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TERMINOLOGY TO DEFINE THE TERRORISTS: RECOMMENDATIONS FROM AMERICAN MUSLIMS

Words matter. The terminology that senior government officials use must accurately identify the nature of the challenges that face our generation. It is critical that all Americans properly understand the gravity of the threats we face, and prepare themselves to take the steps necessary to build a secure future. We are facing an enemy that holds a totalitarian ideology, and seeks to impose that ideology through force across the globe. We must resist complacency. The language that senior government officials use can help to rally Americans to vigilance.

At the same time, the terminology should also be strategic – it should avoid helping the terrorists by inflating the religious bases and glamorous appeal of their ideology. One of the most common concerns expressed by Muslims in America, and indeed the West, is that senior government officials and commentators in the mass media regularly indict all Muslims for the acts of a few. They argue that terminology can create either a negative climate, in which acts of harassment or discrimination occur, or, by contrast, a positive climate, such as President Bush's remarks while visiting a mosque in the days after 9/11.

If senior government officials carefully select strategic terminology, the government's public statements will encourage vigilance without unintentionally undermining security objectives. That is, the terminology we use must be accurate with respect to the very real threat we face. At the same time, our terminology must be properly calibrated to diminish the recruitment efforts of extremists who argue that the West is at war with Islam.

This memorandum outlines recommendations from a wide variety of American Muslim leaders regarding the difficult terrain of terminology. This memorandum does not state official Department of Homeland Security (DHS) policy nor does it address legal definitions. Rather, it outlines recommendations compiled by the DHS Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL) from its discussions with a broad range of Muslim American community leaders and scholars.

Background

On May 8, 2007, Secretary Chertoff met with a group of influential Muslim Americans to discuss ways the Department can work with their communities to protect the country, promote civic engagement, and prevent violent radicalization from taking root in the United States. Part of the discussion involved the terminology U.S. Government (USG) officials use to describe

terrorists who invoke Islamic theology in planning, carrying out, and justifying their attacks. While there was a broad consensus that the terminology the USG uses impacts both national security and the ability to win hearts and minds, this discussion did not yield any specific recommendations. Secretary Chertoff requested that these leaders continue to reflect on the words and terms that, in their opinion, DHS and the broader USG should use. Based on this request, CRCL has consulted with some of the leading U.S.-based scholars and commentators on Islam to discuss the best terminology to use when describing the terrorist threat.

Assumptions

Starting from the premise that words do indeed matter, three foundational assumptions inform this paper:

- (1) We should not demonize all Muslims or Islam;
- (2) Because the terrorists themselves use theology and religious terms to justify both their means and ends, the terms we use must be accurate and descriptive; and
- (3) Our words should be strategic; we must be conscious of history, culture, and context. In an era where a statement can cross continents in a manner of seconds, it is essential that officials consider how terms translate, and how they will resonate with a variety of audiences.

TERMINOLOGY TO AVOID

Expert Recommendation 1 – Respond to ideologies that exploit Islam without labeling all terrorist groups as a single enemy.

The public statements of the USG must convey the ideological dimensions of the terrorist threat, in addition to conveying its tactical dimensions. Specifically, it is important for the public to understand that many extremists groups seek to impose their totalitarian worldview by seizing political power through force. In labeling specific organizations and movements, however, the experts recommend that the USG should not feed the notion that America is engaged in a broad struggle against the so-called “Muslim World.” Currently, the U.S. and its allies are facing threats from a variety of terrorist organizations operating across the globe. But the threats presented by transnational movements like al-Qaeda are perhaps the most serious.¹ According to these experts, al-Qaeda wants all Muslims to line up under its banner. Collapsing all terrorist organizations into a single enemy feeds the narrative that al-Qaeda represents Muslims worldwide. Al-Qaeda may be spreading its influence, but the USG should not abet its franchising by making links when none exist. For example, the cult members arrested in Miami should not be called members of al-Qaeda; and, while they are both terrorist organizations who threaten global security and stability, Hezbollah and Hamas are distinct in methods, motivations and goals from al-Qaeda. When possible, the experts recommend that USG terminology should make this clear.

¹ “National Intelligence Estimate: The Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland.” p. 6 (July 17, 2007) http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20070717_release.pdf (July, 28 2007).

Expert Recommendation 2 –Do not give the terrorists the legitimacy that they seek.

What terrorists fear most is irrelevance; what they need most is for large numbers of people to rally to their cause. There was a consensus that the USG should avoid unintentionally portraying terrorists, who lack moral and religious legitimacy, as brave fighters, legitimate soldiers, or spokesmen for ordinary Muslims. Therefore, the experts counseled caution in using terms such as, “jihadist,” “Islamic terrorist,” “Islamist,” and “holy warrior” as grandiose descriptions.

Using the word “Islamic” in a phrase will sometimes be necessary in order to distinguish terrorists who claim the banner of Islam from other extremist groups who do not invoke religion, or who invoke other faiths. Nevertheless, CRCL understands the experts’ caution in this regard to be rooted in the concern that we should not concede the terrorists’ claim that they are legitimate adherents of Islam. Therefore, when using the word, it may be strategic to emphasize that many so-called “Islamic” terrorist groups twist and exploit the tenets of Islam to justify violence and to serve their own selfish political aims.

The same is true of the moniker “Islamist” (or the related “Islamism”), which many have used to refer to individuals who view Islam as a political system in addition to a religion. The experts we consulted did not criticize this usage based on accuracy; indeed, they acknowledged that academics and commentators, including some in the Arab and Muslim Worlds, regularly use “Islamist” to describe people and movements. Nevertheless, they caution that it may not be strategic for USG officials to use the term because the general public, including overseas audiences, may not appreciate the academic distinction between Islamism and Islam. In the experts’ estimation, this may still be true, albeit to a lesser extent, even if government officials add qualifiers, e.g. “violent Islamists” or “radical Islamism.”

Regarding *jihad*, even if it is accurate to reference the term (putting aside polemics on its true nature), it may not be *strategic* because it glamorizes terrorism, imbues terrorists with religious authority they do not have, and damages relations with Muslims around the globe.

Some say that this is a war against “Salafis.” However, Salafism is a belief system that many people follow. This includes al-Qaeda leadership, as well as many individuals who are not violent at all. Again, if we assign this term to al-Qaeda, we will be handing them legitimacy that they do not have, but are desperately seeking.

The consensus is that we must carefully avoid giving bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders the legitimacy they crave, but do not possess, by characterizing them as religious figures, or in terms that may make them seem to be noble in the eyes of some.

Expert Recommendation 3 – Proceed carefully before using Arabic and religious terminology.

USG officials may want to avoid using theological terms, particularly those in Arabic, even if such usage is benign or overtly positive. Islamic law and terms come with a particular context, which may not always be apparent. It is one thing for a Muslim leader to use a particular term;

an American official may simply not have the religious authority to be taken seriously, even when using terms appropriately.

TERMINOLOGY TO USE

Expert Recommendation 4 – Reference the cult-like aspects of terrorists, while still conveying the magnitude of the threat we face.

In describing al-Qaeda, its supporters, and other violent extremists, some commentators have used the term “death cult.”² While the term may not fully encompass or describe the threat posed by groups like al-Qaeda, it may be both accurate and useful when used as a point of comparison. Cults, while often linked to mainstream religions, have a negative connotation. As a practical matter, terrorist groups use recruitment tactics that are similar to cults: separation from family, indoctrination, and breaking down previously-held beliefs.³

This negative connotation also exists in the Muslim world. Indeed, the experts highlighted previous instances in Islamic history where heretic sectarian groups formed, followed a cultish strategy of recruitment, and were eventually marginalized. This began with the Kharijites, the first radical dissidents in Islam, who assassinated the fourth Caliph Ali in 661 C.E. There is even a genre of literature, the *Kitab al-Firaq* or *Book of Sects*, which discusses these movements.

Based on this history and context, senior officials might use terms such as “death cult,” “cult-like,” “sectarian cult,” and “violent cultists” to describe the ideology and methodology of al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. “Cult” is both normative and accurate in that it suggests a pseudo-religious ideology that is outside the mainstream. Moreover, as there is no overt reference to Islam, these terms are not as likely to cause offense. Referring to bin Laden’s movement as “fringe” or “outside the mainstream” may also be helpful.

Of course, the threat posed by terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda is far greater than that posed by most cult groups. Nevertheless, “cult” comparisons may advance strategic USG objectives by marginalizing those who falsely claim to represent ordinary Muslims.

Expert Recommendation 5 – Use “mainstream,” “ordinary,” and “traditional” in favor of “moderate” when describing broader Muslim populations.

In characterizing the broader Muslim American community, the Muslim World, and Islam generally, “mainstream,” “ordinary,” and “traditional” are preferable to “moderate.” One can be deeply religious, strictly adhere to fundamental doctrines, and nevertheless abhor violence. In addition, “mainstream” is a useful foil to the “cult” terminology referenced above. By contrast,

² Thomas L. Friedman, “If It’s a Muslim Problem, It Needs a Muslim Solution,” *The New York Times* (July 8, 2005) <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/08/opinion/08friedman.html?ex=1278475200&en=a1cbffb46f2ac7d0&ei=5088> (July 28, 2007) (“[I]t is essential that the Muslim world wake up to the fact that it has a jihadist death cult in its midst”); see also Reza Aslan, “Why Do They Hate Us? Strange Answers Lie in Al-Qaida’s Writings,” *Slate* (August 6, 2007) <http://www.slate.com/id/2171752> (September 6, 2007) (referring to Osama bin-Laden as a “cult leader literally dwelling in a cave”).

³ For a discussion of terrorist indoctrination, see Robert Baer, “A Talk With a Suicide Bomber,” *Time Magazine* (July 20, 2007) <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1645461,00.html> (July 28, 2007).

the term “moderate” has become offensive to many Muslims, who believe that it refers to individuals who the USG prefers to deal with, and who are only marginally religious. Notably, “mainstream” is a term that is emerging among Muslim American commentators.⁴

Expert Recommendation 6 – Pay attention to the discourse on takfirism.

As discussed, USG officials should use caution before employing religious terminology. But they should not be ignorant of useful phraseology. According to the experts we consulted, one such term is “takfirism,” which refers to the practice of declaring a Muslim a *kafir* or non-believer, and then proclaiming that their lives can be forfeited. Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups employ *takfir* to name as apostates all Muslims who reject their ideology, arguing that this makes their blood violable.

This is not a new phenomenon; indeed, takfiri practices arise sporadically in Islamic history. For example, the Kharijites’ practice of *takfir* became the justification for their indiscriminate attacks on civilian Muslims. Modern examples are the Iraqi insurgent groups who justify their actions against Shi’as by labeling them *kafirs*, e.g. the bombers of the Golden Mosque in Samarra.⁵

Strictly speaking, takfirism most accurately describes terrorism by Muslims against other Muslims. But it may be strategic to employ the term in a wider context given that (1) many of the leaders of al-Qaeda are known to have adopted a takfiri ideology⁶, and (2) part of the USG’s anti-terrorism strategy should be to emphasize that the majority of the victims of modern terrorism are Muslim.⁷ There may also be a useful nexus to cult terminology; regarding takfiri indoctrination, French terrorism expert Roland Jacquard states: “Takfir is like a sect: once you’re in, you never get out. The Takfir rely on brainwashing and an extreme regime of discipline to

⁴ Shahed Amanullah, “Western Muslims need a ‘fourth estate,’” *Altmuslim.com* (April 9, 2007) http://www.altmuslim.com/a/a/a/western_muslims_need_a_fourth_estate/ (September 6, 2007) (“Dynamic, independent, and professional Muslim voices, free of restrictions based on organizational affiliation yet **intimately connected to the mainstream Muslim community**, can make a difference even if their numbers are small.”)(emphasis added).

⁵ James S. Robbins, “Al Qaeda Blows It.” *National Review Online* (February 23, 2006) <http://www.nationalreview.com/robbins/robbins200602230743.asp> (July 28, 2007).

⁶ A *Time Magazine* article published shortly after 9/11 is instructive:

Bin Laden and al-Qaeda may have learned, by violent experience, to pre-empt and harness the new fanaticism. In late 1995, bin Laden's compound in Khartoum was attacked by gunmen believed to be Takfiri. A Sudanese friend of bin Laden's who questioned the surviving attacker said, “He was like a maniac, more or less like the students in the U.S.A. who shoot other students. They don't have very clear objectives.” By the time al-Qaeda had resettled in Afghanistan, ideological training was an integral part of the curriculum, according to a former recruit who went on to bomb the U.S. embassy in Nairobi. Students were asked to learn all about demolition, artillery and light-weapon use, but they were also expected to be familiar with the fatwas of al-Qaeda, including those that called for violence against Muslim rulers who contradicted Islam—a basic Takfiri tenet.

Michael Elliot, “Hate Club: Al-Qaeda’s Web of Terror.” (November 4, 2001). <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,182746,00.html> (July 28, 2007).

⁷ David McKeeby, “Terrorism Report Highlights Global Challenge.” *USINFO* (April 30, 2007) <http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2007&m=April&x=20070425112825idybeekcm0.2628443> (July 28, 2007).

weed out the weak links and ensure loyalty and obedience from those taken as members.”⁸ Thus, the phrase “takfiri death cult” may have some relevance.

The experts we consulted acknowledged that USG officials may feel uncomfortable using religious and Arabic terminology. And as discussed above, it may not be strategic for them to do so. Nevertheless, given its relevance to Islamic history and present-day conflicts, the experts believe government officials should pay attention to the discourse on takfirism for three reasons.

First, unlike *jihad*, which arguably has a variety of interpretations, *takfir* has historically had an overwhelmingly negative connotation. Second, and as the articles referenced here demonstrate, commentators do use the term to describe terrorists and their ideology. As such, no one can argue that the USG invented the concept. Last, and perhaps most important, some of the most influential Muslim religious leaders have strongly come out against the takfiri doctrine.

In July 2005, King Abdullah II of Jordan convened a conference in Amman of 200 of the world’s leading Islamic scholars from 50 countries.⁹ The group, which included Sunnis and Shi’as, unanimously issued a ruling, known as *The Amman Message*, specifically forbidding the practice of *takfir*.¹⁰ Since then, over 500 Islamic scholars worldwide have adopted the ruling.¹¹

While it is undoubtedly a welcome development, the experts agreed that *The Amman Message* is just one step, and that its effect on the ideology and operations of al-Qaeda will be negligible. They pointed out, however, that the audience the USG is attempting to reach includes mainstream Muslims, the majority of whom denounce violence, yet still believe the U.S. is waging a war against their religion.¹² It is this group, the experts reasoned, that may pay attention to *The Amman Message* and its anti-takfiri stance.

The experts did not recommend a wholesale adoption of takfirism or related terms into the USG lexicon. Rather, they advised us to pay attention to how this term is used, and consider future opportunities for utilization. The experts themselves believe in its efficacy and accuracy and have pledged to reference the term in their writings.

⁸ See supra note 6.

⁹ In *The Amman Message*, the participating scholars issued a unanimous ruling, known as the “Three Points of the Amman Message.” In it, they took the following actions:

1. They specifically recognized the validity of all 8 *Mathhabs* (legal schools) of *Sunni*, *Shi’a* and *Ibadhi* Islam; of traditional Islamic Theology (*Ash’arism*); of Islamic Mysticism (Sufism), and of true *Salafi* thought, and came to a precise definition of who is a Muslim.
2. Based upon this definition, they forbade *takfir* (declarations of apostasy) between Muslims.
3. Based upon the *Mathahib*, they set forth the subjective and objective preconditions for the issuing of *fatwas*, thereby exposing ignorant and illegitimate edicts in the name of Islam.

Prince Ghazi Bin Muhammad, “Muslims Speak Out,” *On Faith* (July 22, 2007)

http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/muslims_speak_out/2007/07/ghazi.html (August 2, 2007).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “Muslims Believe US Seeks to Undermine Islam.” *World Public Opinion* (April 24, 2007)

http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/home_page/346.php?nid=&id=&pnt=346&lb=hmpg1 (July 29, 2007).

Nevertheless, they recognized that takfirism is a religious term and that, at least initially, it may be awkward for USG officials to use it. But this was also true of *jihadi*, which is now used regularly. Moreover, unlike other terms, using takfirism does not create a division between Islam and the West. To the contrary, its usage, the experts maintained, will allow the USG to linguistically sever the violent actors from broader Muslim communities, without sacrificing accuracy, succumbing to political correctness, or alienating mainstream Muslims.

Expert Recommendation 7 – Emphasize the Positive.

USG officials should emphasize the positive – what we are seeking together. In addition to recognizing the dark vision of our terrorist enemies and the need to counter their actions with all elements of national power, the USG should also attempt to convince people that this generation needs to unite to promote a common vision for the future. The experts we consulted suggested defining the challenge of our times as “A Global Struggle for Security and Progress.” It is unlikely that this phrase will replace existing monikers such as “the war on terror” or “the long war,” which are more widely used both within and outside the government. Moreover, as a comprehensive descriptor, the phrase may not sufficiently reflect the need to promote public vigilance and rally support for the USG’s anti-terrorism mission. Nevertheless, we understand the experts’ recommendation to be grounded in the realization that we must define what we stand *for*, in addition to defining what we stand *against*. More specifically, it may be strategic to emphasize the following:

1. The civilized world is facing a “global” challenge, which transcends geography, culture, and religion;
2. This struggle is for “security,” a global aspiration that all people seek. In particular, Islam emphasizes order and structure. The takfiri ideology is the antithesis of this and in many respects resembles anarchism – killing wantonly, destroying great buildings and mosques without reason, and bringing chaos and disorder. Moreover, the concept of “security” is one that resonates with mainstream American audiences, as well as with Muslims around the world.
3. This struggle is for “progress,” over which no nation has a monopoly. The experts we consulted debated the word “liberty,” but rejected it because many around the world would discount the term as a buzzword for American hegemony. But all people want to support “progress,” which emphasizes that there is a path for building strong families and prosperity among the current dislocations of globalization and change. And progress is precisely what the terrorists oppose through their violent tactics and through their efforts to impose a totalitarian worldview.

Expert Recommendation 8: Emphasize the Success of Integration.

Bin Laden and his followers will succeed if they convince large numbers of people that America and the West are at war with Islam, and that a “clash of civilizations” is inherent. Therefore, USG officials should continually emphasize a simple and straightforward truth:

Muslims have been, and will continue to be part of the fabric of our country. Senior officials must make clear that there is no “clash of civilizations;” there is no “us versus them.” We must emphasize that Muslims are not “outsiders” looking in, but are an integral part of America and the West. Officials should look to incorporate concepts such as these, and the following, into their remarks:

- Muslims have successfully integrated into American communities for generations. From decades of experience, Muslims know that the environments created by democracies such as ours give them the freedom to choose the best way to raise their families, get an education, relate to their governments, become part of the government, start a business, and become prosperous in their professions.
- Muslim Americans are successful doctors, lawyers, teachers, first responders, Boy Scout leaders, and political leaders.
- We honor and value the contributions that Muslim Americans make to our communities.
- The motto on the seal of the United States is, “E Pluribus unum” – out of many, one. We all need to work together to make this great motto our reality.
- In America, there are no guests and no hosts; all citizens are politically and culturally equal.

The fact is that Islam and secular democracy are fully compatible – in fact, they can make each other stronger. Senior officials should emphasize this positive fact.

Expert Recommendation 9: Emphasize the U.S. Government’s Openness to Religious and Ethnic Communities.

Bin Laden’s narrative presumes a war against Islam and rampant mistreatment of Muslims by the American and other Western governments. Extremist recruiters argue that Muslims should segregate from the larger society; moreover, their recruitment pitch depends on isolation. These appeals are undercut by the fact, true for decades, that the USG works openly with religious and ethnic communities, and takes aggressive steps to protect their rights. Senior USG officials should emphasize themes such as the following:

- The USG is engaged with the American people, including Muslim Americans, looking for ways to make our communities prosperous and just.
- We are listening; we have an open door. There is no reason for Muslim Americans to feel isolated from their governments; we are working together regularly.
- Muslims Americans are playing a constructive and proactive role in improving the public policy of our country.

- There is no war against Muslims or Islam in America. In fact, the American government is committed to ensuring justice in our country. For example, we have aggressively prosecuted allegations of hate crimes against Muslims; the Department of Justice Civil Rights Division has sued a school district that refused to allow a teenage girl to wear a hijab; and, we actively pursued justice for Muslims victimized during the conflict in the Balkans.
- There is a good level of engagement between the Federal government and Muslim American communities, and it will continue to increase over the upcoming months and years. Indeed, we have the hope of seeing levels of engagement between the USG and Arab and Muslim Americans that have never been reached in the history of this country. For example, leading Arab, Muslim, and South Asian American groups have met multiple times with the Secretary of Homeland Security, the Attorney General, the Director of the FBI, the Secretary of the Treasury, and senior officials at the State Department.

If senior officials will emphasize these themes, it will undercut those who attempt to develop a “grievance” or “victim” mentality in the American Muslim community.

C. CONCLUSION

Words matter. The terminology the USG uses should convey the magnitude of the threat we face, but also avoid inflating the religious bases and glamorous appeal of the extremists’ ideology. Instead, USG terminology should depict the terrorists as the dangerous cult leaders they are. They have no honor, they have no dignity, and they offer no answers. While acknowledging that they have the capacity to destroy, we should constantly emphasize that they cannot build societies, and do not provide solutions to the problems people across the globe face.

Where our reach is limited, we should strongly encourage Muslim writers, commentators and scholars to use terminology that will drive the debate in a positive direction. While the USG may not be able to effectively use terms like *takfirism*, others certainly can.

Finally, we should view our words as bricks used to build a coalition. The USG should draw the conflict lines not between Islam and the West, but between a dangerous, cult-like network of terrorists and everyone who is in support of global security and progress.