

# PHARES: Countering jihadists

Contributed by Dr. Walid Phares  
Wednesday, 08 October 2008

## A battle of de-radicalization

For the debate among jihadists is not about the use of violence or not. It is about when to use it, against whom and under which conditions. If that level of understanding is missing in the West, then another decade may well be lost in unsuccessful and futile attempts to find the "good jihadists" and enlist them against the "bad jihadists."

The grave mistake committed by some in the counter-terrorism community is to single out a "moment" in jihadi strategy and think it is "the" jihadi strategy. Hence we are witnessing the proliferation of academics' calls to "engage" with the non-violent jihadis as if the latter were a category in itself. In fact, this is a truncated reading of the whole process of jihadism. Worse, it is also a maneuver by the Islamists in their war of ideas to slow down the process of empowering the Democrats in the Muslim world.

On the other hand, the much-needed strategy of engaging "counter-jihadi" Muslims and civil society groups in the greater Middle East has been almost ignored by chanceries and their counter-terrorism experts. Ironically, instead of focusing on engaging the dissidents, pro-democracy human rights NGOs and activists, the "advice" extended to European governments and now to the United States as well, is to engage &ndash;- read cut deals with - the Islamists and even the jihadists.

This tactic is the result of a systemic failure to understand not only the jihadist strategies and realities, but also the political sociology inside the Arab and Muslim world and the immigrant communities in the West. Policy makers were almost convinced by their senior advisers, themselves relying on academic expertise, that the road to de-radicalization goes through an engagement with the radicals. Hence, the move &ndash;- and the spending - to integrate the Muslim Brotherhood, Wahhabis and Khomeinists in a bilateral dialogue with law enforcement and higher political levels for a few years now.

Obviously, the issue is not about having or not having a dialogue with these Islamist factions. It is not about "talking." It is really about expecting that these bilateral deals would effectively lead to de-radicalization. Undoubtedly, these engagements aren't leading to reversing the radicalization processes. Law enforcement and intelligence reports are clear in proving that none of these games has led to a reverse of jihadization, either in Europe or in the United States.

By contrast, findings show that the activities by counter-jihadist Muslim groups and similar cadres are the leading factors to help resist the advance of radical mobilization.

The equations I have tested for over 20 years are verifiable: every time jihadists and counter-jihadists engage in a balanced battle of ideas, counter-jihadists win. Every time jihadists are alone on the scene, obviously, they win. It is now imperative that a renewed debate about radicalization in the West restructures the engagement process to include the democracy segments within Middle Eastern and Muslim communities. Central European experience in dissidence-dynamics and counter totalitarian processes and Middle East dissidence are needed components in the global effort to contain the Salafist and Khomeinist ideological expansion.

I have suggested to U.S. and European officials to initiate a strategy on democracy support as one of the new policies needed to win the battle of de-radicalization. Engagement must remain a solid principle, but with whom to engage strategically is the real question. My thesis is that those who deserve systematic and relentless backing are those who in their communities are willing to fight for the shared values of democracy and humanism. All attempts to ignore them have led to strengthening the very forces which are spreading jihadism. Europeans and Americans have a real choice ahead of them; they must not fail again.

Walid Phares is director of the Future Terrorism Project at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and a visiting scholar at the European Foundation for Democracy.

<http://washingtontimes.com/news/2008/oct/08/countering-jihadists/>