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**THE STRATEGIC CITIZEN**

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## **THE STRATEGIC CITIZEN**

### **Abstract:**

*The private behavior or document of a citizen displayed on the Internet can compromise the strategy and diplomacy of his country in a growing and irreversible way. Particularly regarding the relations between the Western and the Muslim world, who is very sensitive to the contents of religious nature.*

### **Keywords:**

*Strategy, religion, Arab uprisings, Ambassador Stevens, US embassies*

## THE NEW DIMENSION OF THE UNMINDFUL STRATEGIST

The term “strategic corporal” is well known at least among the militia professionals. This surprising and exact term clearly defines the evolution caused by the impact that a certain individual of the Armed Forces, based on his actions, may have during a crisis or a conflict, up to the point of leading to more serious consequences than the expected, concerning its military use or its position in the wide gear of the campaign.

Not long ago, the ability to cause effects with far-reaching strategic consequences was limited to the actors in that decision-making level like Heads of State, Prime Ministers, members of the Government, and, on the last level, senior military commanders responsible for operations campaigns and theatres in conflict situations.

However, like in journalism, where any person armed with a phone with a digital camera and an Internet connection becomes an unexpected reporter and supplies the television news with first-hand information and images, the former circle of decision-makers with strategic ability is unwillingly, but inexorably pushed with what we would commonly call “spontaneous”. The impact that nowadays goes with the media and its immediate diffusion to every corner of the globe –we should seriously think about including the mobile smart devices next to the physiological needs on the bottom level of Maslow’s Pyramid- has initially allowed and currently promotes a great deal of this effect.

There are multiple examples, but we only have to focus on some events of the last year in Afghanistan to become clearly aware of this phenomenon. On the last 22 February, some American soldiers burned several copies of the Koran that were apparently used by prisoners in the military base of Bagram to communicate with each other. It’s highly possible that the soldiers, wanting to ensure security, destroyed this way the contact between the detainees incommunicado. The knowledge of this fact caused in Afghanistan and in many other places with a majority of Muslim population a surge in violence that included suicide attacks in this country and ended with the death of 6 Americans. Nevertheless, the worst consequence was the increase of difficulties in the relations between the US Administration and the Government in Kabul, as well as a serious deterioration of the image of the foreign military forces in front of the Afghan population.

Some events similar to an extent regarding their significance, like the killing of three civilians by US soldiers led by Sergeant Gibbs in Kandahar or the video in which some Marines sullied the corpses of Afghan insurgents, have inevitably caused waves of protests and have put the US Administration in serious predicaments. But possibly the occurrence that embodies best the character of the “strategic corporal”, this time with its full implication, was the serious incident caused by a US sergeant who killed 17 civilian, some of them children, in Belandi

village. The killing took place during the negotiating process of the US-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement to ensure the residual American presence in the country after 2014 and nearly made impossible those negotiations, impeding the main foundation on which the US strategy in the area post 2014 is based. Moreover, it nearly ended the counterinsurgency night-time raids carried out solely by the US troops.

Although eventually after weeks of great strain between both governments, the agreement was signed. Without doubt the examples mentioned illustrate enough the current ability that individual members of the FAS, usually unintentionally, have acquired to influence the crisis development or even campaigns beyond their logic due to its military rank or the role played, forcing the real strategic actors to react before this unfortunate circumstances to try to control the situation or at least minimize the damages.

### **THE STRATEGIC CITIZEN**

In addition to the well-known phenomenon described above, it has recently appeared a similar figure regarding the potential effects caused even though it is from outside the governmental institutions. It is the common citizen who driven up by different motivations, from political to religious and including its professional fulfillment, propagates insulting contents, offenses towards certain social groups or reveal classified information of their governments or armies' activities. This is done through the media, which is always behind these behaviors or actions, or through a direct implication in the social networks or other web-based applications. Even though these actions are exclusively its responsibility, regardless of their penal classification, they usually irradiate its authorship and responsibility to their fellow citizens and the Government of their country, when it's not the culture to which they belong as it normally happens concerning offenses to the Muslim religion.

Therefore, what the control of information is now facing regarding the globalization of communication and the dissemination of ideas is progressing. It's a fact we must accept and we must prepare ourselves to mitigate its effects, to the extent possible, because avoiding it is not impossible, but troublesome, since it may invade the fundamental rights of the individual. However the truth is that this ability is starting to sometimes have serious consequences, which usually are disproportionate to the content of the message disseminated, compelling countries to forced actions that are opposed to their interests, even when they are not indirectly causing the death of people.

## RECENT EXAMPLES

Within the category described above, there's been recurring events related to publications with a humorous side concerning figures and symbols of many religions or the massive publication of documents in WikiLeaks. But the most worrying cases are the ones that affect the Muslim community.

To the past cases related to the publication of cartoons featuring the Prophet Muhammad, which in the past years originated waves of violence in many areas predominantly Muslim, we must also add the events that took place last September. Coinciding with the anniversary of the attacks on the 11th September, the streaming in YouTube of an amateur video with anti-Islamic content produced by people apparently linked to the most radical factions of the North-American extreme right caused many protests against North-Americans in most Muslim countries.

The same day and next week took place serious events in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Pakistan, Sudan, the Lebanon, Iraq, Qatar, etc. They normally consisted in assault attempts to the American embassies and even the ones of other Western countries such as Germany, or the United Kingdom, with dozens of deaths. Nevertheless, the assault to the US consulate in Benghazi, with the killing of the Ambassador Stevens and three other officers of the American Administration is to date the most serious episode of the anti-Western demonstrations and protests of the Muslim world, regardless of the specific cause in each case, past or future.

And there are several reasons. First of all, the apparently irreconcilable vision of the individual and of the community that both the Western and the Muslim world have. The reaction of the *Ummah* as a whole against the non-existent or the equivalent of the Western community due to the supposed offences and crimes committed by one or several individuals against their own religion are perplexing in the West.

Conducting actions against the interests of the Western countries theoretically in the name of religion –without seeking to compare these actions, some of them violent, with the publication of a caricature or video- can only be punished directly on the perpetrators and by no means on all religious practitioners; therefore, the anti-Muslim activities of certain individuals can only be its own responsibility, regardless of the importance, which will be defined by competent justice systems.

Obviously communizing responsibility towards one direction regardless of its individualization in the opposite direction it's nothing more than the implementation of a double standard which the firm scale of values established by the western culture cannot

accept. Fortunately the countries' governments where these problems occurred have understood this very well and the embassies and western interests have been duly protected by security forces. Thus we can conclude that it's not a consequence of a monolithic view, but of an inevitable presence of extreme individuals and groups.

Secondly, the knowledge of Al-Qaida's responsibility in the attack to the US consulate in Libya increases the sense of insecurity, because in spite of being a preconceived and planned attack, it found a way and an ideal moment masked in the extremists' protests about the video issue.

In consequence, the recurrent episodes of anger in the most extreme factions of the Muslim population are the ideal breeding ground for the realization of programmed actions, necessary leading to the possibility of causing similar occurrences as a facilitator tactic for the attacks.

The anonymity behind which there are many information items in the net allows this possibility. This way, in theory, the dissemination of the rumor about a Buddhist uploading anti-Muslim messages in his Facebook was enough to raid and burn some Buddhist temples in Bangladesh on the 29th September. However, police investigations have found "*crude oil and munitions ready for the burning of temples*"<sup>1</sup>. This is an evidence about how was treated a preconceived action and shows that the public opinion of at least part of the Muslim population can be manipulated by its feelings and beliefs and can be lead to cooperate in actions that answer political interests of others.

And lastly, it is also a source of concern or a cause for reflection on the apparent contradiction between the explicit western support of the processes of the Arab protests and the effect that this has on their interests. Precisely, the highest level of support to the riots and the fall of the dictatorial regimes to date has been in Libya, where a military intervention was determinant in the outcome of the civil war and the fall of Gadaffi. In all this process it was very important the role of the Ambassador Stevens, who became one of the main defenders of the new direction adopted by the country.

However, these supports and economic and political efforts of an entire country, or a group of countries, made in order to help strengthen the democratizing processes in Muslim countries don't seem not only insufficiently recognized, but they may even collapse in front of cartoons or amateur videos of private and individual nature. They are clearly very disproportionate weights in the balance and it doesn't mean that the freedom of speech, as

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<sup>1</sup> Muhiuddin Khan Alamgir, Minister of Interior Affairs of Bangladesh, in the ABC, on the 30th September 2012

one of the main foundations of the western culture and societies, shouldn't be used with responsibility and respect.

## CONCLUSIONS

The huge possibilities of communication in the hands of nearly every individual are once again disrupting the paradigms. Like the individual actions of FAS members or of the Security Bodies and Forces can reach a strategic dimension due to the effects of its action, somehow recorded and registered and then uploaded and replicated by social networks and mainstream media; recently adding to this ability, wanted or unwanted, there are all citizens, that seriously undermine the firm structures of strategic approach and the diplomacy of their countries with a vulgar cartoon or a short home-made video. This trend is irreversible, because the individual freedom of speech, within the law, is not only necessary, but inalienable.

This fact is showing itself critically mainly in the relations between the Western and Muslim world, especially sensitive to these manifestations, which apart from being of dubious taste, and in some cases doubtful legality, they are the product of certain individuals foreign to the institutions and administrations. But the concepts of individual freedom and membership are different to both cultures and sometimes they are also nearly incompatible.

Violent actions in response to cartoons, videos or any other display are carried out by extreme minorities, and normally the authorities respond adequately; therefore, it's necessary for the Muslim society to value positively the collective efforts that are carrying out Western countries to contribute establishing their rising democracies, against the past dictatorial and authoritarian regimes, and also to position in their right place the value of these actions against other isolated and generally unfortunate of certain individuals. Again, it's the mountain against the grain of sand.

Nevertheless, western citizens also need to reflect about the consequences in this area that can have their actions, and use their freedom of speech with responsibility.

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