

Words for the evildoers

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The National Counterterrorism Center recently suggested that government officials stop linking extreme terrorist groups to Islam and avoid using offensive terminology like "Islamofascists." They should also steer clear of terms like "jihad," "mujahideen" and "caliphate" when discussing terrorism, because all have positive connotations in the Muslim world.

Our political leaders ought to adopt this strategic use of vocabulary, but this may be a hard sell.

A recent article in The Washington Times reported that Sen. John McCain's campaign declined a request by a coalition of American Muslim groups to "stop using the adjective 'Islamic' to describe terrorists and extremist enemies of the United States." A McCain media strategist said that "the hateful ideology which underpins bin Ladenism is properly described as radical Islamic extremism. Senator McCain refers to it that way because that is what it is."

Similarly, Rudy Giuliani attempted to make this into a partisan issue during his presidential campaign, accusing Democrats of "taking political correctness to extremes" by refraining from using the terms "Islamic extremism, Islamic terrorism or Islamic radical terrorism."

To his credit, President Bush has generally declined to use this phraseology, sticking to the theme he developed post-9/11 that "the war on terrorism is not a war against Muslims ... [i]t's a war against evil people who conduct crimes against innocent people." While Bush did use the phrase "Islamic fascists" a couple of times in 2006 and "Islamic terrorist groups" once last year, for the most part he has taken great care to de-link the concepts of terrorism and faith.

POINT OF VIEW

The reason why the government is making these suggestions, and Bush and others are wise to avoid this terminology, is not out of a sense of political correctness but because calling terrorists "Islamic" is exactly what Osama bin Laden wants us to do.

The new vocabulary guide recognizes that al-Qaida and other radical groups intentionally co-opt the power of religion to promote their political aims of toppling secular Middle Eastern governments and establishing a global totalitarian state. From the times of his earliest writings, bin Laden has put himself forward as a religious authority (which he is not) who is preaching the true word of Islam to the masses. He intentionally cloaks his ideology in the scriptures and literature of Islam — "Cavalry of Islam, be mounted!" he proclaimed in his famous 1996 "Declaration of War" against America.

Indeed, it is no accident that the names of more than half of the 31 groups on the State Department's list of terrorist organizations active in Muslim countries contain references to Islam, Muhammad or other specific Islamic imagery. Doing so gives them power, authenticity and appeal that their cause otherwise could not obtain.

IF WE HOPE TO STUNT THE GROWTH OF EXTREMIST TERRORISM over the long term, our strategy must be to delegitimize bin Laden and his followers in the eyes of the world's 1 billion-plus Muslims. And if we want Muslims here at home and abroad to assist our counterterrorism efforts, we need to need demonstrate a greater understanding and respect for their religious sensibilities. Asserting time and again that these terrorist groups are "Islamic" is the wrong way to achieve this objective.

No, our counterterrorism strategy should be just the opposite — we want popular, prestigious clerics throughout the Muslim world to confront bin Laden's claims that killing civilians is consistent with Islamic tradition and law. The message we want Muslims to hear is that bin Laden and his followers are "un-Islamic."

Fortunately, we are beginning to see the seeds of a Muslim backlash against al-Qaida. As The Washington Post reported recently, some established religious authorities in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere are publicly challenging al-Qaida's ideology and tactics.

So what should we call the terrorists? If we need a phrase at all, then "violent extremist terrorists" would do. Rather than elevating their power and prestige by calling them "Islamic," it makes a great deal of sense to characterize our enemies as simply what they are — vicious thugs who use religion as a political tool.

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