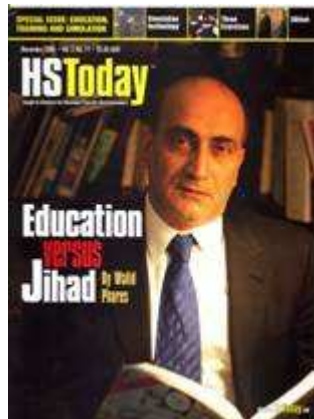


# EDUCATION VERSUS JIHAD

By Walid Phares

*Knowledge provides strategic depth for America and the West against the jihadist onslaught, argues the author, and there are specific steps we must take to protect the homeland.*

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## **EDUCATION VERSUS JIHAD**

In the few hours following the terrorist attacks on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, media in the United States began looking for answers. The very first series of questions asked by all was indicative of the state of mind of most Americans: “Why do they hate us?” Five years later, as we analyze the conflict from a homeland security and war on terrorism perspective, and probably years from now, when historians have had enough time to contemplate it, the bigger question regarding the 9/11 attacks will be: “Why didn’t Americans know?” Indeed, as I argued in my book *Future Jihad: Terrorist Strategies against America and the West*, one of the most dramatic failures of US strategic defense against Al Qaeda on Sept. 11 and against the jihadist war against America during the 1990s was that neither the government nor the public knew they were at war and that a terrorist declaration of war had been in effect against America for years.

The central conclusion of the 9/11 Commission’s examination of the failure was that “Americans had a failure of imagination”—meaning that even if the US was better equipped technologically and more alert on intelligence levels, something was missing in the US resistance to terrorism. The commission was unable to comprehend why analysts, decision makers and leaders—even as information about fragments of threats poured in— didn’t conclude that there was an Al Qaeda offensive and, more dangerously, that a global jihadist war had been mobilizing forces around the world and within the West against democracies, in general, and America, in particular. One of the commissioners, during the summer 2004 hearings, asked repeatedly: “Why didn’t the US government acknowledge that a war was declared in 1996 and in 1998 against America?”

Many US leaders and commentators after him added: Why hadn’t we declared war back at them, before the attacks took place, if, indeed, the jihadists have been on the offensive for a decade?

These and other questions continue to haunt US counterterrorism strategists, legislators, security planners, academic researchers and, obviously, citizens at large. The weight of this inquiry is increasing, as the public knows that 9/11 wasn’t a single event in America’s history but, unfortunately and dramatically, a single benchmark in a series of past and future attacks and offensives against US interests worldwide and, more importantly, the national security of the homeland.

The eyes and ears of the American public and international public opinion have been absorbing the escalation of violence in acts and rhetoric by the various jihadist groups worldwide— from Iraq to Afghanistan, from Madrid to London— over the past five years since the Manhattan massacre. The speeches by Osama Bin Laden, Ayman Zawahiri and, lately, their American product, Adam Gadahn, as well as the fiery declarations by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinijad, if

anything have showed that radical Islamists, regimes and organizations are massing resources to further attack not only the US presence overseas but, more worrisomely, America's homeland.

Thus, with all this pressure on the country's national security and its economic and demographic future, answering the basic questions since 9/11 becomes crucial. More and more of these fundamental questions are still lingering over matters related to homeland security, foreign policy, counterterrorism and justice: After "why do they hate us?" another question has been raised in the debate: "Who are they?"

Indeed, as we watch Al Qaeda undergoing a metamorphosis from a regime-protected network in Afghanistan to a landless web of branches around the world, the US and Europe are increasingly encountering a second-generation Al Qaeda and, even beyond it, what governments are now identifying as "homegrown" jihadists.

This troubling development of the enemy of 2001 into a hybrid of new shades of terrorists in 2006 is not really due to the changing nature of the threat but to the initial misunderstanding of its nature by Americans and democracies in general. For it is clear to connoisseurs of jihadism that mutation is one of its essential characteristics. It should also be understood that, given its ideology and history, jihadism, far from being a mere emotional reaction to American or other foreign policies, "is" by itself a movement with goals, strategies and changing tactics.

Unfortunately, most Americans weren't enabled to absorb the basics of their rising enemy so that they could prepare, mobilize and win. But beyond the 911 Commission's conclusion of a "failure in imagination," I have argued, and continue to argue that the initial and structural failure of understanding is in western and, specifically, American education.

Here is why:

### **CULTURAL INABILITY**

If you look at all incidents that involved intercepting, interpreting and learning about terrorism directed against America— specifically, the jihadist type— throughout the decade that preceded 911, you'll realize that, in most cases, both overseas and domestically a black hole dominated the decision making process regarding both preemption of jihadism and consequences of failing to do so.

In 1993, the US government treated the Twin Towers attacks as "a police operation" with criminal ramifications, not as an operation by a worldwide jihadist movement. This gave the enemy eight years to prepare future attacks. In 1996, the takeover of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the war fatwa issued by Bin Laden were treated as matters of foreign policy.

In 1998, Al Qaeda's second declaration of war and the subsequent attacks against the embassies in Africa were treated as terror strikes, but not as a war of ideas followed by a war of terror. After the failed attempt to attack airliners over the Pacific (the "Bojinka" plot) and the millennium conspiracies, came the USS Cole attack. During these years of jihadist offensives, the government was advised by experts and academics who dismissed jihadism as a threat and recommended the opposite of a US War on Terror—i.e., a demobilization of the forces facing this specific ideology.

But more dismaying was the fact that the public was not informed of the threats against the homeland, precisely because the classrooms, the backbone of the nation's future, were misinformed and the talents graduating year after year were deprived of the right to learn about the threat and, therefore, to serve their government and nation proportionally to the menace.

American graduates of Middle East studies, history and security studies weren't equipped with the right knowledge. Hence, their final professional destinations suffered from this miseducation. If one reviews the curriculum in place between 1980 (when Ayatollah Khomeini came to power in Iran) and 2001 (when Bin Laden attacked America), one can see an inexplicable and immense hole in teaching students about the roots, development, rise, logic, strategies, tactics, methodologies and literature of the movements that targeted the US during those two decades. It was an educational breach of historical dimension. Why did it happen?

### **THE WAR ON US EDUCATION: 1980s-1 990s**

One of the major results of the 1973 oil crisis was the rise of a determination by many oil producing regimes that the West, in general, and the United States, in particular, "understand" the greater Middle East, the Arab and the Muslim world and, accordingly, design its policies toward those regimes and ideologies on the basis of this "understanding."

As a result, millions of dollars were invested in American and European educational institutions as a way to "foster" this understanding. But instead of fostering an objective understanding or spreading impartial knowledge, the growing influence of Wahabism, an extreme form of Islam, and other such ideologies on the nation's campuses played a dangerous role: Because of the ideological nature of the donors, the financed programs followed the guidelines of the donor regimes and organizations, which obviously narrowed research and teaching to issues remote from the major historical crisis in the region, other than the modern Arab-Israeli conflict. It removed all serious attention to the rise of Islamism, jihadism and even Baathism, as well as the deep ethnic and religious conflicts and the mass abuse of human rights in that part of the world.

A careful review of curricula and research projects established within the US educational system, both public and private, since the 1980s stunningly reveals that American classrooms were deprived of knowledge on social, historical, ethnic and ideological movements rising to challenge the United States. Moreover, as I taught comparative studies for over a decade and lectured on many campuses in the 1990s, I came to realize that defense, strategic and security studies were heavily influenced by “regional” studies when it came to identifying the backgrounds of international terrorist movements emerging from the greater Middle East and penetrating western societies. History and Middle Eastern studies had been corrupted by Wahabi and other funding with an impact on political science, international relations and, ultimately, defense and security studies across the land.

A thorough review of the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association, the Middle East Studies Association of America, the International Studies Association, the Middle East Institute and other professional education associations, of the hundreds of books, publications, articles, talks and research grants distributed by Ivy League universities and other colleges lead to only one conclusion: The gap is immense. There are no traces of the roots of jihadism and its long-term objectives against democracies and the United States. Instead, prominent scholars produced an enormous amount of literature precisely deflecting scholars and students away from the most serious issues related to American defense and security after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The “hole” was so vast and the “deflection” (not to use the term “deception”) so wide that a systemic problem strode the field producing waves of effects into the professional worlds of the media and policy. An academic lobotomy led to an incapacitation of the public learning process about the national security threat and created a cultural crisis in perception. In short, if one isn’t taught about the political thinking of the enemy and his ideological objectives in the classroom, where else would one catch up?

### **MOLLIFICATION OF NATIONAL PERCEPTION**

With this systemic crisis inside America’s educational system expanding during the 1990s, a “mollification” of the national perception of the threat began. Deprived of the basic data and information about the terrorist threat, citizens were at the mercy of the elites’ debates. The latter, during the years leading to 9/11, were increasingly apologetic toward America’s most lethal enemies: Salafist and Khomeinist jihadists.

Despite the series of attacks, speeches and visible moves of radical jihadists worldwide, US national perception was blurred by the academic and educational deflection. Jihadism, for example, was described by leading “specialists,” many of whom have advised media and government for years, as a “theological experiment and spiritual phenomenon.”

Those who spread the doctrine of jihadism in America during the 1990s had no counter check from the public or government, while even a minimal manifestation of Nazism, anti-Semitism or domestic violent racism was quickly countered. Clearly, Americans never lacked for imagination, but they were deprived of the necessary information.

### **THE WAR OF IDEAS AND DERAILMENT OF NATIONAL ANALYSIS**

When historians analyze the War on Terror in the near future, they will most likely look back at the war of ideas preceding 9/11 and understand the role academia played as a central battlefield leading to the weakening and defeat of the country, before it rose back in resistance. For if the fields of foreign policy, regional studies and international relations teaching—the most sensitive feeders for security and defense decision-making—were obsolete in identifying the “enemy,” all that is left to national security is the last shield, which is the hope that intelligence and counterterrorism sensors can catch the raiders at the doors or beyond the gates. And that’s what didn’t occur in 1993, 1998 and 2001. The terror offensive against America was preceded by a War of Ideas, blurring the eyes of the nation.

If intellectual blurring starts in classrooms, it soon reaches the newsrooms and, eventually, the intelligence rooms and war rooms. If young Americans are mistaught the ideology, political culture and intentions of the enemy while at school and in college, once graduated, they will carry this misperception with them as they find jobs and are recruited in all the layers of national analysis. Students enter the media, legislative research, security, intelligence, foreign policy, justice, think tanks and other sectors crucial for national decision making at the bottom levels and rise up to the ultimate positions.

By failing students in the classrooms, the educational system caused a national analysis failure: Media failed to report terrorism as it should have, impacting government’s various levels of policymaking; intelligence analysis, deprived of cultural understanding, saw the data but couldn’t put the bigger picture together; courts couldn’t process the concepts of terrorism beyond criminality; and, ultimately, both the legislative and executive branches were denied sound advice on the war already in progress against the country.

In conclusion, the failure in education led to a derailment of national analysis.

### **REACTION TO 911: HOMELAND SECURITY**

The public and the political leadership had to react to 9111 by sheer instinct, both overseas and domestically, rather than rely on knowledgeable analysis. The War on Terror’s first counteroffensive took down the Taliban regime from Afghanistan. The second counteroffensive brought down Saddam Hussein, but not without

generating a severe and continuing debate on the Iraq war at home and internationally.

Here again, the past systemic educational crisis of the 1980s and 1990s deprived the public and even politicians from solid ground on which to engage in an educated discussion on Iraq, Al Qaeda, Syria, Iran, Hezbollah and beyond. Even though Americans have deep instincts regarding the “intentions” of the enemy, they surely rely on the expert elite to provide the objective and raw education and information about the foe—in this case, the totalitarian forces and the jihadists, in particular. That is the first current problem.

The second problem has to do with internal national security. Also by sheer instinct, America rushed to establish its Department of Homeland Security, a vital organ in the defense of the nation: The 19 perpetrators of 9/11, but also the dirty bomb maker; the Virginia paint ball gang; the American fighters with Al Qaeda and the various US-born jihadists have all penetrated American national defense or been raised and trained inside the homeland.

As detailed in Future Jihad, in one of the most extreme scenarios—parts of which are now coming to fruition—future jihads will launch as a result of the growth of the jihadist ideology inside the United States and a subsequent recruitment to action. Clearly, more jihadist terror is to be expected—not less—if only because the doctrinal factory is still working, with greater technological resources at its command.

Hence, the essence of homeland security resides in its ability to mobilize the public and its talents and isolate the wouldbe terrorists before they become actual terrorists and strike.

## **EDUCATION AND US HOMELAND SECURITY**

As a result of the situation I have described, it is crucial for US homeland security to operate with a full understanding of the ideology and strategies of the terrorists, particularly those publicly threatening this nation and other democracies—the jihadist terrorists. But in order to win the War on Terror within the national territory, homeland security must be able to count on the public and its resources and talents. To make the point again: The real field of resistance to terror is in the wider national and local communities.

Isolation of the menace of terrorism starts within society. A more enlightened classroom will provide a more equipped society. Also, a more readied public will better understand and assist the ethnic communities struggling against terrorism. Instead of leaving extremists to take leadership of vulnerable communities, a better-educated liberal and anti-terrorist youth can help mobilize against it. On a national scale, Americans should be educated to identify the ideology instead of relying on negative ethnic stereotypes.

As a result of that intellectual empowerment, society could be the first line of defense against infiltration, penetration and potential urban warfare by the terrorists.

### **COUNTERING JIHADISM IN COURTS**

The legal system is perhaps the most sensitive segment of the national resistance to jihadism. From the top of the pyramid to its bottom, tribunals, judges, defense lawyers, prosecutors and, more importantly, juries are critical to establishing a fair but educated processing of the terror cases as they arise.

Experienced in bringing expertise to courts in terrorism cases, I was able to pin down the weaknesses during the processing of jihadist-related material. Regardless of the procedural mishaps of the prosecution or the out-of-court maneuvers of defense lawyers, the fact is that lack of education has tripped up at least four of the players: the prosecution, the defense, the judges and—especially—the juries.

How can the latter, formed out of ordinary citizens, understand the content of jihadist material if they weren't exposed to it while in school? How can citizens fathom the jihadist tactics such as taqiya (simulation of identity and behavior) if they were not exposed to it before? In fact, how can the juries reflect on basic concepts such as jihad against the infidels and genocidal attitudes? And how can they distinguish between committed radicals and law-breaking individuals uninterested in ideologies? Last but not least, as to the debate on monitoring terrorists within the country and civil liberties, educated and specialized judges are the real answer to the problem. But that basic education, so crucial to the judge's thinking process, must start years earlier.

### **A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR: COUNTERTERRORISM EDUCATION**

I strongly recommend rapid-paced reform of a specific segment of national education in the United States, with comparable application in other democracies around the world, in order to prepare society and national governments for better intellectual resistance to terrorism. These recommendations constitute a strategic plan for a national counterterrorism education:

1. Embrace the right of people to have access to a comprehensive education about the threat that has been and is facing the nation. That right is inalienable and universal. All citizens, not only those volunteering for the front lines, have the right to receive this education by the appropriate means and the most qualified parties.
2. Prepare the younger segment of the population for the global threat of terrorism as early as the cognitive process allows, with the help of qualified

psychologists. A carefully structured program in homeland security has to be established to gradually prepare the students for national shocks, dramatic development and identification of threats. On the identity of the threat, middle and high school social studies classrooms should be introduced to the history and evolution of the enemy's ideas. The objective is to enable teachers to answer students' questions arising from the media and social environment.

3. Initiate the most dramatic reform at the level of colleges and universities so that courses on the War on Terror and homeland security are made available and integrated into concentrations, certificate and degree programs in these two fields.

4. Explain the roots of terrorism through courses in disciplines and fields crucial to the learning process regarding the War on Terror and homeland security, particularly courses in history, political science, international relations, comparative studies and all relevant cross-disciplinary fields. The explanations must include different perspectives, so that students are better prepared for a global understanding of the threat.

5. Significantly reform the field of Middle East studies, starting with a program protected from militant and ideological funding and relying on a balanced teaching of the region, its various problems, crises, identities, trends and ideologies. A sub-research field in jihadism studies must be established to serve as a focus for the study and analysis of the various movements related to jihadist terror doctrines.

6. Equip public libraries and institutions with adequate learning material focusing on the history and evolution of the terrorist threat, but also on the collective emergency efforts expected from the public to prevent or respond to terror attacks.

7. Initiate another series of measures to address one of the most severe problems in the United States: the spread of "terror apologist culture" through the publicly owned or dedicated media. Congress must rapidly request a comprehensive reform of the public media as a prelude to reforming public education. The Public Broadcasting Service, C-Span and National Public Radio must undergo a significant change in content and focus to provide balanced material regarding the terror threat. This reform is owed to the public as part of its right to reliable information related to the crucial issues of security and survival.

8. Direct federal grants related to national security and foreign affairs toward providing support to educational projects, non-governmental organizations, private think tanks, publications and other efforts aimed at educating and informing the public on these issues.

9. Broadcast and publish for societies worldwide information about democracy and pluralism to combat terrorist ideologies. Congressionally funded Al Hurra TV

and Radio Sawa should also be able to air special educational programs regarding these topics.

It is a fact that America's homeland security is highly dependent on the US educational system. Terrorists use knowledge to harm this nation and other democracies in the name of their ideology. And knowledge is what Americans and other civil societies need to resist terrorism and reach a secure and peaceful end to this ongoing conflict.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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