

When Barbarism Is Propaganda

The civilized world is confronting a movement that defines “victory” as the slaughter of unarmed cartoonists at work at their desks.

Even worse, that movement knows that its barbarism—the very conduct that revolts us—is perhaps the jihadis’ most effective recruiting tool. Jihadi snuff films are rampant in the Middle East, featuring up-close photos and videos of beheadings, videos of car bombings and suicide bombings set to music, and graphic videos of dead bodies—with the camera panning slowly over the corpses. These videos are passed around on cell phones, reproduced on CDs, uploaded to the Internet, and spread as far and wide as possible.

Why? Because the enemy knows that while these videos certainly revolt many Muslims, they inspire others, and they intimidate entire nations. I fear that Americans—that Westerners in general—still don’t understand the enemy we face. And even worse, we still don’t understand the cultural challenge of confronting a movement that inspires millions with the exact kind of images and messaging that repulse decent people everywhere.

But even as their “successful” acts of barbarism inspire their public, defeat deflates. It’s astonishing to track Osama bin Laden’s public approval ratings in Muslim countries, both to see its heights and to see how precipitously approval fell as al-Qaeda was hunted into near extinction. He did not become a heroic martyr but instead a scorned fugitive. But the sobering reality is that bin Laden, even at his lowest ebb, was still commanding the admiration of 34 percent of Palestinians, 26 percent of Indonesians, and 22 percent of Egyptians. Our fight against jihad has always been a fight against extremists, but their number has never been “few,” and those numbers grow when they kill innocents. That’s the nature of our challenge.

That's the nature of our enemy.