to have walked through NY during and after the attacks to attempt community relations? As horrific and absurd as this might sound, that is how we are perceived in some corners of the world, in the aftermath of airstrikes and destruction, attempting to persuade or engender good will. This commentary arrives at the conclusion that it is disingenuous to attempt to win the hearts and minds of an indigenous population when those efforts are set against the backdrop of military materiel and personnel.

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If Western governments – or more specifically, their militaries – are truly pitched in a battle to win hearts and minds, then we are ultimately destined to fail. Throughout history, no outside, warring faction has been able to foster and sustain an environment of intellectual acceptance and appreciation from an opposing force or population for any sustained amount of time.

The true victory in strategic communication will reside in persistent and unrelenting expectation management. Far too often, large democratized Western societies place limitations and impedances upon their own efforts in such a grossly magnified way that they will never be able to realize any operational success because the rhetoric and expectations they have created in the wider public consciousness has been under evaluated or thought through.

It has been said before that an image of a American troop on the ground in an occupied country or territory, even if they are doing humanitarian operations or handing out toys, will never be an acceptable image – that ultimately it is still

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a U.S. troop in a country that has not invited them in.

Waging campaigns of “Shock and Awe” while also seeking to win the hearts and minds of the people are at complete odds with one another, not only do they create confusion among affected populations, but they also create an internal climate of mixed messages and strategy.

Many military leaders will talk about “phases” of operations, as if these are transparent occurrences to indigenous populations. To these affected groups, there is but one phase of operations—a relentless, ongoing, never-ending phase. The bombings, patrols, toys, dental care and detainments all occupy the same space in time.

Kinetic actions have a potential one-time yield. If a strike against a building is successful in eliminating a target group of insurgents, they only perish once. However, if there are children playing in the building or in an area adjacent to that building, and they fall as well due to a lack of discrimination in the carrying out of the operation, that tactical error will resonate through generations.

Certain organizations carry either a stigma or perception that precludes them from carrying out specific tasks or actions. I charge that a fielded military force cannot successfully or with any degree of longevity, carry out military occupation and enact a successful public relations campaign. The messages are beyond mixed and the long-term visuals far more compelling than any press release or photo op.

What if 9/11 conspirators were to have walked through New York City, Shanksville, Pennsylvania or the grounds of the Pentagon in the immediate aftermath of the attacks to attempt community relations? As horrific and absurd as this might sound, that is how Western forces are perceived in some corners of the world, attempting to persuade or engender good will in the aftermath of airstrikes and destruction.

Our efforts lack any and all sensitivity to the historical underpinnings of the West’s relationship with the Middle East. One photo op cannot undo a thousand years of grievance or mistrust. This is something that must be understood and accepted from the outset. What we would term as “good images” are often generated more for the self flagellation of the US population at large than for the indigenous, affected population.

Messages of, “We are your friend, we are here to help you” set against a backdrop of Humvees and .50 caliber machine guns are disingenuous at best.