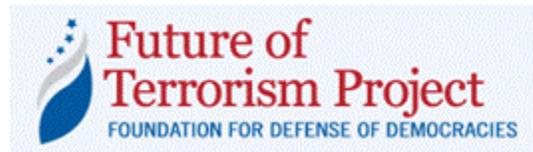


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Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade

BRAD SHERMAN (D-CA), CHAIRMAN

HEARING

**Flag on the Bag?:**  
**Foreign Assistance and the Struggle Against Terrorism**

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# Strategic Branding as a Tool in the Struggle Against Terrorism

## Executive Summary:

The United States' generous support overseas, branded as U.S. Aid, must not be perceived as bribes from an alien government to nations suspicious of Washington's policies. It must be presented as the American people assisting societies in peril. The U.S. government must serve as a liaison between its citizens and those receiving aid and comfort. The assistance should be open, transparent, and branded unapologetically as solidarity with peoples in jeopardy, particularly when the threat comes from terrorism and radical forces. The U.S. government's duty is to ensure that the recipients hear that message and that aid is remitted to the victims via a native civil resistance against terror, partnering with the American people.

Mr. Chairman, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify on foreign assistance and the struggle against terrorism.

In order to define the problem and to present my analysis, I would like to address five central questions:

1. Can and should U.S. aid be used as a tool in the struggle with terrorist forces?
2. Does U.S. aid sufficiently cover the areas plagued with terror activities?
3. Are the adversaries' counter-narratives undermining aid and assistance policies?
4. Have U.S. strategic communications been successful in countering the jihadi narrative?
5. How should branding be handled in order to most effectively defeat jihadist efforts?

## **1. Should U.S. aid be used as a tool in the struggle with terror forces?**

The conceptual debate about using foreign aid and assistance for the purpose of developing and securing U.S. national interests is complex and involves a set of philosophical, economic and political issues. There are several schools of thought that address the choices that can be made by U.S. policy makers. Some support the idea that America can and must seize any opportunity to use its resources to satisfy its immediate national interests. Others argue that the United States has an overarching interest in the improvement of socio-economic conditions around the world with the promise of long-term diplomatic gains. Hence, some support the notion that U.S. aid should be applied to address specific and immediate U.S. international concerns, while others

support a more benevolent approach - helping those from whom we may not expect return, as an American humanitarian duty.

However, this debate, with its equally compelling points, must be superseded by a more pressing equation. The United States is engaged in a confrontation with forces aiming to harm its national security and the security of its allies around the world. In addition, these forces, networks, regimes and ideologies are also engaged in violence and suppression of basic freedoms in civil societies around the world. Hence, it is logical in this specific context that the U.S. government uses the tools at its disposal to achieve concurrent and non-contradictive goals:

- a. Send foreign aid and extend assistance to societies in peril; particularly those targeted by terror forces and/or those that are subjected to ideological radicalization.
- b. Civil societies that received U.S. aid that are already targeted by terror networks and must perceive these aid programs as a sign of international solidarity with their position.
- c. Foreign aid extended to communities in peril, in the context of the conflict with the terror forces. American help to other nations must be part of the global efforts to rescue the weaker element of these communities, insuring the latter's resistance to oppression, radicalization and terrorism.

In short, foreign aid must be used as a tool in confrontation with terrorist forces and as a means to curb the expansion of radicalization. Not using humanitarian resources in this precise way will cause U.S. national interests to suffer and will deprive the most vulnerable populations of an opportunity to gain strength in the confrontation with terrorist organizations. In other words, we must give vulnerable populations the means to be self reliant rather than leaving them to rely on terrorist groups for their security and welfare.

## **2. Does U.S. aid sufficiently cover regions affected by terrorist activity?**

U.S. aid and other forms of humanitarian assistance have been heavily committed to countries where the terrorist groups have been operational. This addresses the primary concern in the process of using branded humanitarian aid as a means of diminishing the power of terrorist organizations over afflicted populations.

- a. The main agencies dispensing assistance are: USAID, The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), PEPFAR (the President's Emergency Program for AIDS Relief), the Department of Defense, the Department of Agriculture. These are operating in the areas which are relevant to the countries where terror forces and radicalization networks operate.
- b. U.S. assistance to civil societies in peril from terror and radicalization also covers two of the critical theaters in which U.S. forces are operating: Afghanistan and Iraq.

- c. Examples of countries and areas benefiting from the dissemination of resources and training that are also subjected to the influence of terror networks and radicalizing agents are: Indonesia, Egypt, Yemen, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Mauritania, Somalia, Chad, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Territories.

### **3. Are the adversaries' counter-narratives undermining aid and assistance policies?**

The jihadist and radical entities that have been challenging the U.S. and its allies have maintained a critical campaign against foreign aid; saying that it is a form of domination, neocolonialism, or, in jihadi terms, *Kuffar*-policies. Jihadi ideologues have framed U.S. assistance programs as politically motivated. Flagged or not, material and resources sent by U.S. agencies have been, and will continue to be, described by the opponents as an attempt to seek influence and dominance of weak segments of Arab and Muslim societies. The strategic goal of terror groups and radical networks is to deny civil societies the ability to perceive U.S. charitable and humanitarian assistance in positive ways. Our opponents have, and will continue, to wage systematic propaganda warfare against U.S. humanitarian assistance in all countries and regions where they can maintain an influence.

The propaganda strategies and tactics of terror and radical forces are diverse and are adapted to the terrain, circumstances, and types of U.S. aid initiatives. There are two main jihadist strategies regarding U.S. aid: those waged by oppressive regimes and those by terrorist networks.

#### **A. Regimes:**

Regimes that follow a form of jihadi ideology (such as Salafism, Khomeinism or Baathism) are usually hostile to U.S. influence. Examples include:

I. Sudan's regime, which is involved in the Darfur Genocide, openly accepts American assistance but instructs its regime-linked agencies and cadres to criticize U.S. humanitarian aid. Sudanese officials often refrain from openly criticizing this support in western media; however in the Arab media, the ruling party does attack American aid for political means. The aim is to intimidate Sudanese citizens as they receive this help and warn them from being involved in the "social, intellectual and democratic components" of the aid. This is especially crucial for the regime, as large amounts of international aid have been funneled into Sudan in the past several years.

At a rally in Khartoum in March 2009, Sudanese President and National Congress Party member, Omar al-Bashir said: "We need to clear our country of any spies...within a year, we don't want to see any foreign aid group dealing with a Sudanese citizen...if they want to bring relief, let them drop it at airports or seaports. Let the national organisations deal with our citizens."

II. Syria's regime supports terror organizations. U.S. aid in Syria is limited to civil society groups and Iraqi refugees. Syrian authorities threaten Syria-based NGOs, particularly human rights and educational groups when they receive aid or training that is outside the Baathist

auspices. Authorities do not openly blast American aid but regime-sponsored propagandists criticize it, saying that it is a component of a “Zionist” conspiracy.

III. The Iranian regime fully opposes U.S. policies across the region, including U.S. aid programs to the Middle East and other Muslim countries. Iran’s official and foreign-funded propaganda channels openly attack American humanitarian aid as a scheme with which to dominate.

In President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s speech before the UN General Assembly in September 2009, he stated his views on American humanitarian efforts quite unmistakably: “The theories of development that are in line with the hegemonic system and not in accordance with the true needs of humankind and human societies, have turned into repetitive and bland tools for assimilation of economics, expanding hegemonic domination, destroying environment and destroying the social solidarity of nations.”

IV. While Qatar has remained uncritical of U.S. aid publicly, its government and oil industries fund and provide hosting to one of the most acerbic critics of U.S. foreign aid: the al Jazeera Arabic Channel.

## **B. Organizations:**

There are two types of terrorist or radical organizations critical of U.S. foreign aid: those who dominate large areas militarily within a country and those who are present and influential within a country but not in open control of specific areas.

### *I. Dominant Organizations:*

*Hamas*, the dominant militia in the Gaza strip officially welcomes international aid, but its propagandists criticize U.S. policies, in general and humanitarian aid, in particular. Hamas ensures that the distribution of aid occurs via groups set up by the organization itself. However, the U.S. often aims to restrict Hamas’ access to aid, which was made evident during the 2009 Israeli invasion of the Gaza strip when U.S. aid was distributed to the Palestinian Authority controlled by rival group, Fatah.

*Hezbollah*, the dominant militia in the Bekaa Valley and Southern Lebanon, allows U.S. aid to be distributed in its areas of control but ensures the organization has jurisdiction over which entities receive the aid. Hezbollah’s propagandists are critical of U.S. policies and humanitarian assistance, especially with regards to Israeli relations; Hezbollah most often blasts the U.S. for its large amount of aid to Israel.

*The Taliban* in Pakistan control areas where U.S. aid is distributed, such as Waziristan and other regions. In these zones, the Taliban permits physical distribution but controls the message tightly. The Taliban’s propaganda channels attack U.S. policies and foreign aid.

Even prior to September 11, 2001, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees was reporting that the Taliban’s “religious police, pretending to observe the rules of Islam, [were] creating intolerable conditions for the work of foreign humanitarian missions. There [were]

increasingly numerous cases when foreign members of such missions and their Afghan employees were intimidated, arrested and even manhandled.” Marc Kaufman wrote in *The Washington Post* in October 2001, that “Taliban soldiers disrupted the humanitarian aid effort by expropriating over half of the food designated for distribution to starving Afghans by the World Food Program...[other reports suggest] “that the Taliban plan to poison U.S. food-drop packages and blame the United States.”

One can also categorize the *Shabab al Mujahidin* of Somalia in a similar category.

## II. *Non-Dominant Organizations*

Jihadist, mostly Salafist and Wahabi organizations and factions operating within sovereign countries under national governments, adopt comparable narratives regarding U.S. aid. While they generally allow the dissemination of resources, at the same time they seek to control the perception of the populations receiving the aid by inserting themselves in the physical distribution process. They are able to intercept the receipt of any pro-U.S. message and replace it with the impression that they are the ones rescuing people from peril.

In countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan (outside the Taliban-dominated areas), Bangladesh, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Mali, Mauritania, Chad, and others, U.S. aid is processed under the protection of governments. However, the jihadists are thorough in their effort to decimate the U.S.’s strategic message behind the humanitarian assistance. The anti-American propaganda is seen and heard throughout the process of aid distribution and any attempts at cultural engagement. It is executed via a plethora of means, including physical penetration of the networks of U.S. aid distribution and an ideological web that discredits the U.S.’s statements about humanitarian intentions. Their outlets vary from country to country, depending on the various organizations. Among the means they use are the internet, operatives, and media.

### C. **Media Propaganda**

In addition to regimes and organizations, a web of global media serves as a conveyor of anti-American and anti-U.S. aid messages. It includes a number of satellite television stations, radio stations, newspapers, and web sites. To understand the messages against the goals of U.S. humanitarian assistance, one has to understand the wider web waging a war of ideas against the U.S. role as a whole. Following are just a few examples:

#### I. *Al Jazeera*

For many years, talk shows on this network have featured systematic attacks against U.S. foreign aid. The criticism ranges from the promotion of ideologically grounded narrative placing U.S. aid in an unacceptable category of charitable actions, to political accusations - U.S. aid programs are covers for CIA agents or other covert operations that are trying to gain access to Sudan, Somalia, Pakistan and Indonesia. The network intensively promotes Qatari and international Islamic humanitarian and relief funds and organizations instead.

#### II. *Al Aalam and al Manar*

*Al Aalam*, owned by Iran, and *al Manar*, Hezbollah's TV station, have both adopted similar rhetoric regarding U.S. aid and humanitarian assistance.

### III. *Jihadi* web sites

A number of Salafi and Khomeinist web sites blast the image of U.S. intentions of aid and humanitarian assistance.

The global strategic goal in the jihadist and anti-American narrative is to delegitimize the cultural essence of U.S. messages. The gist of the hostile agenda is that the United States is not performing benevolent actions on the humanitarian level; rather, it is practicing insidious propaganda to further its own agenda. The jihadi message is that as long as Washington does not change its policies in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other Muslim countries, or change its posture towards Israel, any aid coming from the U.S. is suspicious.

One clarifying example is the immediate and efficient distribution of U.S. aid to the shores of Indonesia in the aftermath of the tsunami. In the first hours and days of the relief operations, the local communities reacted favorably, as was reflected by Indonesian web sites and humanitarian groups inside the country and in the rest of the Muslim world. This genuine positive reaction took place in the midst of a silence by the jihadi propagandists. U.S. action was implemented quickly and overtly and the devastation was too extreme for the jihadists to immediately respond. Also, a quick negative reaction on the part of the jihadis would likely have backfired. But as soon as the news receded, and with the return of the militant activists to the devastated zones, anti-American propaganda resurfaced. This discrediting process was pushed from global media down to local jihadi activists.

## **4. Have U.S. strategic communications been successful in countering the jihadi narrative?**

Combining analysis and observation over the past eight years of the U.S. strategic communications effort to maximize the effects of U.S. aid in the countries and regions where terror forces and radical networks are operating, I have come to the conclusion that these efforts have failed. While the organization, dissemination and technical components of the network of operation have scored several successes, the specific efforts in preparing for aid initiatives and the effort to respond to propaganda have not been fruitful. The combined hostile networks discussed so far in this testimony were able to comprehensively criticize U.S. humanitarian campaigns. U.S. efforts to sway hearts and minds of societies in these regions did not result in a significant change in attitudes; not because of the shortcomings in the material process but in the failure in American strategic communications and the efficacy of the oppositions' smear campaigns.

Following, are glimpses of the problem:

### I. *The Cultural Advising Body*

A review must be conducted of the so-called “Cultural Advising” entities employed by, or contracted by the U.S. government. The research and advice on responding to jihadists that is given to the U.S. government is, per my findings, compromised. In its bulk, the “cultural advising” body within the various layers of the U.S. government does not believe that the U.S. should undertake efforts to counter jihadi propaganda ideologically. On the contrary, the conclusion often reached by most of the entities or advisors we contract is to disengage from the battle of ideas and leave the societies we are aiding to handle the radicals by themselves.

## II. *U.S.-Funded Media*

A review of the narrative and argumentation used by most U.S.-funded media also shows a lack of connection to the societies we are seeking to persuade. The operations of foreign aid not only need branding, but also a massive program of support through media and educational networks. Most U.S.-funded media refrains from strategically supporting the moderate, democracy-seeking entities, dissidents and liberal movements within the areas where U.S. aid is disseminated. If support for these potential partners or their views were emphasized, they would be more likely to defend and promote a partnership with the United States. I have often witnessed the arguments of propagandists being played on American-funded media, while dynamic and strong pro-democracy opinions were not aired.

## **5. Branding Options**

This leads us to consider options for branding of U.S. foreign aid and humanitarian assistance. In an environment where there will likely be confrontation with radical forces that are employing sophisticated propaganda campaigns, the options are different from providing humanitarian assistance while operating in stable political conditions. One overarching parameter to consider when deciding which option to select is that there are organized global forces which oppose U.S. efforts and work against U.S. national security. Hence, the affected populations’ reaction to U.S. aid policies is not merely a natural social reaction, but in fact an organized, stimulated and coordinated effort orchestrated by our opposition.

Hence, when we consider an option we need to keep in mind that the reactions of the beneficiary populations are profoundly impacted, and even shepherded by our foes. Dramatically, these interactions are taking place in a context where the radicals are organized and striking back and our strategic communications operations are inefficient, if not compromised.

Therefore, the main goal of the jihadists is to convince the United States government of the following:

- a. Not to extend foreign aid.
- b. If foreign aid is extended, then it should not be flagged.
- c. If the aid is flagged, then it should not be accompanied with aggressive strategic communications promoting U.S. values and interests.

Consequently, what are the options the United States has for branding its foreign aid?

## **I. Not Branding**

If the U.S. does not brand its foreign assistance the adversaries would seize the ground, control the cultural messaging, and eventually control parts of the distribution. If American aid is sent via other agencies, our adversaries will determine the values under which the distribution will take place. The U.S. will lose its ability to use foreign aid in its global strategy to encourage moral, psychological, social and political resistance against terrorism. The radical networks will be able to fully control the political message that accompanies the unlabeled aid.

## **II. Blind Branding**

If the U.S. were to brand its product by putting a flag on aid packages, but do so without accompanying that aid with a strategic marketing program, that would become a “blind branding,” campaign, which would ultimately result in failure to reach the U.S. government’s strategic goals in conflict areas.

## **III. Strategic Branding**

A comprehensive branding campaign must be designed to integrate all resources at the disposal of the U.S. government; from diplomacy, strategic communications, media, and a close alliance with NGOs on the ground. The core objective of strategic branding is to transform the perception of American efforts into “needed, wanted and sought” resources.

### **Recommendations:**

I would strongly recommend the option of “Strategic Branding.” This option would require the following steps:

- a. A thorough review of the global and strategic communications resources available to the United States. This requires the formation of a special committee to present findings regarding the strategies of jihadis, and a presentation of the precise tools and methods needed to counter them.
- b. A review of the U.S.-funded media, in terms of the ability of various outlets to deliver a strong, successful and strategic message to audiences in the countries benefitted by U.S. assistance.
- c. A review of U.S. strategic communications, ranging from civilian to military agencies and institutions, to determine new strategies in engagement with the appropriate NGOs and civil society segments which will engage in partnership with the United States.

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