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Fighting the War of Ideas

Zeyno Baran

VANGUARD PARTY

ISLAM AND the West are not engaged in a clash of civilizations—at least not yet. But the West is being drawn into the clash of two competing ideologies within the Islamic world. Proponents of the first believe that Islam is compatible with secular democracy and basic civil liberties. Proponents of the second are committed to replacing the current world order with a new caliphate—that is, a global Islamic state. They are the ones who seek to trigger a true clash of civilizations, partly in order to force the more moderate Muslims to choose their interpretation of Islam.

Extremist Islamist organizations such as al Qaeda have become well known in recent years for trying to accomplish their objectives through terrorism and political violence. Less well known, however, are the complementary organizations devoted not to direct action but to ideological struggle. Of these, the most important has been Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT, or the Party of Liberation), a transnational movement that has served as radical Sunni Islamism's ideological vanguard.

HT is not itself a terrorist organization, but it can usefully be thought of as a conveyor belt for terrorists. It indoctrinates individuals with radical ideology, priming them for recruitment by more extreme organizations where they can take part in actual operations. By combining fascist rhetoric, Leninist strategy, and Western sloganeering with Wahhabi theology, HT has made itself into a very real and potent threat that is extremely difficult for liberal societies to counter.

HT's ideology and theology, which are derived from those of other radical Islamist groups, are simplified to make them more accessible

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to the masses. Whereas many other Islamist groups insist that their particular religious interpretation is the only valid one or are obsessed with a single issue, such as Israel or Kashmir, HT keeps its focus on the broader goal of uniting all Muslims under the Islamist banner and thus emphasizes issues of more general concern, such as the clash of civilizations or the injustices suffered by Muslims worldwide. Other radical Islamists therefore tend to see the group not as a competitor but as an ally and often use HT's concepts and literature (readily available on the Internet) to rally their own supporters.

HT's greatest achievement to date is that it has shifted the terms of debate within the Muslim world. Until a few years ago, most Islamist groups considered the notion of establishing a new caliphate a utopian goal. Now, an increasing number of people consider it a serious objective. And after decades of stressing the existence and unity of a global Islamic community (*umma*), HT can take pride in the growing feeling among Muslims that their primary identity stems from, and their primary loyalty is owed to, their religion rather than their race, ethnicity, or nationality.

HT's exact size is difficult to confirm because the group is composed of secretive cells, but its membership is estimated to number in the hundreds in European countries, such as Denmark, and up to tens of thousands in Muslim countries, such as Uzbekistan. Because many governments recognize the threat it poses to them, HT is banned in most of the Muslim world as well as in Russia and Germany. But until recently, it has been allowed to operate freely elsewhere, most notably in the United Kingdom, where it has played a major role in the radicalization of disaffected Muslim youth. (There is some evidence of an underground HT presence in the United States as well.)

In the wake of the bombings in London this past July, however, British attitudes are changing, especially since the bombers were revealed to be members of an HT splinter group. In August, British Prime Minister Tony Blair announced a series of measures his government would take to address the threat of Islamist extremism, including compiling lists of suspect Web sites, bookshops, and organizations as a prelude to the possible deportation of foreign nationals associated with them. Blair said that outlawing HT in the United Kingdom would be part of the crackdown. But the proposed ban is being

opposed by some of Blair's advisers in the Islamic community, on the grounds that the organization is itself nonviolent.

Since HT occupies a gray zone of militancy, with its activities involving more than mere expression of opinion but less than terrorism, regulating its activities poses a unique challenge to liberal democracies. How Western governments and societies can meet the challenge HT poses without sacrificing their own most cherished values in the process is not entirely clear. What is clear, however, is that ignoring the problem is no longer an option.

ISLAM'S BOLSHIEVICS

THE MODERN Islamist movement emerged with the creation of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, four years after Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey, abolished the Ottoman caliphate. Inspired by the works of the thirteenth-century thinker Ibn Taymiyya and his eighteenth-century ideological successor Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the group's key ideologue, Sayyid Qutb, held that the Islamic world's decline could be reversed only if a small group of "real" Muslims emulated the ways of the Prophet Muhammad and worked to replace the existing governments in Muslim lands with Islamic ones.

In 1953, deciding that the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology was too accommodating, one of its members, a Palestinian judge named Sheikh Taqiuddin al-Nabhani, left to form the more radical Hizb ut-Tahrir in what was then Jordanian-ruled East Jerusalem. Drawing on the work of Qutb and other Islamists, Nabhani rejected capitalism as exploitative and democracy as godless. He asserted that the only way to reestablish the kind of Islamic society promulgated by the Prophet was to liberate Muslims from the thoughts, systems, and laws of *kufir* (nonbelievers) and replace the Judeo-Christian-dominated nation-state system with a borderless *umma* ruled by a new caliph.

Nabhani viewed Western civilization and Islam as mutually exclusive systems vying for ideological dominance within Muslim societies. Both capitalism and socialism were anathema, he argued, since both failed to recognize the primacy of Islam. Guided by its founder's beliefs, HT took the fall of communism in stride, identifying Western democratic capitalism as the primary remaining impediment to the

establishment of a truly Islamic society. However much HT despises the existing governments in the Muslim world, accordingly, it is no fan of U.S. efforts at “democracy promotion,” considering them to be part of a neocolonial conspiracy and simply the latest manifestation of the West’s permanent animosity toward Islam. To HT and its followers, “the war on terrorism” is a euphemism for “the war on Islam.”

Nabhani died in 1977 and was succeeded by Abd al-Qadim Zallum, a Palestinian cleric, who in 2003 was succeeded in turn by Ata Abu Rashta, a Palestinian who had served as HT’s spokesman in Jordan. Under Rashta’s leadership, HT has become more aggressive; Western intelligence sources believe it has instructed its members to direct their activities against U.S. allies, especially countries that supported the Iraq war. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, for example, HT stated that the “US and Great Britain [had] declare[d] war against Islam and Muslims” and argued that all Muslims were “in a state of war” in which jihad against Americans and Jews would be acceptable. (HT ideology has long been marked by a pronounced anti-Semitism, taking certain Koranic verses out of context to mean that Muslims have a duty, in the group’s words, to “destroy the monstrous Jewish entity.”)

HT describes itself as a political party, even though it has never registered as such and denounces all existing political systems. It does not seek to elect candidates to political office, focusing instead on extraparliamentary agitation. In order to operate freely and avoid problems with law enforcement, however, HT scrupulously refrains from engaging in criminal or terrorist activities. Like the Bolsheviks did, HT has a utopian goal that it pursues through ideological struggle, driven by the actions of secretive cells. For the global revolution it envisions, HT does not need large numbers; hundreds of supporters in critical positions are more important than thousands of foot soldiers.

THE PROPHET’S WAY?

IN ITS EFFORT to re-create the caliphate, HT seeks to emulate the method adopted by the Prophet Muhammad when he established the first Islamic state. According to the group’s interpretation, the Prophet did so by patiently disseminating ideas, then organizing

followers, and only then moving to seize power. HT thus envisions a three-step process of its own.

HT's focus in the first stage is on building the party, a goal accomplished by recruitment and propaganda. Recruitment methods vary from country to country, but HT members generally seek out young people with existential questions and bring them into the party's circle. Prospective candidates are formally introduced to the party apparatus by interacting with a study group; most join to learn about Islam in general but over time are indoctrinated with HT's particular version of Islamic political history so that they may be purged of all "non-Islamic" thoughts. New members are required to take the HT membership oath, which includes a commitment to "carry out even those decisions of the party leaders that I find objectionable." By the end of their apprenticeships, which can last from six months to three years, HT members are ideologically and spiritually prepared to deal with any hardship that may befall them as they embark on the struggle.

During the second stage of HT's grand plan—which the group has reached in most of the countries in which it operates—members form new cells and try to create tension between governments and their peoples. Members are asked to modify their behavior so as to blend in with the population around them and infiltrate the government.

When the second stage is complete, the ground will supposedly be ripe for an Islamic revolution to establish a state ruled by sharia. The third stage will be reached, the group believes, when the *umma* embraces HT's interpretation of Islam and all the implications associated with it. Unlike most global jihadist groups, HT believes it can carry out the political revolution in a nonviolent manner, relying on the penetration of government institutions and the recruitment of key officials.

Although it has been engaged in the war of ideologies for over half a century, HT has made enormous progress recently using the most modern of mediums, the Internet. Indeed, the Internet's global reach is perfect for a group that denies the legitimacy of political borders. HT's Web sites can be easily accessed by Muslims anywhere, and the Internet is especially effective at facilitating communications with and among people living in repressive societies.

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The party has essentially constructed a virtual Islamist community in cyberspace, frequented by members, prospective members, and sympathizers. HT's Web sites are designed to draw in Web-surfing Muslims who feel alienated from the societies in which they live, providing them with a place to obtain news and analysis, exchange ideas, and feel part of a global Muslim community. Moreover, unlike in many other venues, there is no gender segregation, allowing women to take part in political activism in cyberspace in a way they have long been denied offline.

Meanwhile, for second-generation Muslims living in the West, HT's Web sites offer easily accessible literature in many languages and through this literature an alternative source of historical, political, and theological interpretation. These Muslims often complain that their information about Islam comes only from Western "Orientalists." HT fills this void with its own take on religion and world events.

THINK GLOBALLY, ACT LOCALLY

TODAY, HT is active in more than 40 countries and has a carefully designed strategy for each. As with the communist movement before it, HT's approach is both hierarchical and decentralized, global and local: all of its branches are devoted to the common goal of bringing about a global revolution, but different tactics are used in different places. In the Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia, HT aims to overthrow governments, since it sees particular regimes there as direct obstacles to resurrecting the caliphate. In the West, HT's aim is to unite Muslims on the basis of their Islamic identity and prevent their assimilation into Western culture.

HT focuses its efforts on three areas: Turkey, Central Asia, and Western Europe. Turkey is in many ways the key battleground in the war of ideologies. If the abolisher of the caliphate is accepted into the EU, that presumed Christian club, then HT's "clash of civilizations" paradigm will effectively be proved wrong.

Although HT has generally been considered a marginal player in Turkey, active campaigning has enabled it to make serious inroads there. Paradoxically, as Turkey is reforming its legal and constitutional systems to boost its chances of joining the EU, it is becoming increasingly

vulnerable to domestic Islamist extremists, partly because some of the measures traditionally used to keep radicals in check are being abolished. HT's main agenda today is to convince the Turks that they should not try to enter the EU, arguing that membership would cost them their Islamic identity. Instead, HT argues, Turkey should raise the Islamic flag and become a leading opponent of the Judeo-Christian civilization.

The prize for HT in Central Asia is Uzbekistan, historically a center of scientific learning and enlightened, tolerant Islamic culture. With over 26 million inhabitants (nearly 90 percent of whom are Muslims), the region's largest and most effective army, and a key location, Uzbekistan has great strategic importance and influence that extends beyond its borders.

The greatest gift to HT in Uzbekistan has been the dictatorial rule of President Islam Karimov. HT is well positioned to exploit the country's dangerous mix of corruption, poverty, drug addiction, and repression. Furthermore, HT serves the immediate personal needs of its local members, filling the deep psychological void at the center of many of their lives.

Ironically, HT has been able to advance its agenda in the region with help from groups in the West, by framing the Central Asian governments' reactions to its activities as efforts to suppress religion and dissent rather than efforts to combat radical ideology. Instead of voicing concern over the potential impact HT infiltrators could have on local governments and populations, many Western organizations and governments have focused their criticism almost exclusively on the tough administrative measures taken by Central Asian governments to halt Islamist extremism.

The third regional focus of HT is western Europe, where the group has a strong presence in several countries with large Muslim populations. Many European HT members are immigrants who fled politically repressive countries in recent decades. Western Europe's difficulty absorbing and assimilating such immigrants has left many of them without a sense of belonging or a clear identity, which HT and its affiliates are happy to provide. HT has been particularly successful at recruiting frustrated youth who have lost faith in the systems of the countries to which they or their parents came. As a senior European diplomat has put it, after joining HT, "they turn from being rebels without a cause to rebels with a cause."

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Interestingly, many of the countries that have banned HT were late to recognize the threat it posed. Initially, for example, HT was tolerated in Jordan. But in 1968 and 1969, HT tried—with the help of the military—to overthrow the government and was then banned. In Egypt, too, it took a coup attempt (in 1974) for the Egyptian government to ban the group. Credible reports indicate that HT members have also been involved in attempted government overthrows in Syria, Tunisia, and Iraq. In short, as HT has spread across the Middle East and the rest of the Muslim world, it has attracted the attention of governments and been outlawed—but only after having already created hundreds, if not thousands, of hardened radicals in each country.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

HT HAS provided Muslims with a compelling explanation for why the Islamic world has fallen behind the West in recent centuries. It also offers a simple remedy: close the gap by destroying the existing order. History, in this view, is still very much in play. As Imran Waheed, the spokesman for HT in the United Kingdom, recently commented, “[Francis] Fukuyama says we have reached the end of History because there’s a lack of a viable alternative ideology to capitalism and Western civilization. We view our work as a direct challenge to that statement: we have to prove him wrong.”

The United States (and the West more generally) was able to prevail in the last epic ideological struggle, the Cold War, only after coming up with a durable strategy based on thorough study of communist ideology and tactics. That strategy was to contain the enemy’s military threat while offering a better ideological alternative, one based on political and personal freedom combined with economic prosperity.

It is imperative to recognize that another such struggle is unfolding and that it requires a comparably durable strategy. Today, however, the target population is well aware of the basic Western alternative and is largely rejecting it. More and more Muslims—and not just terrorists—believe that they will always be looked down on in a U.S.-led world order. They believe George W. Bush’s “freedom and democracy agenda” is merely a trick to placate them so that the

United States can maintain its global hegemony. Instead of acquiescing, HT argues, Muslims need to unite and rise up so as to return to their former glory. The international political structure of the Cold War has thus been turned on its head: just as the United States did for dissidents behind the Iron Curtain, so today HT and its brethren raise hope among disaffected Muslims of a dignified alternative to their perceived oppression.

The first task in countering this challenge is to deprive HT of the ability to discredit the United States and its ideals. In the wake of the war in Iraq and the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay, however, the credibility and moral authority of the United States in the Muslim world is at an all-time low, and so this will not be easy. In fact, rehabilitating America's image will probably take decades and require an ideological campaign highlighting values common to the Western and Muslim worlds.

President Bush's "forward strategy of freedom" will never be received as well as an approach stressing justice and dignity, concepts that resonate much more strongly in Muslim societies. Washington also needs to minimize the general causes of grievance that anti-American radicals are able to exploit, such as the arrogance with which the United States wields its power and its perceived biases in dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Although perhaps familiar, these policy prescriptions are nonetheless important. The second task—finding ways to suppress the activities of HT and comparable militant organizations without sacrificing too many civil liberties—is more novel and perhaps more difficult. Taking advantage of the West's own freedoms of speech, assembly, and the like, HT has spread hate-filled, anti-Semitic, and anticonstitutional ideas and created a fifth column of activists working to undermine the very systems under which they live. Western governments and societies must find ways to protect themselves not just from terrorism but also from the indirect incitement that is HT's specialty.

The glorification and encouragement of suicide bombers, the dissemination of justifications for violence, and the development of support networks for militant activities create a crucial, if barely visible, ideological infrastructure that enables the more explosive actions of Islamist radicals that actually make the headlines. This

infrastructure needs to be dismantled for Western societies to be fully secured. But how to do it? Blocking the dissemination of extremist literature over the Internet is technically difficult. As soon as one Web site is blocked, another one pops up; many Web addresses are difficult to locate, and tracking them requires close cooperation among intelligence services in multiple countries. The political difficulties are even greater, since many Europeans and Americans do not understand the ideological threat radical Islam poses and therefore see no need to curb civil rights to fight it.

Political leaders thus need to explain that although fears of a repeat of McCarthyism are legitimate and restrictions on civil rights need to be policed carefully, a failure to take sensible precautions now is likely to lead to greater troubles later. If the West does not stop the spread of radicalism, down the road its societies will become further polarized as tensions increase and more ripe for dramatic overreactions after further attacks occur.

These problems are coming to a head in the United Kingdom, where the Blair government has stated its intention to pass legislation outlawing HT and its offshoot, al-Muhajiroun, and banning indirect incitement to violence by extremist clerics who glorify acts of terrorism. Blair's goals are to combat terrorism and its militant supporters; to accomplish them, he is apparently prepared to amend human rights laws to make it easier to deport foreign nationals suspected of links with terrorism. Although these measures may seem draconian, they are both necessary and long overdue. Given the opposition such proposals have already generated in certain quarters, however, it remains to be seen what restrictions the British government will adopt in the end and which other countries will emulate the United Kingdom's actions.

Although other European nations, such as Denmark and the Netherlands, have discussed banning HT, only Germany actually has (in 2003), and it did so by applying its unique laws on anti-Semitism. The German government did not target HT for being an organization directly engaged in terrorist activity; it banned the group in order to wipe out the breeding grounds for Islamist terrorism. It certainly strengthened the German government's case that Shaker Assem, an HT leader in Germany, had lectured the study group of Mohammed

Atta and that Atta and several other September 11 planners were known to have read HT's German magazine, *Explizit*.

The third task is to find ways of helping moderates win the theological and ideological civil war currently taking place within the Muslim world. One way to start would be for Western journalists and human rights organizations to expose HT's self-created image as a "peaceful" organization as the fraud it is. The West can also help by encouraging governments in Muslim countries to allow truly peaceful religious organizations to promote tolerance and interfaith dialogue. It can assist them in developing school curricula that emphasize critical thinking, patriotism, ethics, and those Islamic values that are compatible with democracy and secularism.

In this context, the EU's handling of Turkey's candidacy for membership will be an important test of Western policy. If the Turkish Muslim tradition that emphasizes a convergence of civilizations is accepted by the EU, then HT's arguments about an inevitable clash of civilizations will lose ground. The rejection of full Turkish membership, however, would bear out HT's broader vision of a divided world.

None of these tasks is easy and none can be accomplished quickly. The alternative to undertaking them, however, is leaving the cancer to spread. Ideological struggles can take even longer to wage than overt military ones, and even then success is often less decisive or lasting. The central ingredients in any strategy must therefore be patience and determination. On the fourth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, some noted with disapproval that a comparable length of time after Pearl Harbor, the Axis had already been defeated. They might more appropriately have considered that the Cold War lasted for almost half a century. 🌐