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Memo to the General: Free Speech Doesn't Kill People, Jihadists Kill People

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Citizen control of the military is one of the most important foundations of political freedom. Rather than an instrument of a powerful autocrat or king, the army in a republic serves the collective interests, security, and policies of the state as determined by the citizens through the constitutional processes of deliberation and election. Generals are limited to one task: managing conflict so that those political aims are achieved. Thus they should keep quiet about politics, which frequently requires knowledge that professional soldiers do not necessarily possess.

This circumscribed role for generals has a long tradition, one famously reinforced by President Truman when he fired General Douglas MacArthur in 1951 for public comments that went beyond that role. More recently, General Stanley McChrystal was fired in 2010 for remarks some of his staff made that were critical of political figures. Yet McChrystal's replacement, General David Petraeus, in his public comments frequently strays into areas beyond his competence, recycling received wisdom and unexamined dogma detrimental to our winning the war of morale we are fighting against the jihadists.

For example, in March 2010, General Petraeus told the Senate Armed Services committee that the Arab-Israeli conflict "foments anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel," and that "Arab anger over the Palestinian question" hampers U.S. military effectiveness and "weakens the legitimacy of moderate regimes in the Arab world," allowing jihadists organizations to "exploit that anger to mobilize support." How does the General know this? Certainly not from the facts of history, but from decades of Arab propaganda that has successfully deflected the blame for the Muslim Middle East's manifest dysfunctions and failures onto the West and tiny Israel.

The falsity of this dogma was revealed recently by the uprisings throughout the Middle East, in which the protesters were silent about the Palestinian issue, consistent with the Arab indifference to the reality, as opposed to the propaganda value, of Palestine evident for the last half century. After all, the Arab nations didn't invade Israel in 1948 to create a Palestinian state, but rather to carve up the rest of British Mandatory Palestine, as the secretary-general of the Arab League, Abdel Rahman Azzam, confessed at the time: "Abdullah [ruler of Transjordan] was to swallow up the central hill regions of Palestine . . . The Egyptians would get the Negev. The Galilee would go to Syria, except that the coastal part as far as Acre would be added to the Lebanon." The Arabs don't hate Israel because there isn't a Palestinian state, or because of checkpoints or settlements that make life hard on the people the Arabs have kept penned up in refugee camps for sixty years. They hate Israel because it exists, and because it harbors the people Muslims historically have scorned as subjects and inferiors.

As for recruiting jihadists, the doctrines of Islam provide more than enough reasons for becoming a martyr, not the least being a chauvinistic certainty that Allah intends for Islam "to conquer the whole world," as the Ayatollah Khomeini put it, for "all the countries conquered by Islam or to be conquered in the future will be marked for everlasting salvation." The conflict in Israel is what Thucydides called a "pretext," an excuse to pursue actual aims under the rhetorical camouflage of some principle dear to the enemy. Osama bin Laden has been the master of manufacturing such pretexts for consumption by self-loathing Westerners, even harping on Bush's failure to sign the Kyoto treaty. But as bin Laden said to his jihadis in November 2001, "This war is fundamentally religious. Under no circumstances should we forget this enmity between us and the infidels. For the enmity is based on creed." So too Khomeini in November 1979: "The Muslims must rise up in this struggle, which is more a struggle between unbelievers and Islam than one between Iran and America: between all unbelievers and the Muslims. The Muslims must rise up and triumph in this struggle." Israeli settlements or American foreign policy are merely tactical pretexts, to be replaced by others if necessary.

Give those religious motives for waging jihad, it is bizarre that Petraeus believes this cosmic struggle really comes down to Israel and settlements. Yet the General once more has intruded his questionable received wisdom into matters beyond his professional purview. In response to the riots in Afghanistan that followed an obscure pastor burning a Koran, Petraeus and NATO proclaimed "our condemnation of any disrespect to the Holy Qur'an and the Muslim faith. We condemn, in particular, the action of an individual in the United States who recently burned the Holy Qur'an. We also offer condolences to the families of all those injured and killed in violence which occurred in the wake of the burning of the Holy Qur'an. We further hope the Afghan people understand that the actions of a small number of individuals, who have been extremely disrespectful to the Holy Qur'an, are not representative of any of the countries of the international community who are in Afghanistan to help the Afghan people."

[Andrew McCarthy](#) has already sliced and diced this astonishing bit of groveling, with its desperate emphasis on the holiness of the Koran, and its

anxious sensitivity to Muslim sensibilities, one never reciprocated when Muslims blow up Israelis or murder Christians. What I'm wondering is, what business does an American general have in opining about another American citizen's exercising his Constitutional right to free speech? Because it makes the military's job harder? But Petraeus's mistaken beliefs about jihadist motivation are based not on facts, but rather on the widely shared, bipartisan delusion that jihadists want to kill our troops because we don't respect Islam and its "Holy Koran" enough, or because of our foreign policy crimes against the Islamic Ummah. But those are mere pretexts, trotted out because they gratify our own self-loathing assumptions of guilt and thus erode our resolve. In reality, the jihadists want to kill our soldiers because they are infidel "invaders" of Muslim countries and the representatives of the most important power standing in the way of Islam's recovery of its Allah-ordained global superiority. And they will continue trying to kill us no matter what we say or do, short of converting to Islam.

General Petraeus should stick to the job at which he is skilled: destroying the enemy and creating the conditions under which American troops can accomplish their mission and return home. We already have enough flawed analysis coming from politicians like Senator Harry Reid, who at the beginning of the "surge" in Iraq proclaimed "this war is lost," or Barack Obama, who as Senator called the surge a "reckless escalation," and as President gave a speech in Cairo that confirmed Muslim estimations of their superiority and our guilt. That sort of talk from what [Mark Steyn](#) calls "advocates of the one-way multiculti danse macabre" is what has made the military's job harder by convincing the jihadists that they can win the long war of morale even as they keep losing on the battlefield.

(photo credit: [Talk Radio News Service](#))