

Changing Tough Hearts and Minds

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An experiment in the field

by Charles Strohmer

Is rational dialogue with a terrorist possible? More importantly, could the mindset of a terrorist be defused? While researching the new book I'm writing, I concluded, especially after reading Paul Berman's *Terror and Liberalism* and Barry Cooper's *New Political Religions*, that terrorists are adamantly opposed to anything other than what reinforces their own totalitarian ideologies. But I may be having my own mind changed about this, at least about some tough hearts and minds.

While rummaging through stacks of research papers piled up around my office, I discovered James Brandon's article "Koranic duels ease terror," which tells the amazing story of Judge Hamoud al-Hitar, who began a dangerous experiment when he and four other Islamic scholars challenged five captured al Qaeda operatives in Yemen: "If you can convince us that your ideas are justified by the Koran, then we will join you in your struggle. But if we succeed in convincing you of our ideas, then you must agree to renounce violence." Here was a different approach, I thought, one that seemed to have some wisdom to it. And the prisoners agreed to participate.

Two years later, those five prisoners, and 359 others who have gone through these "theological dialogues," have so renounced violence that they have been released from prison. An unconventional strategy, certainly. But according to one European diplomat, it may be helping to change Yemen from "being a potential enemy to becoming an indispensable ally in the war on terror." he shows them numerous passages commanding Muslims not to attack civilians

Hitar's system is simple, if risky. Instead of lecturing or threatening the operatives, he listens to them and tries to win their trust. That part of the process itself takes weeks. He begins by inviting militants to use the Qur'an to justify attacks on innocent civilians, and when they cannot, Brandon writes "he shows them numerous passages commanding Muslims not to attack civilians, to respect other religions, and fight only in self-defense." Only after winning the militants' trust does Hitar begin to help them correct their beliefs.

I realize that this leaves unanswered a host of important questions, but in the meantime, evidently, some tough hearts and minds are being changed. Hitar has discovered a way to fight terrorism other than with cruise missiles and Abrams tanks. And the judge's model ? he relates to them via their common humanity, noting that most militants are ordinary men who got led astray ? is now being called on by anti-terrorism experts at New Scotland Yard, and US diplomats in Iraq have begun turning to Hitar for help.

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