They got it right: America is their enemy

The REGION

• By BARRY RUBIN

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American values and culture. While the mere fact that a highly secular, largely hedonistic and generally free lifestyle is practiced in the United States raises the Islamists' ire, there is far more involved here.

The United States is the world's leading exporter of culture, regarding everything from T-shirts to films and democratic ideas. As such, it inevitably subverts traditional Islamic society and poses as a rival alternative to the kind of system the Islamists want to impose. There is simply no way around this conflict. It is not an imagined one and remains in effect no matter what political policy a US government follows.

• America as an example to their own society. If the United States succeeds with a "fantastic" standoff, how can Islamists persuade their people that Allah is on their side? America must be seen as a fall, either through propaganda or by its actual collapse, at least in terms of the Middle East. Otherwise, the United States will remain an attractive model for many, prompting everything from inspiration to competition.

Obviously a distinction can be drawn between, on one hand, winning over the radicals and their supporters, and winning over ordinary Arabs. The problem is that most of the latter group gets its worldview, news and spin from radical sources, be they Islamists, militant Arab nationalism or traditional clerics.

In other words, no matter what the United States does it will not be interpreted — especially by the masses — based on the US government's statements or intentions but through the filter of a very different culture and worldview that has a good deal of hostility in it and is prone to xenophobia and conspiracy theories.

By the same token, to be hated the United States doesn't have to do anything wrong. It just has to be itself and pursue its own legitimate interests. This is a point that many Americans — including "experts" and leaders — seem to have great difficulty in grasping. What you say is not what someone else hears; what you do is not what someone else sees.

Finally, the radicals — which include a large portion of governments, political movements, teachers, clerics and journalists — will deliberately do everything they can to discredit the United States and foment popular hatred against it. That includes using anything they can, be it a video, the slaying of Osama bin-Laden, accusations of atrocities, and so on, whether the specific accusations are true or false, consciously misinterpreted or misunderstood on ideological grounds.

They will never run out of reasons to hate America or its policy; for their efforts to convince others to go so. One conclusion that can be drawn from this assessment is that the traditional arsenal of diplomacy — credibility, deterrence, power — is what's important, not popularity. The same principle applies to allies, of course, who must feel that their friend or patron is strong and reliable.

Such an approach has not been the one pursued during the past four years. As for the next four years, the vote count is not in yet.

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