



DEFENSE DOSSIER

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AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY COUNCIL

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

Welcome to the June 2024 issue of AFPC's *Defense Dossier*. On February 12th, AFPC convened its second "Airlie Dialogue" conference at the University Club in Washington, DC. The event, a follow-on to an inaugural 2022 closed-door roundtable addressing the common intellectual fight against Islamic extremism, brought together leading scholars, officials and experts for a day of discussions about the "war of ideas" against radical Islam now taking place in the Muslim World. In this edition, we offer five articles that encapsulate the findings of the conference.

Our featured articles explore the roles of technology, geopolitics, and ideology in shaping the global discourse, from the double-edged nature of technological advancements to the urgent need for strategic engagement in confronting global challenges. We examine the shifting approaches of key players, such as China's transition from mercantile outreach to partisan involvement in the Middle East, and the alarming realities of Afghanistan under Taliban rule. The articles also underscore the importance of prioritizing the war of ideas and reclaiming the narrative in the face of adversarial rhetoric. Collectively, these pieces offer valuable insights into the intricacies of the battle for hearts and minds and the critical necessity of robust, multifaceted engagement in the realm of ideas.

We hope these articles provoke thought, spark discussions, and contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities in the struggle for global influence.

All the best,

Ilan Berman
Chief Editor

Richard M. Harrison
Managing Editor



New Technologies And The Struggle For Hearts And Minds

Alberto M. Fernandez

Technology and the propagation of ideologies go hand in hand. One can speak of the revolutionary power of the printing press and the Gutenberg Bible over five hundred years ago. More recently, contending groups, governments and extremists have always looked at technological innovations to help amplify their message. Totalitarian regimes in Soviet Russia, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany recognized the power found in the flickering images at the cinema. In 1934, Mussolini's Italy, through *Radio Bari*, was the first to beam European propaganda in Arabic to the Middle East. This would lead directly to the creation of BBC Arabic as a sort of response four years later.

The revolutionary regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser would harness the radio power of the Voice of the Arabs, *Sawt al-Arab*, beginning in 1953 and expanding in 1962. More recently, al-Qaeda initially attempted to start a news agency in London in the 1990s to get its message out.¹ The group then seized on the new platforms emerging in that decade on regional pan-Arab television networks, forming a symbiotic relationship with Qatar's *Al-Jazeera* – a relationship that lasted for years. Today, *Al-Jazeera* is still a key part of another extremist propaganda empire, slavishly serving the media needs of the Palestinian Islamist terrorist group Hamas.

The *al-Qaeda* offshoot known as the Islamic State (ISIS) would take the propaganda game to the next level. As the group moved from Iraq to Syria in 2013, its propaganda shop evolved. It was in Syria that the group copied the insurgent media tools already being used by the Syrian Revolution against the country's dictator, Bashar Assad—citizen journalism, hashtag Fridays, diffuse media swarms on various platforms, trolling, and the compelling immediacy of social media. From Syria, the group also learned to message in numerous languages, relying on the thousands of foreigners who joined its nascent *caliphate*. It also tapped into global youth culture, drawing from what one scholar has called the cultural-emotional dimension of the “jihadi aesthetic universe.”²

The groundbreaking propaganda tech of ISIS in its heyday was coupled with experimental battlefield tech—the use of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) on an industrial scale, including the first use of drones (filmed by other drones) dropping a grenade into the open hatch of an Abrams tank. At the height of its power, ISIS was launching sixty to one hundred drone attacks a month, pioneering what we now see in Ukraine and the Middle East. And while ISIS was subsequently decimated in the Middle East and its initial media innovators killed, the group has proven resilient, bouncing back in Africa and Afghanistan. Today, its old propaganda still finds its way into the hands of impressionable teenagers far from the Middle East, still radicalizes them and, in some cases, still leads them to kill.

But if those actions were startling at the time, they offered just a foretaste of things to come. We are now told by the experts that we will experience more technological progress and change in the next decade than we have seen in the past century.

TECH AND TERROR

Some experts fear that these coming technological changes will channel and amplify state power, the power of elites and bureaucrats in a surveillance regime, rather than help insurgents, rebels or revolutionaries. In this all too plausible scenario, “the Total State” is turbocharged by technology and the Internet of Things (IoT) and becomes a sort of authoritarian scold crushing individual freedoms in the name of “safetyism,” public health, fighting disinformation, climate change or any other pressing emergency.

But a recent tabulation of expected changes, prepared in 2021 by the McKinsey consulting firm and publicized by the World Economic Forum (WEF), lists the first of these expected big changes as “around half of all existing work activities could be automated in



the next few decades, as next-level process automation and virtualization become more commonplace.”³ So, if anything, people of the near future may have more time on their hands, including extremists. More time to play, more time for dissatisfaction, more empty time needing to be filled by purpose and a cause.

Another listed expected change is the “democratization of artificial intelligence,” as new AI tech becomes widely available, not just in the West but everywhere. Some may see this as a possible escape into a virtual lotusland for the bored denizens of the future with too much time on their hands. But one of the advantages for jihadists and Islamists in recent years has been the so-called “democratization of knowledge,” where everyone can pretend to be not only an expert but a religious expert.

While we talk much of disinformation these days, new technology will radically improve the quality of the fake and the false. Back in 2014, when I was Co-ordinator of the State Department’s Center for Stra-

incendiary things, weaponized strategically in order to deceive.

This could be a powerful weapon in the propaganda wars. We are on the verge of seeing how new technology will be redirected and reconfigured by the “dark creativity” of a host of bad actors, not just criminals and terrorists but also ideologues. And even if the deception does not convince, it may accomplish another important goal: that of discrediting official discourses and state narratives. Perhaps the discrediting of such things is necessary, but something must and will fill those new vacuums.

MAN AND MEANING

Perhaps the biggest danger of the technological revolution, however, is not so much the initial or direct terrorist use of it but how tech will affect us, rendering us defenseless and more exposed in the war of ideas.

Writer and philosopher Paul Kingsnorth has warned

that in the late modern age we are now entering, the very meaning of reality and identity will be up for grabs. As he notes, “the ultimate project of modernity is to replace the human with the machine” as we are, literally and not just symbolically, caught in a “web” or a “net.”⁴ Atomized man, alone, desperate, bored, or trapped in illusion, will be susceptible to all sorts of social and ideological pathologies.

Dreamland and illusion can be powerful. But in such a struggle reality will at some point intrude and the entity or group that can best model authenticity, meaning and purpose will have an inherent advantage over those who do not.

The biggest advantage extremists will have in the battle for hearts and minds will not be in the use of new tech, but in marrying that innovation with plausible or convincing alternatives to the societal drift that such tech causes.

The accelerating pace of technology is, almost certainly, bound to alienate us from ourselves. And even if

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tegic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC), ISIS supporters online tried to pass off footage from a Hungarian porn video as “Sunni Muslim women being raped by Western soldiers.” We were able to expose this falsehood at the time almost as soon as it happened. Now imagine far better, original deep fakes or synthetic content not just of sexual assault but of all sorts of



new tech can stupefy us to a certain extent, sooner or later we must have something else. We will be searching. The range of possibilities for our destinations, from the benign to the toxic, will be breathtaking.

ON THE CUSP OF CHANGE

More recently, the United States, as a result of the current Hamas-Israel war, has seen the worst explosion of student unrest since 1968. There is no doubt that this unrest has been well funded and abetted by ideologues—leftists and/or Islamists—but that it is also a homegrown campus product made up of other factors: among them alienation from society, self-radicalization, boredom, idealism, naivete, a thirst for novelty, and a fear of missing out. In their day, the massive anti-war protests of the 1960s would lead some Americans, though only a tiny sliver of the whole, into outright terrorism, into revolutionary violence which would last for years. It would not be surprising if the seeds of new iterations of the Weather Underground or the Black Guerrilla Family have already been planted by today's unrest. And the possibility of rival radical ideologies warring for dominance in the West cannot be discounted.

It is precisely at the nexus of the accelerating pace of technological change and the alienation or disorientation of man that the next great battle for hearts and minds will be fought. As is often the case, as it was in the past for international communism or fascism or Salafi-jihadism, most will be distracted or passive. We are talking here of vanguards, of revolutionary elites, rather than mass movements. The question remains, however. Who will be the belligerents of the future, and under what ideological battle flags will they fight? New tech will provide new opportunities, and new ways of delivering old messages with greater volume and velocity. That the battle approaches, there can be no doubt.

We are now told by the experts that we will experience more technological progress and change in the next decade than we have seen in the past century. [...] Perhaps the biggest danger of the technological revolution, however, is not so much the initial ordirect terrorist use of it but how tech will affect us, rendering us defenseless and more exposed in the war of ideas.

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Showing Up in the New Battle of Ideas

Brian Katulis

The past decade has witnessed the confluence of three geopolitical trends in the battle for ideas—trends that present unprecedented challenges to U.S. foreign policy. First, the rise of China and Russia has strained the fragile liberal international order that existed in the quarter century since the end of the Cold War, as these countries actively engaged in efforts to create new doubts and divisions within the United States and Europe. Second, religious extremism in key parts of the Middle East, most notably the challenge presented by the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria from 2014 to 2020, began a new wave of illiberal thinking that inspired violent action and nativist counterreactions across the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Third, the rise of illiberal populist political movements in key democracies have divided societies and contributed to a wave of neo-isolationism that sent mixed signals from countries living in freedom about how willing they were to stand up against the retrograde forces of extremism and authoritarianism. The convergence of these three trends—strategic competition, religious extremism, and illiberalism within open societies—has made it more difficult for U.S. foreign policy to build a shared consensus about meeting the threats posed by today's geopolitical landscape.

AMERICA UNFOCUSED

The notion that we now live in a new era of strategic competition between Russia, China, and the United States is one that has been shared to some degree by the past three U.S. presidents: Joe Biden, Donald Trump, and Barack Obama. All three administrations have acknowledged this new geopolitical landscape in some fashion, but none have demonstrated a steadfast and steady commitment to a clear strategy to engage in this new battle of ideas. This comes as a time when the global prospects for

freedom around the world remain quite negative, as the most recent assessment by Freedom House has indicated.¹ The mixed and uneven responses to national security challenges such as Russia's war on Ukraine, Syria's war against its own people, and Iran's threats to the broader Middle East all demonstrate a lack of unity and resolve on the part of the United States that wasn't in evidence during the Cold War and World War II.

What has emerged in the last decade is a new global battle of ideas centered around competing narratives advanced by different centers of power. During the past decade, the United States has indeed effectuated some forms of policy responses to the challenges posed by Iran, the Islamic State, Russia, and China. But those policy responses have only been partial and incomplete, because of divisions at home and more assertive efforts by extremists and autocrats to promote their ideologies inside of America – as witnessed in the recent social and political debates in America over the war between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. In many ways, America has been sleepwalking through a global resurgence of alternative, retrograde worldviews that compete with the ideals of liberal and open societies. And now that political battle is also taking place inside of America's ideological, social, and political debates.

A FIVE POINT PLAN FOR ENGAGING IN THE NEW BATTLE OF IDEAS

In the wake of the 9/11 attacks at the start of this century, a debate unfolded inside of America centered on the question of “why?” This discussion asked why there was so much hatred directed toward the United States, with some observers suggesting that a key part of the answer could be found in the intellectual, social, and ideological landscape of the broader Middle East.² Arab

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human development reports written by intellectuals and specialists from the region pinpointed education gaps, social and economic inequalities, and the absence of freedom in key countries across the broader Middle East and South Asia. In turn, the U.S. government invested in new tools of engagement, including public diplomacy and new media outlets, in an effort to engage in the ideas debate with broader publics.

But that was then, and this is now. The United States became consumed by debates over the many unforced errors in prolonged military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the country became more inward-focused, riven by economic inequalities and social and cultural divides at home. The U.S. is still fitfully engaged in the Middle East, where it remains the unrivaled outside actor with the most power and influence to shape the trajectory of events, albeit mostly through traditional hard power means like military and economic power. But a series of events across the region, including the popular uprisings of the “Arab Spring” and a number of civil wars in the 2010s, prompted America to seek a path of overall disengagement. At the very least, it pulled back from the fulsome discussion about the battle of ideas that had emerged in the early 2000s.

To be sure, there were exceptions. The United States, for instance, marshalled a response to the rise of the Islamic State that involved erecting a coalition with five lines of effort, one of which was the ideological contest. But this engagement on the ideological front was episodic and often disconnected from the central policy initiatives put forward by various U.S. administrations. Even now, in the midst of an important debate about the future of the broader Middle East against the

backdrop of the Israel-Hamas war, there has been little time to reflect upon—let alone develop—a strategic plan for America to engage in this new battle of ideas unfolding around the Middle East.

But we should. When it comes to meeting the challenges of this new era of geostrategic competition, there are a number of steps that the U.S. should take.

1. Develop a trans-partisan and trans-ideological initiative inside of the United States to compete with extremists on the left and right. America will continue to lack the capacity to shape and influence trends and debates in the broader Middle East and around the world as long as sharp divisions at home hold it back from addressing its own problems and issues. Recent public opinion data shows³ that a majority of Americans support U.S. engagement and leadership in the world, yet a band of neo-isolationists on the left and the right have advanced inward-looking world-views that echo some of the “blame America first” rhetoric of America’s ideological adversaries in Iran, Russia, and China, among other places. We should seek to create a “vital center” built on the foundation of a sense of inclusive nationalism and patriotism, rather than the “red versus blue” partisan divides, as well as class, social, and racial divisions stoked by different groups across the political spectrum.

2. Increase U.S. engagement in the Middle East, focusing on building partners in the ideological battle along with coalitions to enhance security and prosperity to the people of the region. It is long past time for the United States to discard the false choice

that has framed America’s overall engagement with this key part of the world—a debate centered on the question of “stay or leave?” Even after years of debate about “pivoting” or “rebalancing” to other parts of the world, America remains engaged in the broader Middle East, mostly through military, economic, and energy tools. What’s needed is a greater diversity of engagement that seeks to building partnerships along social, educational, religious, and ideological lines in a way that challenges the backward-looking elements

The convergence of these three trends—strategic competition, religious extremism, and illiberalism within open societies—has made it more difficult for U.S. foreign policy to build a shared consensus about meeting the threats posed by today’s geopolitical landscape.



centered around Iran's "axis of resistance," and offer greater opportunity than the alternatives being offered by Iran, Russia, and China.

3. **Prioritize U.S.-Saudi relations as a key node in building several concentric networks of partners.** America already has a strong network of partners across the region, mostly in the military and economic realms. Some of these partnerships, including with countries like Morocco, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, engage in their own forms of public, social, and religious diplomacy that seeks to bridge divides rather than exploit them. The ongoing transformation inside of Saudi Arabia on the social and religious fronts should be encouraged, because this transition offers an abundance of positive spillover effects if social and religious reforms proceed in the right direction. State power and legitimacy in Saudi Arabia no longer relies squarely on religious authority; it is manufactured by giving Saudis the fiscal means to participate in modern experiences that the government can directly control. Religious authority will always be critical to the regime's survival, but the dynamics have changed.

Moreover, the example of Saudi Arabia is simply the most salient in a rapidly changing Middle East. Most governments in the region ultimately derive some of their power from religious authority, and in turn use that authority in a stable, reliable cycle of governance. But this relationship is one that differs country by country. Demographics, history, and government institutions all come together to create a variety of unique dynamics. The common thread is that, in this region of the world, religious authority and state power continue to play off of one another. Most of its inhabitants are practicing Muslims, and faith is an important source of power and connection.

4. **Counter Iran and its "axis of resistance" partners.** Iran's aging clerical leadership continues to face challenges from the next generation of Iranians who seek a different future. Furthermore, Iran's

In many ways, America has been sleepwalking through a global resurgence of alternative, retrograde worldviews that compete with the ideals of liberal and open societies. And now that political battle is also taking place inside of America's ideological, social, and political debates.

partners in the so-called "axis of resistance," including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Yemen's Houthis, and a panoply of state and non-state actors in Iraq and Syria, all play an aggressive role in the ideological battles of the region. America should work with key partners across the region to offer worldviews that give hope for the future to compete with the despair that seems dominant in conflict-ridden countries. This means acting more assertively and strategically to counter the narratives peddled by Iran and its regional partners, often with support from other global actors such as Russia and China. It also means creating a more coherent national security policy to address the threats that Iran poses to the broader Middle East and more widely in conflicts like Russia's war against Ukraine.

5. **Work with the region to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict.** Another important piece of the puzzle in combating the ideologies of religious extremists is tackling the chronic problem of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The current moment looks particularly bleak, given the war raging between Israel and Hamas and wider tensions across the region exploited by extremists who seek to foment discontent and conflict. Nevertheless, recent trends, including the historic 2020 Abraham Accords that opened up relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco, offer a counterpoint to the negative trends



between Israelis and Palestinians in the past year. The central idea of promoting greater regional normalization and integration is now at the heart of the Biden administration's approach to the Middle East, just as it was in the second half of the Trump administration, and the next U.S. administration would be wise to build on these efforts, including through steps that bring a two-state solution closer to reality.

NO SUBSTITUTE FOR SERIOUSNESS

The main ingredient in the formula outlined above is deepening America's engagement across the board with its regional partners in the Middle East and working together to counter the retrograde and extremist visions offered by our chief adversaries and competitors. The first step in that direction starts at home—by moving away from America's addiction to partisan and ideological division and turmoil. Fortunately, a pathway to creating a vital center is visible if one takes a step back from the excess of noise produced by America's political media industrial complex. The other key ingredient is the fact that many countries in the region, along with their people, are moving away from the past. By working in concert with these partners, the United States can show up in the new battle of ideas and compete with the extremist and autocratic mindsets that have dominated the region for decades.

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A Changed Chinese Approach To The Middle East

Ilan Berman

You might call it the third edition of China's Mideast policy. Over the past half-year, the Chinese government has dramatically reconfigured its approach to the Middle East, abandoning long-held principles like non-interference and strategic balancing in favor of a policy that has made it an increasingly partisan player in the unfolding geopolitics of the region.

It wasn't always this way. Historically, Beijing has calibrated its Mideast policy carefully, seeking to extract maximum benefit from its limited engagement, first in economic and then in strategic terms. Today, however, a significant shift in thinking toward the region appears to have taken place in the PRC. It is one with sweeping implications for China's traditional regional partners—and its new ones.

ENERGY AND ARMS

The first iteration of China's approach to the region, which predominated during the Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao eras (1989-2002 and 2002-2012, respectively), was decidedly mercantile in nature. Writing in *Middle East Quarterly* back in 2005, Jin Liangxiang of the Shanghai Institute for International Studies mapped out the "energy first" approach that characterized Beijing's attitude toward the region for much of the 1990s and 2000s. That policy, Jin explained, focused overwhelmingly on securing stable sources of oil and natural gas to fuel the PRC's ballooning economy.¹

The results were a deepening Chinese stake in the region's energy-rich states, and ballooning Chinese oil imports from the Persian Gulf. "While the Middle East accounted for less than 40 percent of China's oil imports before 1994," Jin outlined, "since 1996, the proportion has risen to over half." What this meant, in practical terms, was a deepening Chinese dependence on suppliers like Oman, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Yemen.²

A second, albeit notable, facet of this mercantile outreach was the sale of arms to the region. Leveraging the desires of weapons-hungry regional states, Chinese arms exports to the region surged in the 1990s and 2000s, as the PRC sold, among other things, battlefield materiel to the Islamic Republic of Iran and missiles to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.³

On the whole, however, Chinese engagement in the Middle East—though growing—could still be said to be modest. It wouldn't remain that way for long.

EXPANDED PRIORITIES UNDER XI

The ascent to power of Xi Jinping a little over a decade ago marked the start of a second, qualitatively new phase of Chinese Mideast engagement. On the back of Xi's signature foreign policy project, the Belt & Road Initiative, China broadened its involvement in the region through new trade deals, investment ventures and infrastructure projects. This approach was typified by triangulation, with China simultaneously seeking to engage the Sunni Arab states of the Persian Gulf, Shi'ite Iran and the Jewish state of Israel.

This turned out to be a shrewd calculation—and one that reaped enormous dividends for the PRC. It established China as a major stakeholder in Israel's vibrant high-tech sector.⁴ Beijing likewise assumed a key role in the Saudi government's expansive "Vision 2030" strategy.⁵ And in 2021, China's government inked a sweeping quarter-century deal with Iran—then struggling financially as a result of the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" policy—giving it extensive access to various sectors of the Iranian economy and positioning the two countries for deeper military coordination.⁶

In this way, China's leaders succeeded in establishing a significant—and growing—geopolitical footprint in one of the world's most vital regions. Moreover, that



positioning has become increasingly vital in recent years against the backdrop of souring diplomatic ties and deepening strategic competition with the United States.

THE NEW “NEW NORMAL”

But everything changed on October 7th. The brutal campaign of terror carried out against communities in southern Israel by the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas that day resulted in the single largest slaughter of Jews since the Holocaust. It also propelled Israel into a new war in the Gaza Strip—one intended to end Hamas’ rule there and to secure the return of Israeli hostages.

Yet while the grisly terror campaign evoked sympathy for Israel among many nations, China was not among them. Officials in Beijing conspicuously refrained from expressing their solidarity with the Jewish state, instead calling almost immediately for greater international action on the “Palestinian question.”⁷ China, moreover, was quick to condemn Israel’s subsequent military operations in the Gaza Strip, and has emerged as a consistent, vociferous opponent of the Israeli government even as it has sought to engage various Palestinian factions and improve their bargaining power.⁸ As my colleague Joshua Eisenman has noted, China’s previous

Over the past half-year, the Chinese government has dramatically reconfigured its approach to the Middle East, abandoning long-held principles like non-interference and strategic balancing in favor of a policy that has made it an increasingly partisan player in the unfolding geopolitics of the region.

foreign policy line—that relations between Beijing and Jerusalem are “stronger than ever” despite American pressure of recent years—has experienced a complete reversal in an astonishingly short amount of time.⁹

China’s policy preferences, meanwhile, are being amplified by social media and turbo-charged by information technology. On platforms like Tiktok, which boasts a staggering 170 million users in the U.S. alone, the post-10/7 era has witnessed an explosion of anti-Israel and anti-Semitic content which far exceeds normal or even predictable proportions.¹⁰ This state of affairs has been corroborated by Jewish content creators, who have experienced an unprecedented “avalanche of hate” on the platform in recent months.¹¹

Why should this matter? After all, anti-Semitism can be found on platforms like X (formerly Twitter) as well. But Tiktok isn’t simply another social media app. As numerous scholars and national security practitioners have noted, the social media platform serves as a “trojan horse” of sorts for the Chinese Communist Party, which—via its hold over parent company ByteDance, which is domiciled in the PRC—has the ability to use it to access, and influence, the views of literally hundreds of millions of people. And the overwhelming evidence suggests that, in tandem with the shift that has taken place in its Mideast policy, Beijing is now putting its finger on the scale of online debate concerning the region. Or, as Josh Rogin of the *Washington Post* has bluntly put it: “fueling online antisemitism is China’s new tool against the West.”¹²

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Moreover, that positioning has become increasingly vital in recent years against the backdrop of souring diplomatic ties and deepening strategic competition with the United States.



China's changing engagement reflects an understanding that U.S. Mideast policy of recent years has created a critical opening—and that the current Israel-Hamas war has now afforded it an opportunity to ingratiate itself with an increasingly inflamed 'Arab street.'

In other words, it is difficult to divorce the revamped way in which Beijing is approaching the Middle East from the unfolding “great power competition” between China and the United States. China’s changing engagement reflects an understanding that U.S. Mideast policy of recent years has created a critical opening—and that the current Israel-Hamas war has now afforded it an opportunity to ingratiate itself with an increasingly inflamed “Arab street.”

This shift, of course, is not cost-free for China. Perhaps belatedly, Israeli scholars and experts have started waking up to the reality that, for all of the initial benefits that they believed stronger ties with China would confer to their country, the PRC is not in fact a dependable partner.¹³ As they do, ties between China and the Jewish state can be expected to decline in both scope and vibrance. However, given the potential dividends of stronger ties with the Arab states, as well as with Iran, that seems to be a price that Beijing is more than willing to pay.

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The Taliban's Third Act

Davood Moradian

Since their emergence out of Afghanistan's civil war in the 1990s, the Taliban have occupied a significant place in Afghan, regional and global politics. The February 2020 peace agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban paved the way for the movement's third incarnation as the ruling authority of Afghanistan, following its first reign (1996-2001) and subsequent successful insurgency phase (2002-2021).

Numerous studies have been published over the years about various aspects of the Taliban's two previous incarnations. By contrast, world attention—and opinion—regarding the group's third phase is still evolving. Indeed, even the terminology differs; while the Taliban refer to themselves as "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan," the UN has labelled them as "the de facto authorities" of Afghanistan, while various governments describe the movement interchangeably as "the Taliban regime," "the Taliban government," "the Taliban militias" and "the occupying Taliban."

But what is the group, really? And what does it stand for today, in its third iteration? The Taliban's organizational and ideological origins are rooted in historical Islamist uprisings against foreign occupation, secular governments and Western modernity. These responses have been encapsulated in four key Islamic concepts—Jihad¹, Sharia², Jahilliya³ and Ummah-Caliphate⁴—which collectively animate the Taliban's new order.

GENDER APARTHEID...

While every culture, religion and tradition is contaminated by some kind of misogyny, the Taliban can be said to have won this inglorious contest.

Leading international lawyers and Western officials describe Taliban's gender policy as the world's first gender apartheid,⁵ and a manifestation of crimes against humanity.⁶ The Taliban's views and treatment of women, in turn, are shaped by three entrenched misogynistic traditions: Islamic law's discriminatory provisions, Pashtun society's deeply misogynistic cultural norms, and Islamist anti-Western beliefs.

First, while far more progressive than its preceding monotheistic religions, women in Islam are not accorded equal rights in many respects. Any Islamic government is therefore institutionally discriminatory, particularly in public and political spheres.

Second, the Taliban's cultural and ethnic basis is Pashtun, one of Afghanistan's main ethnic groups. The place of women in Pashtun culture has been comparatively robust, with females occupying a prominent place in the public sphere, alongside various ethnic groups. Nevertheless, misogynistic practices remain entrenched and widespread, particularly in rural communities. For instance, protecting the chastity of women is a top Pashtun cultural norm, meaning as a practical matter that women must be excluded from the public eye and shielded from exposure. Thus, even the most cosmopolitan Pashtun politicians, such as former Afghan President Hamid Karzai and former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, chose to hide their highly educated wives from public eyes.⁷

Finally, the anti-Western beliefs of Islamists underpin the Taliban's systematic discrimination against women. Islamists view Western support for women rights as part of a project to weaken Islamic values and heritage. Accordingly, one of the Taliban's early and symbolic acts upon their return to power in Kabul was

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to replace Afghanistan's Ministry of Women Affairs with their notorious Ministry of Promoting Virtue and Preventing Vice.⁸

...AND ETHNIC RULE

The Taliban today also operates on a clearly ethno-centric basis. The Pashtuns are one of Afghanistan and Pakistan's main ethnic groups, and the Taliban are essentially a Pashtun movement and phenomenon. They arose from Pashtun-dominated regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and that character has remained. According to the UN, "Taliban governance structures remain highly exclusionary, Pashtun-centred and repressive towards all forms of opposition. The majority of de facto ministers are Pashtun (there are five non-Pashtun ministers). Among provincial governors there is a similarly high Pashtun representation (25 out of 34), reflecting the Taliban's Pashtunization strategy of the 1990s, although there is more variation at the district level."⁹

The Taliban's presence in non-Pashtun areas, meanwhile, is seen as an occupation – one reinforced by acts such as the group's systematic eradication of Persian language and cultural symbols.¹⁰ This has had the effect of further deepening Afghanistan's century-old ethnic and linguistic fault lines.

Indeed, among the country's political class, Afghanistan has become a de facto partitioned polity, divided between the Pashtuns and Persian-speaking communities (Farsiwans). The Taliban's response and strategy has been the forceful oppression and assimilation of non-Pashtun communities. Taliban ambitions to build a Pashtun-centric polity bring them closer to ethno-nationalist Pashtuns. This shared political objective explains why both previous Pashtun presidents of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, refused to mobilize their respective Pashtun bases against the Taliban. Many Western observers and policymakers, however, were blind to the ethnic driver of the Afghan conflict.

EXCLUSIONARY RELIGION

Another important feature of the Taliban's governing system and political identity is their

sectarian nature. The Taliban are entirely comprised of Sunni Muslims. The exclusion of non-Sunni communities from power is not confined to political power, moreover. Such communities now face legal discrimination under Taliban rule.

It was not always this way. The previous constitutional order recognized Shia jurisprudence, enabling the country's Shia Muslims to conduct their personal and religious affairs according to their own sectarian principles. By contrast, the Taliban's refusal to recognize Shia jurisprudence has deprived a quarter of Afghan citizens of their religious rights.

Nor is it only the Shia communities that now live under the Taliban's Sunni dictatorship. The Taliban have also banned other religious sects and groups in the country, such as the Salafi, the Sufi, and the Hizb Tahrir activists whose conduct and doctrines do not fall strictly in line with the Taliban's rigid Deobandi precepts.¹¹

ENSHRINING IDEOLOGY

The Taliban emerged from Afghanistan and Pakistan's religious Madaris (the plural of *madrassa*, or Islamic religious school) in the 1990s. Therefore, it is not surprising to see the elevated role of Madaris and mullahs under the Taliban's reign. The entire leadership of all Taliban-run units, including at the district level, are mullahs.

This, it should be noted, is a modern innovation. Historically, mullahs belonged to the lower class of society and state across the Islamic world. The Islamic Revolution in Iran elevated the socio-political status

The exponential growth of Madaris under the Taliban will have far reaching consequences for the fabric of Afghan society, for regional stability and indeed for global security. The Taliban view the Madaris as their political backbone and their main source of recruitment.



The Taliban's organizational and ideological origins are rooted in historical Islamist uprisings against foreign occupation, secular governments and Western modernity. These responses have been encapsulated in four key Islamic concepts—Jihad, Sharia, Jahilliya and Ummah-Caliphate—which collectively animate the Taliban's new order.”

the Taliban's totalitarian regime. Similar to the way communist dictatorships relied on a specific class—workers, in the case of the Soviet Union, and peasants in the case of Maoist China — the Taliban and Madaris/mullahs will have a mutually beneficial strategic partnership.

THE LESSON FOR OTHER ISLAMISTS

The Taliban's relations with their fellow militant Islamist movements can be looked at from two angles: political/inspirational and operational. The former dimension is far more important and consequential than the latter, as “ideas” are the driving forces behind terrorist acts. If Berlin was at the heart of the Cold War, symbolically and strategically, Kabul has held that role for the Islamist global war against the West. Afghanistan was the first place where militant Islamists defeated an infidel global empire, the Soviet Union. But the victorious mujahideen groups

failed to sustain their initial victory by building an Islamist polity and society. That failure has now been corrected. By signing the 2020 Doha peace agreement, the Taliban achieved their three objectives: imposing a humiliating defeat on the U.S. and its Western allies; establishing their “Islamic Caliphate,” and; initiating the process of Islamization of Afghan society.

It was therefore not surprising to see the jubilation of various Islamist movements at the Taliban victory. The shared, decades-old struggle to establish a Sharia-enforcing Islamic state had born fruit. Osama Bin Laden and Abu Bakr Baghdadi may have received overwhelming global attention, but those ideologues had failed to achieve such a goal. The Taliban had now succeeded.

The significance of the Taliban's victory to the Islamist ecosystem can be best symbolized by the erection of a replica of the Dome of the Rock on the top of Kabul's tallest hill, overlooking the former U.S. Embassy. The monument was built by a Turkish company,¹⁴ and engendered a congratulatory message from the Iranian embassy. Moreover, since the start of the ongoing violence in Gaza, there have been numerous meetings between the head of Taliban's political office in Doha with his fellow Qatari guest, the representative of Hamas.¹⁵ Taliban flags are now

and power of Shia mullahs for the first time in history. Similarly, the Taliban's ascendance to political power is unprecedented in Sunni Islam. The Taliban's monopoly on state power and structures has enabled them to begin a nationwide campaign to build religious Madaris across the country. The Taliban's ministry of education has recently boasted of enrolling close to one million students in religious Madaris, out of Afghanistan's 35 million person population.¹² By way of comparison, in Pakistan (population 230 million) there are 2.5 million madrasa students. And in Turkey, the Islamic-leaning government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan has not yet achieved its ambition of recruiting 120,000 religious mullahs.¹³

The exponential growth of Madaris under the Taliban will have far reaching consequences for the fabric of Afghan society, for regional stability and indeed for global security. The Taliban view the Madaris as their political backbone and their main source of recruitment. The movement presently relies on former fighters to maintain its grip on power. However, these cadres are struggling to transition from insurgency into civilian and bureaucratic roles. Madari graduates will soon replace the current manpower. And, consistent with the Taliban's overall belligerent ideological identity and objectives, their Madaris will reflect the vision and strengthen the functioning of



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appearing at pro-Palestinian demonstrations around the world, including in Jerusalem.

Nor is the Taliban's victory confined to the symbolic. The Taliban have developed a strategy of the "management of terrorism," which includes cooperation, co-optation, containment, and concealment of different terrorist groups.¹⁶ This policy has paid abundant dividends. The Taliban present themselves as "good terrorists," capable of fighting "bad" ones—such as the Islamic State's Khorasan Province, or ISIS-K.

AMERICA'S FLAWED APPROACH

U.S.-Taliban relations can be said to defy conventional wisdom. America's war with the Taliban was its longest war—one that, as one scholar opined, ended up being "The war that destroyed America."¹⁷ It was waged as the first and central battle of global war on terrorism, but strangely the U.S. has refused to put the Taliban on its proscribed list of terrorist organizations. And indeed, just few days after the collapse of the U.S.-supported constitutional order in Kabul and the Taliban's occupation of the U.S. Embassy, CIA director William Burns quietly visited the Afghan capital to meet with its new rulers.¹⁸

This engagement has continued. In addition to America's role as the main financial contributor to Afghanistan's Taliban-run economic and financial sectors, Washington continues to provide diplomatic and political support by maintaining regular diplomatic and intelligence contacts with

the movement while actively discouraging any serious and armed resistance to it.

Overall, one can describe the current U.S. view of the Taliban as that of a "frenemy"—morally repugnant, but strategically useful and financially affordable. On the Taliban side, however, the U.S. undoubtedly remains "the great Satan." Nevertheless, the Taliban's sense of victory has given them the confidence to flirt with it. The Taliban are convinced they have outsmarted the West, and treat their American counterparts as "useful idiots," capitalizing on the West's desperation, distraction, ignorance, apathy, opportunism and cyclical politics. The end result is a new chapter in Afghanistan's long-running tragedy and America's entanglement in it.

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¹ The doctrine of *Jihad* is as old as Islam itself. The prophet Mohammed is reported to have led nearly thirty military expeditions during his 10 year rule over Medina. Ever since, *Jihad* has been a permanent feature of the Islamic world, used to give religious legitimacy to nationalist/liberation movements. In the case of the Taliban, whose ideological roots date back to the Deobandi movement of the late 19 century, it has been weaponized to the liberation of Muslim lands and the (re)Islamization of society.

² If *Jihad* is the military-political strategy for the Islamist movements, enforcing *Sharia* is the conceptual and unifying framework for an Islamic polity/order. The word does not appear in the Koran, however, nor is it included in the five pillars of the core beliefs and practices of Islam. Rather, the term is one invented by medieval Muslim jurists to help organize the personal and social obligations of Muslims per Islam's ethical basis. But if *Sharia* is a contested legal and theocratic term, it is a very powerful political and ideological framework for mobilising and unifying for social and political movements.

³ The third term, *Jahiliya*, is also a historic concept, one which has been transfigured by modern Islamist movements to advance their totalitarian ends. *Jahiliya* is the state of ignorance understood to have characterised Arabian society prior to Islam. Upon his



conquest of Mecca, the Prophet Mohammed began a number of acts to remove from the newly Islamized society its pre-Islamic character and appearance, such as banning polytheism and the destruction of idols that were worshipped by the Meccan tribes. In much the same way, modern Islamists have acted violently to suppress acts, symbols and practices deemed at variance with their interpretation of the correct interpretation of Islam.

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Rethinking America's Role in the War of Ideas

Colin P. Clarke

It is not uncommon to hear the refrain, especially when it comes to terrorism, that while we might be able to defeat the group or organization (whether al-Qaeda or the Islamic State) we'll never be able to beat the ideology.¹ This isn't a cynical approach; in many ways, it mirrors America's experience over the two-plus decades of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT).

Yes, the United States has helped lead a counter-terrorism coalition unmatched in modern history. Between precision strikes launched from unmanned aerial vehicles to special operations forces (SOF) raids, the U.S. retains an unrivaled kinetic capability to disrupt transnational terrorist groups. But countering the ideology of these groups, and nullifying their narratives, has proven far more challenging. Indeed, the entire concept of counter-narratives has become somewhat maligned, sullied by its image as a cottage industry by Beltway hucksters looking to cash in on a phenomenon that became trendy almost overnight. The resulting approaches lacked rigor and barely demonstrated a proper understanding of the importance of measurement, assessment, and evaluation.

SPEAKING CLEARLY

The term strategic communication was popular in the early years of the fight against al-Qaeda. It reflected the understanding that, to succeed against Osama bin Laden and the seductive lure of jihadist propaganda, the U.S. would be well served to minimize the 'say-do' gap. In other words, if Washington's actions more closely mirrored its rhetoric—especially with regard to human rights, democracy, and other core American values—it

would be much easier to expose the hypocrisy of groups like al-Qaeda, which claimed to be the vanguard of Islam but actually killed untold numbers of Muslim non-combatants.

In the context of Islamic extremists, this should have been easy. At its peak in Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State was synonymous with extreme violence: beheadings, burning people alive, and auctioning off Yazidi women and young girls at modern-day slave auctions. Sectarianism and excommunication became the currency of the Islamic State and in many ways still is, as evidenced by the Islamic State's Afghan affiliate relentlessly targeting the country's Shia Hazara minority. Yet all too often, the United States has ended up ceding the informational initiative to its enemies, and not just terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS but also adversaries such as Russia, Iran, China, and North Korea.

This state of affairs is deeply deficient. Russia has shown wanton disregard for the sovereignty of Ukraine and a clear desire to undermine the existing post-World War II order in Europe. Iran utilizes a network of proxy actors to destabilize the Middle East, including Hezbollah and Hamas, two of the region's most odious terrorist groups. China represses its own ethnic Uighur Muslim minority, bullies smaller countries in East and Southeast Asia, and has a complete disregard for intellectual property and other widely accepted tenets of modern geopolitics. North Korea is a rogue regime that starves its own people, headed by a dictator who hordes his country's resources in order to pursue nuclear weapons.

Yet it is often the United States, alongside its Western allies, that is on the back foot, defending its actions on the world stage and trying to convince populations

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in other countries, particularly in the Global South, of the purity of its intentions. We do not live in a “post-truth” era, and facts still matter. So when Russia uses mercenary groups to prop up warlords and military juntas in the Sahel, the U.S. should not mince words. When Iran trains, equips, and finances Hamas, which goes on to slaughter 1,200 Israeli civilians in one of the most gruesome terrorist attacks in recent memory, this is the narrative that the U.S. should continue highlighting. Similarly, instead of writing “love letters” to North Korea’s odious dictator, Kim Jong Un, American leaders should highlight Pyongyang’s rogue actions, its pursuit of nuclear weapons, and the starvation of its own civilian population.

A STORY TO TELL

Not only does the United States still retain the moral high ground, it also boasts world-class talent in Hollywood and on Madison Avenue that can help transmit these ideas to the rest of the world, the way it did during World War II and throughout the entirety of the Cold War.² American soft power and cultural appeal were extremely important variables during Washington’s contest with the Soviets, and America still has a lot to offer—which is why it remains the preferred destination for people from

The entire concept of counter-narratives has become somewhat maligned, sullied by its image as a cottage industry by Beltway hucksters looking to cash in on a phenomenon that became trendy almost overnight. The resulting approaches lacked rigor and barely demonstrated a proper understanding of the importance of measurement, assessment, and evaluation.

all over the globe. From Silicon Valley to Wall Street and beyond, the United States continues to offer opportunities to those who share the timeless American values of ingenuity, innovation, and meritocracy.

Too many in the U.S. policymaking community live with the stigma of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, arguably one of the most significant U.S. foreign policy blunders of the post-Cold War era. When no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq, America’s brand suffered and created a geopolitical hangover that lingers to this day. To be clear, the United States has made critical errors during the GWOT, from the way Guantanamo was handled to enhanced interrogation techniques (e.g. waterboarding) and Abu Ghraib, to name just a few. Yet these missteps don’t obviate all of the positive things that Washington does globally.

From economic development programs to humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, the United States still does a lot of good in the world. But we’ve become more self-loathing, more prone to isolation, and less likely to promote American ideals abroad. There is at least some concern that if former President Donald Trump is elected again in November 2024, some of those isolationist tendencies could reemerge.

The bottom line is that the United States has an important story to tell; it’s just that we don’t always know how to tell it. For all of the criticism that it receives from countries around the world,

Whether nation-states or violent non-state actors, the United States cannot afford to cede the information space to its adversaries. Only by treating the war of ideas like an actual military conflict—and allocating sufficient resources as well as acting with a sense of urgency—can we transform it from an empty slogan into a priority worth pursuing.



especially for its foreign policy in the Arab and Islamic worlds, America has done, and continues to do, a great deal for populations in those places. In contrast, China has placed its Uighur Muslim population in concentration camps in what some have labeled a modern-day genocide.³

TAKING IDEAS SERIOUSLY

The war of ideas has never been static. Geopolitical events contribute directly to the way this conflict is waged. For the past several years, many of the events occurring across the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia have worked directly against the United States. The U.S. evacuation from Afghanistan provided the Taliban and its allies, including the Haqqani Network and al-Qaeda, with a ready-made propaganda victory. Just as bin Laden boasted after the U.S. withdrew from Somalia in the early 1990s, “America is a paper tiger” has once again become the refrain for jihadist messaging.

The Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023 have similarly energized the global jihadist movement. Though groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have always held disdain for Hamas, that has not stopped them from leveraging the attacks for their own benefit. Nevertheless, serious work is now being done to counter militant Islam and undermine its narratives by governments in the Middle East, Central and Southeast Asia, including

the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Uzbekistan, and Indonesia, to name just a few.⁴

In the war of ideas, it should not be a close contest. The American approach to the world stands in stark contrast to what U.S. adversaries have to offer. Whether rogue states like China, Russia, and Iran, or non-state armed groups like al-Qaeda, Islamic State, and Hezbollah, none offer an attractive vision for what the world should be. To the contrary, this constellation of American adversaries represents authoritarianism, illiberalism, and oppression. Yet too often, the focus on American misdeeds is what resonates in the Arab and Islamic worlds.

It doesn’t need to be this way. America has the experience, manpower, and resources to prevail in the war of ideas. No other country operates with such precision, speed, and accuracy in the information environment, a warfighting domain our adversaries recognize. After all, it was al-Qaeda’s longtime deputy and then leader Ayman al-Zawahiri who once famously quipped, “We are in a battle, and more than half this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. And we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Umma.”⁵

Whether nation-states or violent non-state actors, the United States cannot afford to cede the information space to its adversaries. Only by treating the war of ideas like an actual military conflict—and allocating sufficient resources as well as acting with a sense of urgency—can we transform it from an empty slogan into a priority worth pursuing.

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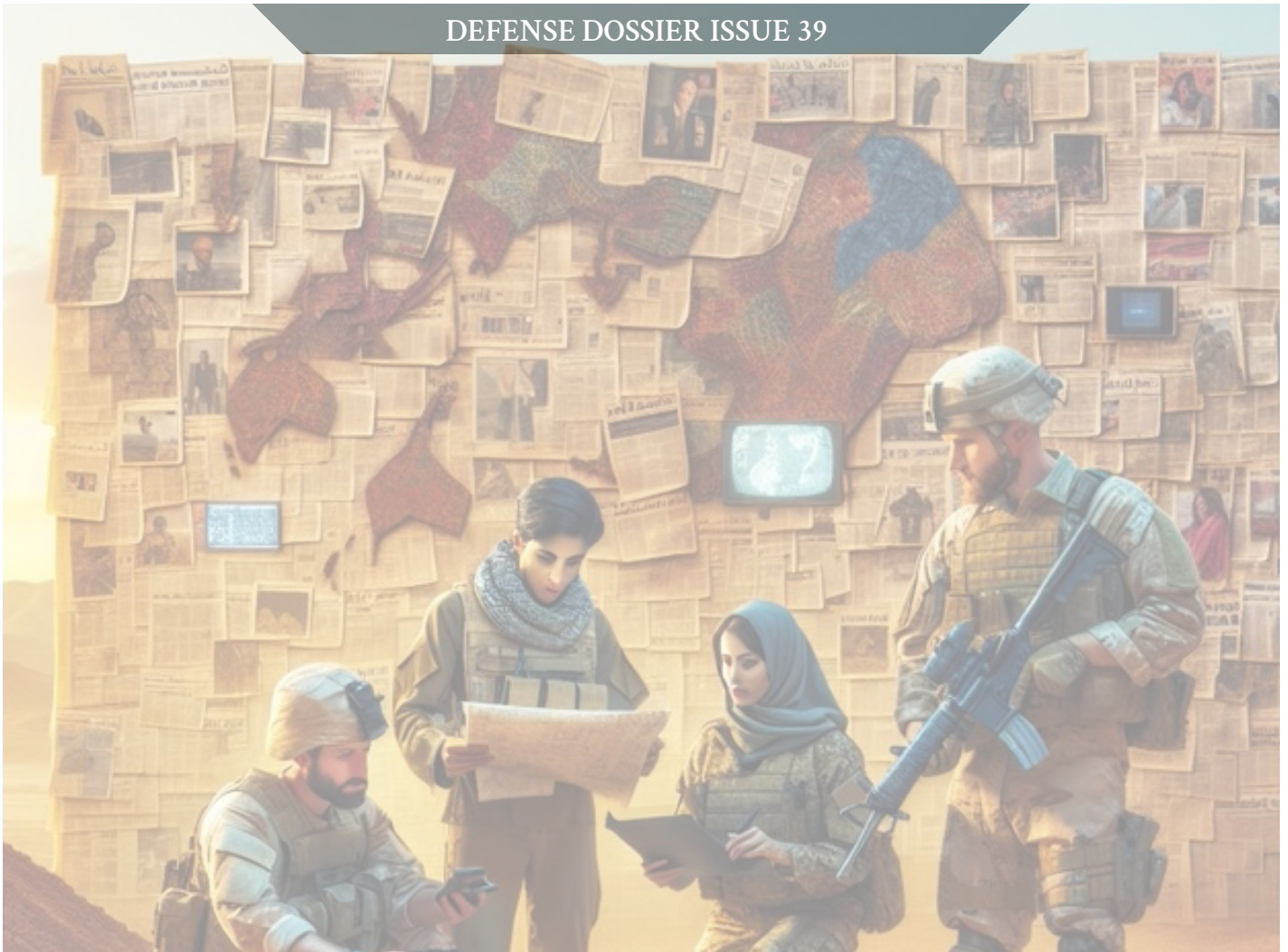
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