

# ***COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM:***

**BEYOND WORDS**

**Amy Zalman**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The last seven years have seen leading Americans falter in their communications about violent extremists and the communities believed to be fostering them. Policymakers, journalists, and community leaders have reached an impasse in crafting a common understanding of how to describe the link between religion and violent extremism, both from a factual point of view and in terms of what might be effective in undermining the appeal of extremist movements. This paper begins at this impasse. It reviews the choices to be made about language and rhetoric in U.S. public discourse as elements of a necessarily broader communications strategy to counter violent extremism. It takes account of how these choices flow through the global media, especially Arabic outlets. It concludes with a call to go beyond debates about the words themselves and to implement a holistic approach to communication that comprehends both the contemporary media environment and the cultural and political landscape of conflict. Communication cannot be composed merely of canny use of media, nor only of a well-crafted message. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century media environment, words shape actions, actions beget words, and both are in perpetual, dynamic relationship.

Good communicators reveal, in speech and action, that they understand the motivations and aspirations of their audiences—and it is via this understanding that they gain their sympathies. A review of U.S. rhetoric shows a persistent failure to demonstrate this understanding which in turn can fan rather than dampen extremist sentiment. This paper recommends correctives in three terminology areas that have driven U.S. statements on religious extremism:

1. **Religious Terminology:** Religious ideology is not the sole source of contemporary violent extremism and terrorism. No amount of expertise and knowledge will make it possible to target in a communications strategy the precise school of religious thought driving terrorism.
2. **Geopolitical Generalizing:** Islam and "the West" are not uniform concepts. Despite U.S. representations to the contrary, the attackers of September 11, 2001, did not represent a unified global movement guided by a coherent ideology with the sole aim of destroying or defeating "the West."
3. **Extremism Lexicon:** The use of the term "extremism" in place of "terrorism" will not be sufficient to solve the problems posed by the indiscriminate use of terms such as "terrorism."

There are no neat solutions and it is not realistic to aim for full consensus or authoritative control over terminology. This type of approach would inevitably

be undermined, not only by a vocal, multifarious, globalized media, but also by language itself, which is shaped by a variety of histories, viewpoints, and political objectives. Opinion makers should instead focus on creating a communication strategy that harmonizes words, policies, and actions, and on bringing all three to bear to create conditions in which not only friendly dialogue, but also conflicting viewpoints, are evident.

### **Key messages for communications strategies to counter violent extremism:**

- ❑ Actions speak as loudly as words  
*Only throwing this or that strongly evocative word into the communications environment is a hit-or-miss proposition. Speakers will be judged by their deeds and policies as well as by their rhetoric. Communications must be crafted in which actions, policies, and rhetoric are mutually reinforcing activities*
- ❑ Take the politics out of personal faith  
*Shape messages in ways that encourage the adherents of a religion to freely decide for themselves its meaning and virtues*
- ❑ Ideological archaeology is not the answer  
*Avoid engaging in debate on any particular religious claims or specific religious doctrines*
- ❑ There is no “Them or “Us”  
*Use communication strategies that recognize the potential for all communities to eradicate or contain extremist tendencies*
- ❑ Specifics speak louder than over-generalizations  
*Draw connections and comparisons between groups, actors, ideologies, and conflicts with care, emphasizing simple, situation-specific interpretations over claims about historical or social trends.*
- ❑ Work with—not against—global media realities  
*Acknowledge the multiple, dynamic, and contextual meanings of terms and language related to violent extremism. Where possible, identify the variety of interpretations for events.*

## INTRODUCTION

It would be difficult at this juncture to find many people, if any, who believe that the global discourse on terrorism and violent extremism is proceeding in a productive direction. Indeed, it is ironic that consensus gathers only around the recognition that it is not. The recommendations in this paper are directed toward policymakers who share this recognition and seek to shape an effective discourse as part of a wider communication strategy. It is also intended to serve practitioners—politicians, journalists, community leaders, and others—whose daily art is forging language about violent extremism.

We may plausibly ask whether language matters in a world governed by the truism that actions speak louder than words and in which a word is only worth a thousandth of a picture. Some argue that policies, not words, are the real source of anger among the rest of the world. Listen closely, however, to expressions of wrath at U.S. policies, and what emerges equally powerfully is rage at perceived hypocrisy. It disappoints and angers the world that the United States betrays its own best values; that its words and actions do not line up. What leading politicians say and how they say it are indispensable in establishing U.S. credibility. Nor can action be severed from language in the realm of communication: it is through language that domestic and global audiences make sense of actions; language repeated often enough in policy, or even media, space can become the basis for domestic action; in the global arena, language can provoke action; and language serves as a crucial testing ground for actions, whether these are threatening or conciliatory.

A meaningful communication strategy will approach language, actions, and policy in concert; each must be coordinated with the others if the United States hopes to gain an audience in the community of nations.

This would be a challenging task under any circumstances; it is made more so by new communications technologies that reduce the government's authoritative hold on language. Different viewpoints have always produced conflicting terminologies; one person's freedom fighter has always been another's terrorist. The difference now is that there are more speakers, more messages, more ways of achieving legitimacy, and more speedy transmission across both geographic- and cyber- space. These shifts are visibly transforming how we think about ourselves, how we form communities, and how we are motivated to action. They warrant a new conception of communications in which media and message are two sides of the same communication coin. Language and action, speech and policy, are part of the same continuum of communication and must be leveraged in a coordinated way if the United States is to establish rapport with global audiences.

U.S. policymakers cannot and should not seek to control the media environment, but rather begin to accommodate and work within it. This effort begins with deep attention to how others think about themselves and their communities. Recent U.S. discourse is characterized by a lack of attention to precisely these issues. It has produced faulty assumptions that have alienated global audiences and clouded debate on violent extremism.

Eager to “tell our story,” regardless of whether anyone is listening, U.S. communicators have plunged into a ongoing search for the right word to describe actions, actors, groups, and belief systems. These efforts have met with failure. There is no magic word or phrase that can resolve conflicts and speak across substantial divides in values, history, and experience; rather, there is an opportunity to use language to approach that divide and communicate—by listening as well as speaking—in order to narrow it.

The paper is arranged in two parts. Part I outlines the current language and communications strategies in U.S. public discourse and addresses the three assumptions detailed in the Executive Summary. Part II presents the conclusion and offers concrete recommendations for policymakers and opinion leaders on how to improve their effectiveness.

## **LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES IN U.S. PUBLIC DISCOURSE**

The ability of a globally distributed media to legitimize and amplify a wide range of voices gives it an unprecedented role in providing information during violent political conflict. Inexpensive and easy to access, the Internet flattens conventional hierarchies, potentially making all who seek to explain events equally authoritative, whether these are the leaders of democratic states, leaders of violent extremist groups, or members of their audiences. Satellite television stations beam beyond national borders, instantly turning words meant for national listeners into global speeches. Media is often the message on this landscape where “the relationship between government, military and the media are increasingly intertwined as a result of long-term processes of political and technological change.” In consequence, “we can expect media coverage to have an influence on how the war [on terrorism] is waged.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Robin Brown. “Clausewitz in the Age of CNN: Rethinking the Military-Media Relationship,” in *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government and the Public*, ed. Pippa Norris, Montague Kern, and Marion Just (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 9.

Each of these changes has implications for those wishing to communicate about extremism and terrorism to a global audience in a constructive way, in large part because they limit the control of speakers over their own communication and their ability to speak differently to domestic and foreign audiences. These limits make it especially important that political leaders use language that flows from strategic intention; that they strive to make it clear to audiences that they understand the context of global terrorism today; that they speak in terms congruent with rational policies and actions; that they seek to defuse rather than inflate points of conflict and grievance between communities; that they do not use language as an instrument of fear; and, above all, that they employ language that actively and positively shapes resolutions to inter-communal conflict on a world scale.

## **CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT: COMMUNICATING IN THE CURRENT MEDIA ENVIRONMENT**

It is well recognized that new communication technologies have changed how we convey ideas. The Internet and video equipment are cheap, which means that many people can distribute their own or others' ideas; and they are fast, which means that information travels globally almost instantaneously. The growth of satellite based television has rendered governments increasingly impotent in their attempts to control information flows across national borders.<sup>2</sup> These structural shifts in the means of communication are dynamically transforming not only how news travels, but what news is. Word processing software and the Internet, in particular, have greatly expanded the population of those who can claim to produce news. These many voices are redefining journalism's accepted modes of composition, terms of authority, and codes of legitimacy with effects whose examination has only just begun. Strikingly, conventional media accommodates rather than resists these new terms of authority. Note, for example, the incorporation of techniques such as [we]blogging as an element of the news (rather than the editorial) pages and interactive mechanisms into the online versions of major newspapers. When the *New York Times* puts blogs on its front page, it is announcing that highly stylized, individual voices are appropriate for transmitting news. Offering opportunities for readers to contribute their thoughts turns readers into authors. These gestures signal a retreat from the traditional values of objective reporting and the privileged authority of the journalist. Finally, while would-be authors' contributions make news more local, the magnified reach of their

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<sup>2</sup> For more information on how violent extremists exploit these new capabilities, see J. Rami Mroz, "Countering Violent Extremism: Videopower and Cyberspace" (EastWest Institute, February 2008). Available by free download at <http://www.ewi.info/announcements/publications/index.cfm?title=Publications&view=detail&nid=560&aid=6892>.

output makes news more global. And added speed has made it more interactive.

In combination, these emergent qualities of new media (and conventional media taking on techniques of new media) have profound implications for how perspectives about extremism are relayed and manipulated. Importantly, what we continue to call "the news" is increasingly "meta-news," or news about the news, in which the story at hand is the meaning and interpretation of previously reported facts, rather than reportage of the facts themselves. Within minutes of a news item's release by a news agency [e.g. Associated Press, or Agence France-Presse], it can have an audience all over the world and, within a day if not less, it is likely to have been translated into at least several languages. Journalists who do not have direct access to stories of local or national interest may turn to news items on the Internet as either sources or bases for their own work. Even those who do have direct access may end up heeding Internet sources, as has happened in reporting on violent conflict in the last seven years. As Yasemin Çonger, the Washington bureau chief of the Turkish newspaper *Milliyet* related at the end of 2001, war reporting had changed considerably because of the Internet: "Now my editor in Istanbul reads [the] New York Times before I do, or reads all kinds of Internet sites, websites, and sees all these really weird stories which I have never heard of. Here you are sitting in Washington ... and talking to all your sources, and you don't hear that. And then they find this little story somewhere buried in there and say, 'You know this is happening, are you aware?' ... So it's really so much more interactive."<sup>3</sup> Journalists and bloggers respond to this contracted news environment by making the Internet their beat: by cutting, pasting, amending, and commenting on reported facts emerging from global news agencies or circulating in the world press in order to contextualize them for their own audience/s. These audiences might be national audience, a particular ethnic or religious group, or a self-selected group with shared interests.

These meta-stories, contained within the semi-closed room of the Internet, simultaneously have an autonomous life of their own, and are shaped by the reality of events on the ground. When journalists are writing in the context of perceived power imbalances, they are likely to use their position to make news reported from the point-of-view of the presumed center of power more local. They may also enable local news to 'speak back' to that power. Reporting from the Middle East in the Arabic press on U.S. actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, as

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Hess and Marvin Kalb, eds., *The Media and the War on Terrorism* (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 204.

well as related efforts in the "war on terrorism," has in recent years often displayed, if subtly, this "speaking back" quality.

A journalist can localize global news in a variety of ways. One is by accepting the basis of a news story's facts and providing additional space for a local response or interpretation of those facts. In one overt example, a Kuwaiti newspaper picked up a report on three Kuwaitis sanctioned by the UN Security Council for suspected terrorist financing. Two days after the report's first publication by the Associated Press, *al-Jarida* ran the same story, appending to it a response by Hamid al-Ali, one of the accused. Ali, who is tagged an "Islamic activist" (a frequently used term in Arabic for those engaged in Islamist politics), is quoted as calling the sanctions unjust and promises to take official routes to have the sanctions lifted. In this case, a news item that is already relevant in the Kuwaiti context because it involves Kuwaiti actors is used as an opportunity to speak back to the dominant story. The gesture is subtle, but gestures such as these often are in Kuwait, whose media tends to represent the country's status as a strong U.S. ally.

Journalists the world over also use translation and story arrangement as techniques to ensure that global news resonates with local audiences. A January 2008 *Boston Globe* story about Iraq's Sunni tribal "Awakening Councils," picked up and used as the basis for a report in the Jordanian daily *ad-Dustour* a few days later provides an example. It is provided in some detail here because it demonstrates in action how terms related to violent conflict reflect local cultures, historical experience, and perceived political imperatives. It also demonstrates how the Internet's ability to keep information flowing rapidly ensures that multiple contested terms remain in circulation at the same time. Policymakers and opinion leaders who would like to use terminology constructively, and within a broader communication strategy, can better plan their own communications if they understand in advance how political, cultural, and historical conditions elsewhere may shape the reception of what they say. It will also be useful to plan in advance for the fact that their ability to control this reception is limited.

The background to both stories is the movement, beginning in 2006, of Sunni tribal sheikhs in Anbar province, to combat the violence and influence of al-Qaeda in Iraq (often termed AQI) in the area. They called it the "Awakening Movement." The U.S. military funds and supports these sheikhs, and the fighters they govern, for joining the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police. In January, 2008, a *Boston Globe* article discussed the trepidation of some U.S. officials that funding Sunni tribes to fight al-Qaeda could backfire by inadvertently arming Sunni tribes, who could use their new found power to turn against the

Shiite government. The article draws a conflict between good and bad actors, with the U.S. actors in its center. In this rendering, “good” U.S. forces, allied with Sunni tribes (who have multiple motivations, some of which are good and in concert with those of the United States and Iraqi interests), are in combat with a foreign, “bad” enemy, al-Qaeda in Iraq.

*Ad-Dustour* reported on the *Boston Globe* article several days later. Leaving the article's basic facts and concerns intact, the *ad-Dustour* reporter nevertheless, remarkably, describes a conflict that is fundamentally different from that reported in the U.S. newspaper. In his portrait of the conflict, good Sunni tribes, motivated by Iraqi nationalism, are the central actors and are at battle with a bad enemy, the U.S. occupying force. The journalist achieves this focus by revising the language and arrangement of the original article. The United States is transformed from a good to a bad actor when the English-language "U.S. military forces" is translated as "U.S. occupation forces" and its "funding" of Sunni tribes is described as a "bribery program."

The roles of insiders and outsiders on the battlefield also differ in the two articles. In the U.S. article, the Americans play the role of insiders on the Iraqi battleground, while Sunni tribes choose to become insiders when they relinquish their roles as "Sunni insurgents" and join a battle against outsiders (al-Qaeda). In the Jordanian article, Sunni tribes are considered insiders as former members of the Iraqi resistance who have chosen to join forces with the outsiders (the United States). Both articles describe U.S. fear, but each characterizes it differently. In the *Boston Globe* article, military commanders are described as fearful that the armed Sunni militias could turn against the Shiite government; in the *ad-Dustour* article, U.S. military officials are described as fearful that if the funding stops, Sunni fighters may return to the Iraqi resistance and attack *them*.<sup>4</sup> In the Jordanian article, any mention of al-Qaeda has dropped out. These differing interpretations—this language—matters in the world of action because they not only reflect but also project a particular interpretation of events for their readers. Although it takes more than an article to create a worldview, multiple renditions of the same or similar narratives will create a basis for how a reader understands reality and how they evaluate future events.

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<sup>4</sup> Farah Stockman, "Iraq's Tribal Sheiks Offer Peace for a Price: They Skim from the Top as Sunnis fight Al Qaeda," *Boston Globe*, January 12, 2008, [http://www.boston.com/news/world/articles/2008/01/12/iraqs\\_tribal\\_sheiks\\_offer\\_peace\\_for\\_a\\_price/](http://www.boston.com/news/world/articles/2008/01/12/iraqs_tribal_sheiks_offer_peace_for_a_price/); Muhammad Said, "Al-tahdir min barnamaj al-rashawi al-amrikiya li-shuyukh al-ahsa'ir" [Caution over the American Bribery Program for Tribal Sheikhs], *ad-Dustour*, January 14, 2008, Section 2, 27).

Policymakers and state level communicators the world over recognize that the access and speed afforded by new media degrades their conventional means of control, such as closing down terrestrial television stations, imposing censorship or limits within physical borders, controlling the direction of communications, or taking other actions with the expectation that they themselves will not be observed. Since initiating its “Global War on Terror,” the United States has focused on efforts to respond more rapidly to intersect information, and has on occasion made efforts at conventional censorship. The White House established a rapid response media team within weeks of the invasion of Afghanistan; in the first few years of the war in Iraq, there were at times bitter complaints by former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld over the U.S. failure to censor information that might harm its image. These tactics proved counterproductive for the United States, and they are not likely to work well in any other context.

It will be more fruitful for policymakers and communication practitioners to develop an understanding of how communications technologies affect how we communicate with each other, and learn how to speak—and be heard—within this complex moving system on behalf of extremism-free communities.

## **FANNING THE FLAMES OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM**

Slightly over a week after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, President George W. Bush gave an address to the U.S. Congress—but listened to by the world—in which he interpreted the attacks for a baffled and fearful American citizenry, while laying out the intended U.S. response. Over the course of that address, the president also began to shape a distinct discourse that, while it certainly was intended to describe an existing reality, in fact also produced a reality by way of the particular rhetoric and vocabulary he used to represent the attacks. Those initial choices created the basis for an evolving counter-terrorism and counter-extremism lexicon that is largely, though not solely, authored by the United States.<sup>5</sup>

Bush's address to the United States contained a number of suppositions about the conflict that have proven to be influential in both actions and words in the subsequent years. Two in particular—the assessment of the September 11, 2001, attacks as an act of war and the decision to respond in kind with a

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<sup>5</sup> President George W. Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People” (107<sup>th</sup> Cong., special sess., September 20, 2001), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>.

"Global War on Terrorism," and the divisive effects of characterizing the world as either "with us" or "with the terrorists"—have been examined elsewhere at length.<sup>6</sup>

At least several assumptions deserving greater focus and correctives have also contributed to the evolution of the particular discourse of violent extremism in the United States. These include:

1. Religious ideology is the source of contemporary violent extremism and terrorism, and with enough expertise and knowledge, it will be possible to identify the precise school of thought driving terrorism.
2. Islam and "the West" are uniform concepts. The attackers of September 11, 2001, represented a unified global movement guided by a coherent ideology with the sole aim of destroying or defeating "the West."
3. The use of the term "extremism" in place of "terrorism" will be sufficient to solve the problems posed by the indiscriminate use of terms such as "terrorism."

## **CORRECTIVE ONE: RELIGIOUS TERMINOLOGY**

**Religious ideology is not the sole source of contemporary violent extremism and terrorism. No amount of expertise and knowledge will lead communicators to properly name the precise school of thought driving terrorism.**

When al-Qaeda members struck U.S. targets on September 11, 2001, the U.S. government had relatively little institutional awareness of the contexts out of which al-Qaeda emerged. These included the recent history of the Arab Middle East, particularly during the Cold War; the longer history of Islamic-Arab and European relationships; the various permutations of Islamism (also called political Islam), or their extremist variants in Central and Western Asia. There was some resident understanding of religiously inspired terrorism—both Christian and Islamic—of the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> In the immediate aftermath of events,

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<sup>6</sup> An analysis of the war framework and the role of Manichean language can be found in Dina Kraft, et al., *Countering Violent Extremism: Lessons from the Abrahamic Faiths* (EastWest Institute, October 2007). A comprehensive critical examination of the language also appears in Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counterterrorism* (Manchester University Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> This gap between regional knowledge and counterterrorism strategies actually widened, rather than narrowing, in the ensuing years, as Sherifa Zuhur explained in 2005: "In the last 4 years, nonregionalists primarily responsible for the remapping of counterterrorism moved the discussion of Islamist threats away from regionalist oversight. This meant that more individuals with little in-

administration officials made sense of events in terms of what they knew and what might make sense to a U.S. audience. The idea of religious extremism fit the bill. This explanation was coupled with an awareness that little was known and of the need to know more, as well as an apparent motivation to explain the attackers as members of a single ideological movement.

In the formative understanding of the U.S. administration, the attackers were motivated by a form of personal religiosity that arose on the fringes of a single mainstream Islam. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban were described as marginal actors who "practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism...rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics."<sup>8</sup> "Islamic extremism" was not positioned in relation to any social or geopolitical reality, but primarily against normative religious practice, as a form of worship gone deeply awry. The attackers were viewed as militant proselytizers seeking to impose this form of worship throughout the Islamic world and ultimately beyond. The focus on religion was singular—the administration did not seriously entertain a broader social, political, or historical context to the attacks or the actions of the attackers

Such a formulation would require no translation for a U.S. audience. To a large degree, President Bush's understanding of the event was expressive of a particularly American world-view. The history of the United States is inextricable from a narrative of religious persecution and Puritan redemption. As a result, both religiosity and the freedom to worship independent of state meddling are held as basic values. For Americans, it is no paradox to hold deeply both to the value of a secular public sphere and to deep personal religiosity. It is unsurprising that the U.S. president's first address following the al-Qaeda attacks articulated the national trauma in these primordial American terms of religious persecution and freedom.

Characterizing "Islamic extremism" as a form of radical and forcefully imposed worship would also be well understood in the U.S. context. Fringe religious belief systems explain terrifying and perplexing moments in recent history, such as the bloody events at Waco and Ruby Ridge. But when applied to the al-Qaeda attack, the idea of fringe religiosity ultimately had minimal explanatory power and led to irrelevant communications, such as the 2002

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depth knowledge of the area's complex religio-political, ideological, or cultural history were in charge of developing strategies toward it. They brought in experts, or individuals from the region, but had no ability to discriminate between the different suggestions made or views proffered." Sherifa D. Zuhur, *100 Osamas: Islamist Threats and the Future of Counterinsurgency* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2005), 8.

<sup>8</sup> Bush, *Address to Congress*.

Shared Values Initiative. This first official U.S. communication campaign emerged from the view that al-Qaeda hated, above all, Americans' freedom of religious practice. The advertising campaign—designed to win hearts and minds in Muslim countries—showed American Muslims living happily in the United States. In doing so, it sought to differentiate the United States from autocratic states such as Afghanistan under the Taliban, and to reveal the virtues of a U.S. war against terrorism, and *for* religious freedom of practice.<sup>9</sup> Most countries perceived the advertisements as propaganda and refused to air them, but even if they had, Shared Values would have been irrelevant diversion. As poll after poll of Muslim populations has revealed, no mainstream populations contest either the value of civil liberties in the United States or the value of freedom of worship and they do not need convincing of their virtues.

Naming the enemy proved to be a delicate task. The U.S. administration had made the claim that the September 11 attackers were distinguished by their particular religious identity. Until recently, the U.S. policymaking community has not viewed Muslims' identities and motivations as complex. U.S. policymakers were unable to move past the idea that Muslims are motivated by anything but Islam; that their identities as national citizens, as members of families and professional communities, as urbanites or villagers, as rich or poor, or as members of any other of the hundreds of idiosyncratic groupings into which humans organize themselves, play a role in shaping their worldview.

Policymakers and pundits mounted an aggressive search to name the enemy precisely, and to distinguish an adversary from the mass of mainstream Muslims with whom it was not at war. Proposed categories included distorted forms of Islam (e.g. Islamo-fascism, radical Islam, radical Islamist extremism, bin Ladenism) or particular schools or approaches (e.g. salafi, Wahhabi, fundamentalist) that might be said to sponsor violent aggression against non-Muslims. Terms were mixed and matched with imprecise ease; their

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<sup>9</sup> Orchestrated by former advertising executive Charlotte Beers, the Shared Values Initiative culminated in the release of advertisements for about a month in Indonesia in 2002. Most Arab governments viewed them as propaganda and refused to air them. There was also significant reluctance in the U.S. public diplomacy community to use advertising as a form of public diplomacy. In their 2006 book, *Advertising's War on Terrorism: The Story of the U.S. State Department's Shared Values Initiative* (Spokane, WA: Marquette Books), Jami Fullerton and Alice Kendrick provide research suggesting that Indonesian viewers thought more positively about the United States after seeing such advertisements. Their conclusion suggests that advertising can play a valuable role staking out shared space between distinct cultures. To serve as means of conflict resolution, however, what is shared must also be relevant to serve any meaningful use. Otherwise, as the SVI campaign demonstrated, they divert more than direct attention to issues that matter.

proliferation could be dizzying. In one 2005 lecture alone, President Bush described an adversary using the terms "Islamic radicalism," "militant jihadism," "Islamofascism," and a "form of radicalism [that] exploits Islam to serve a violent, political vision."<sup>10</sup> These distinctions translated poorly. Much of the world interpreted the war on terrorism as a war on Muslims and Islam, and the insistent repetition from the administration that the United States was not aligned against Islam only helped to polarize global opinion and poison potential dialogues among different stakeholders.

The U.S. government's failure to act on the implications of a globalized media—and its erasure of barriers between domestic and international audiences—compounded the negative impact of the approach to the attackers' Islamic identity on global opinion. Intending to speak to a global audience about U.S. intentions and values in the world of international affairs, President Bush presented an Islam of intrinsically peaceful character and broadcast his desire that "the world's Muslims ... know that America appreciates and celebrates the traditions of Islam."<sup>11</sup> At the same time, directing his statements at a domestic audience and potential allies, Bush justified the need for a military campaign by noting the dangers of a terrorist fringe of "Islamofascists." The inability to compartmentalize these statements, which were heard worldwide, had dramatically counterproductive results. The term "Islamofascism" alone alienated Muslims globally, by appearing to equate Islam with fascism.

This late recognition has led to instructions on how to use terminology related to Islam. At the end of April 2008, the State Department approved a lexical guide, "Words that Work and Words that Don't: A Guide for Counterterrorism Communication," for use at U.S. embassies. The Guide recommends that terms such as jihadist and mujahideen be excised from vocabularies because their use might legitimate extremist adherents and alienate mainstream communities.<sup>12</sup> These gestures mark a positive step in communications in particular because they recognize that others are not blank slates on which U.S. communications can simply be written. Rather, they have their own contexts and these contexts shape what is heard.

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<sup>10</sup> George W. Bush, "President Discusses War on Terror At National Endowment for Democracy" (lecture, Washington D.C., October 6, 2005), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/10/20051006-3.html>.

<sup>11</sup> President George W. Bush, "Remarks by President George W. Bush in a statement to reporters during a meeting with U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan" (Washington D.C., November 13, 2002), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/ramadan/islam.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew Lee, "'Jihadist' Booted from Government Lexicon," *Associated Press*, April 24, 2008, <http://ap.google.com/article/ALEqM5i3X6Gha4z-MCq9pU0vC4FWqDCXrwD908CUGO0>.

But such guides, if necessary, are not sufficient nor can they substitute for a communication strategy conceived on a higher order. Indeed, they can appear to confirm that using the right word, and avoiding using the wrong one, constitutes communication. In different departments of the U.S. government the search continues for the correct, Islamically-informed terms by which to win friends and influence the enemy.<sup>13</sup> This search is likely to lead communicators in unproductive circles because the right word for all times and places will never be found.

Words mean different things in different hands. The term jihad will have a different meaning for a Syrian fighter in Iraq, a Muslim professor in Kuwait, an U.S. counterterrorism official, a student of Islamic law in Italy, a taxi driver in Buenos Aires, or a Protestant professional in London. The meaning of jihad will differ even within the circles that each of these people travels. This inability to 'fix' the meaning of any given term makes the search for the right one futile. Terms such as salafi and Wahhabi and Islam are used in many settings and by many people. They are used differently by community insiders and outsiders, by those with different political intentions, by those with different levels of knowledge and authority about and within Islam, and in different times and places.

The degree to which stakeholders in religious terms speak in absolutes makes the search for the right word counterproductive because it pitches policymakers representing pluralism into battles over the absolute meaning. For opinion leaders aiming speech at mainstream communities, and seeking to defuse violent conflict fueled by religious extremism, xenophobia and other forms of Manichean thinking, entering into this debate is futile. Speakers who begin debating the terms of religion with their adversaries cede both moral high ground and effectiveness.

A more strategic communications practice will begin with the recognition that all terms have multiple meanings and contexts, identify those areas on which

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<sup>13</sup> Terms and the concept of a lexicon continue to circulate among commentators within or in advisory roles to the government; additionally, prominent journalists and bloggers discuss and dispute Islamic terms on a regular basis. One example of the former is the lexicon put forth by former senatorial chief-of-staff Jim Guirard on June 2007 at <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/06/david-kilkullens-call-for-a-ne/> ("David Kilkullen's Call for a 'New Lexicon,'" *Smallwarsjournal.com*, June 29, 2007). To view an ongoing discussion of the value of different terms by military and media commentators across the political spectrum, see the links at [redblueamerica.com](http://redblueamerica.com) at <http://redblueamerica.com/topic/2008-04-25/no-more-jihadists-what-should-we-call-terrorists-were-fighting-3067>.

agreement among different parties is most crucial (recognizing that there will never be complete recognition), and formulate key messages that help confirm consensus where it is important.

Take, for example, even the widely accepted phrase "Islamic extremism." Opinion leaders will usefully focus on whether the term is effective in context more than they will on whether it is correct in all times and places. Are there other more precise ways of qualifying actors in this particular case? If the "Islamic" is merely meant to be descriptive, are there other more important descriptors? Might it not be better to speak of Muslim violent extremists who are motivated by a complex of reasons than in less precise terms of "Islamic extremism"? Who is the intended audience? Who is the unintended, but likely, audience? How does the label, Islamic extremism, accord with actions and related policies?

## **CORRECTIVE TWO: GEOPOLITICAL GENERALIZATIONS**

**Islam and "the West" are uniform concepts. The attackers of September 11, 2001, represented a unified global movement guided by a coherent ideology with the sole aim of destroying or defeating "the West."**

The assumption that not only the al-Qaeda attacks, but all terrorist attacks committed by Muslim violent extremists, are motivated by a single well-defined ideology and constitute a unified movement has had a powerful effect on the language on extremism. It has helped sponsor a discourse that encourages fear and discourages much needed specificity in discussions of sub-state violence.

Shortly after the September 11, 2001, attacks, Americans were told they faced an adversary of formidable proportions, to say the least: a "global terror network" with an ideological legacy of "fascism, and Nazism, and totalitarianism."<sup>14</sup> In short order, the original description of the threat posed by a network of al-Qaeda adherents grew to include nearly every conflict in the world that engages Muslim actors, with the presumption that these distinct conflicts not only share but are acting to promote the same ideology. In 2005, the president grouped as one movement "global, borderless terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda;" "paramilitary insurgencies and separatist movements in places like Somalia, and the Philippines, and Pakistan, and Chechnya, and Kashmir, and Algeria;" and "local cells inspired by Islamic radicalism." In subsequent years, similarly imprecise groupings have been

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<sup>14</sup> Bush, *Address to Congress*.

yoked by rhetorical force and served up as gruesome montages of near simultaneous explosions. "Radical Islamic extremism" has also been compared to communism and the Soviets during the Cold War, which suggests that a divergent collection of insurgents and movements have a monolithic identity..

The 2008 U.S. State of the Union Speech brought listeners this review of the recent past:

We've watched throngs of mourners in Lebanon and Pakistan carrying the caskets of beloved leaders taken by the assassin's hand. We've seen wedding guests ... staggering from a hotel in Jordan, Afghans and Iraqis blown up ... and trains in London and Madrid ripped apart by bombs. On a clear September day, we saw thousands of our fellow citizens taken from us in an instant. These horrific images serve as a grim reminder: The advance of liberty is opposed by terrorists and extremists -- evil men who despise freedom, despise America, and aim to subject millions to their violent rule.<sup>15</sup>

These kinds of statements are at once deeply misleading in their implications and accurate in some of their details. Bombings in Jordan and Madrid were both al-Qaeda operations. Muslim religious extremists do drive violent attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. These small points of likeness, placed like dots on a pointillist's canvas, eventually blend together to create one portrait of a globally unified terrorist movement. A closer look reveals far fewer similarities and connections than the overall picture suggests. Political assassinations in Lebanon are not like the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan. In each case, internal and regional politics are at play to a greater degree than a jihadi sensibility. Violence in Pakistan, although driven by al-Qaeda and Taliban actors and sympathizers, is also a function of the particular socio-political landscape of that country. Multiple actors with shifting motives are acting in Iraq, and though some may share the sense of religious justification with those in Afghanistan, fighters in Iraq cannot be considered to be fighting for the same geopolitical terrain as the Afghan Taliban. Algeria's violent extremists, while claiming allegiance to Al Qaeda, grew out of local circumstances that inflect their appropriation of 'global jihad.' In the Philippines, Kashmir, and Chechnya, conflicts have long and distinct historical roots related to regional

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<sup>15</sup> George W. Bush, "State of the Union 2008 Address" (Washington D.C., January 28, 2008), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/01/20080128-13.html>.

geopolitics, the balance of national power, ethnic marginalization and other issues.

Indeed, even within al-Qaeda, there are significant differences of ideology, as Yahya Sadowski has explained:

The men who destroyed the World Trade Center on 9/11 were not political clones who subscribed to a single ideology. Muhammad Atta, whose Hamburg Cell actually executed the attacks, grew up in a white-collar Egyptian household; held ardently to Sufi-influenced versions of Islam; and lived much of his life in Europe. Yet he hated the West, believing that it supported genocide against Muslims in Bosnia and Chechnya. Osama bin Ladin, who organized the attacks, came from a wealthy family in insular Saudi Arabia; was a pious follower of a sectarian, anti-Sufi brand of Islam (Salafism); and never really worked outside the Muslim world. His primary objective seems to have been to drive U.S. troops out of the Middle East, particularly away from the Islamic holy places in Saudi Arabia. Khalid Shaykh Muhammad, who dreamed up the skyjacking attack, came from a working-class Baluchi (Pakistani) family in Kuwait; was never a pious Muslim of any variety; and had lived everywhere from North Carolina to the Philippines. His great obsession was the Palestine question and he hoped to punish American for supporting Israel ....If it is not easy to generalize about the motives and characteristics of the two dozen men who organized one single atrocity, imagine how difficult it must be to make broad inferences about the millions of Muslims who participate in other forms of political Islam ...."<sup>16</sup>

It is always possible to find reasonable points of comparisons between unlike things, and to do so can be a powerful rhetorical gesture. When communicating into political space in which more than rhetorical power is at stake, effective communicators will ask not only what actors share but what they do not share, and whether overall accuracy or the overall intended goal of the communication justifies the comparative claim.

Opinion leaders have options in how they choose to group actors and explain terrorism and political violence in a way that makes narrative sense. They may claim that reality drives their statements, but in fact their statements often forge the perception of a reality among listeners who do not know better. In between statements that are easily proven factually incorrect, and narrow

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<sup>16</sup> Yahya Sadowski, "Political Islam: Asking the Wrong Questions?" *American Review of Political Science* 9 (2006): 215-16.

statements that are correct, there are numerous ways of constructing more precise narratives with a greater or lesser degree of accuracy and persuasive power for global audiences.

Descriptions of a globally unified adversary with a singular motive will play out in particularly damaging ways in the current media environment. First, they help create a sense of unnecessary panic in the domestic environment. The domestic media is quick to pick up and exploit dramatic statements and responsible policymakers should beware of enabling this version of shouting fire in a crowded theater. Second, such statements, although directed primarily at a domestic audience, are inevitably heard by a global one. When they are riddled with inaccuracy and misunderstanding of the history of distinct conflicts, they have the potential to alienate a popular audience already skeptical of U.S. motives.

Statements suggesting that the September 11, 2001, attacks are the epicenter of the history of terrorism lend themselves in particular to cynical ridicule in countries that have a distinct history of terrorism themselves, such as Egypt and Algeria. They also lay bare the U.S. failure to grasp that in the Middle East, "most Arab views of terrorism do not coincide with those defined by the US State Department as 'all premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets.' Rather, they see such violence – and the groups that perpetrate it – as legitimate if they are part of a strategy to counter the policies of what they see as threatening powers – the US and Israel. Arabs are inclined to define terrorism more according to the motivations of the combatants rather than by the nature of the act."<sup>17</sup> While it is unlikely to be in the U.S. national interest to agree with this definition, the failure to understand how it shapes the reception of U.S. statements about terrorism will continue to lead to unproductive communications.

Foreign governments may be persuaded that nearly any disturbance to domestic stability can be labeled terrorism, based on the U.S. example of a global war against terrorism that encompasses a wide variety of actors. Indeed they may find that joining the battle will ensure U.S. favor in concrete ways. In the increasingly transparent media environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, statements by U.S. leaders and actions by other political leaders will be more quickly absorbed into and refracted by popular media, with repercussions whose full effects are not yet calculated. We do know, however, that governments are increasingly under domestic and international scrutiny by professional and

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<sup>17</sup> *Revisiting the Arab Street: Research from Within* (Amman, Jordan: Center for Strategic Studies, February 2005), 71.

citizen journalists. When U.S. policymakers relinquish opportunities to remark on local causes and contexts in favor of broad statements of a global terrorist threat, they serve up a counterproductive model. This model will serve governments seeking similar cover. These include Middle Eastern governments as well as Russia and China, among others. A greater focus on understanding local contexts could serve as the basis for communication to popular audiences in the Middle East. Finally, with enough repetition by media in the United States, claims of a singular global adversary are likely to start to appear true and filter into actions on the ground and policymaking.

## **CORRECTIVE THREE: EXTREMISM LEXICON**

**The use of the term "extremism" in place of "terrorism" will not be sufficient to solve the problems posed by the indiscriminate use of terms such as "terrorism."**

The initial focus on "terrorism" as a primary security threat has shifted substantially over the course of the last few years to become a focus on "extremism." In Great Britain, where there has long been discomfort with the U.S. phrasing, the use of the term "war on terrorism" has been halted altogether. The Home Office recommended that communicators and media use of the term "violent extremism" over terms such as "Islamist extremism" or "jihadi-fundamentalist," with the intention of severing rhetorical links between Islam and terrorism. The United States has followed suit. Although a 2005 attempt to 'officially' re-label the "Global War on Terrorism" as a "Global Struggle against Violent Extremism"<sup>18</sup> met with ridicule in the U.S. media as a branding strategy to deflect attention from the Iraq war, there has been an unofficial drift toward favoring the term extremism. Political, military, and intelligence heads refer to the "war against Islamic extremism" (while also continuing to cite the "war on terrorism"),<sup>19</sup> and it is the preferred term in many internal government documents.

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<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Tom Regan, "The 'Rebranding' of the War on Terror, *Christian Science Monitor*, July 28, 2005, <http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0728/dailyUpdate.html>; Sidney Blumenthal, "Selling the War," *Salon.com*, July 28, 2005, [http://dir.salon.com/story/opinion/blumenthal/2005/07/28/war\\_on\\_terror/index.html](http://dir.salon.com/story/opinion/blumenthal/2005/07/28/war_on_terror/index.html); Terry Turner, "What Did You Do in the 'Global Struggle against Violent Extremism,' Daddy?" *blogcritics.com*, July 27, 2005, <http://blogcritics.org/archives/2005/07/27/094325.php>; Robert Higgs, "Global Struggle against Violent Extremism: Marketing Gimmick or Ominous Turn?" *Media Monitors Network*, August 10, 2005, <http://usa.mediamonitors.net/content/view/full/17640>.

<sup>19</sup> "Winning the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are central to our efforts to win the war on Islamic extremism" - Senator Lindsey Graham, quoted in "Graham Supports Promotion of Generals, *The Times and Democrat*, April 25, 2008, <http://www.thetandd.com/articles/2008/04/25/news/doc481233f65ba0b292078251.txt>.

The turn toward the use of "extremism" rather than "terrorism" has a number of potential implications. Good effects flow from relinquishing the incendiary charge of "terrorist." But "extremism" poses its own problems in its current usage. "Extremism" is a term with exceptionally wide scope. "Extremist" does not convey the same meaning as "terrorist" in either the specialized terms of political scientists nor in our everyday sense of these words. Terrorists threaten or inflict violence with the intention of spreading terror. We disagree over who is a terrorist because we disagree over when violence or its threat is legitimate. Unlike "terrorism," "extremism" does not suggest an action; it does not even suggest an intention to act. Extremism is a relational term—it is only meaningful in relation to a consensus about what is not "extreme." This consensus (and agreement on what constitutes extremism) is difficult enough to achieve within one society or state. At its logical extreme, what is being proposed by a "war on extremism" is a global consensus on how we think about religious and ethical norms.

In much official U.S. speech, the use of the term "extremists" is a superficial semantic fix, at best. Last year's terrorists may have been renamed extremists, but they appear to be the same vague and imprecisely named menace as terrorists. Mentions of extremism harbor the same forms of illogic that riddled earlier communications. In a January 5, 2008, radio address, for example, President Bush referred to "the war against these extremists" who "have assassinated democratic leaders from Afghanistan to Lebanon to Pakistan. They have murdered innocent people from Saudi Arabia to Jordan and Iraq. They are seeking new weapons and new operatives, so they can attack America again, overthrow governments in the Middle East, and impose their hateful vision on millions."<sup>20</sup> In this address, the word "extremists" was used in place of the term "terrorists," but it means *exactly* what "terrorists" meant in earlier addresses. Who "they" are is still not clear. The president used language dismissively and, with that gesture, dismissed listeners' concerns about the implications of such sweeping generalizations. Global audiences are likely to see this for the linguistic band-aid for what it is: "extremists" covers, but does not heal, the problem.

Additionally, the term continues to convey the apparent targeting of Muslims and will not by itself challenge the widely-held belief that the United States is at war with Islam itself. Indeed, it has the capacity to broaden that idea. Although both U.S. and British officials have taken pains to delink the word "Islamic" from "extremism," the intention to focus on Muslim communities and Islamic ideologies is clearly present in their communications. In current U.S.

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<sup>20</sup> President George W. Bush, "President's Radio Address: In Focus, Middle East," (January 5, 2008), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/01/20080105.html>.

policy contexts, religious extremism tends to be used to suggest a relationship with terrorism along a continuum of radicalization. The battle then—the war of ideas—is a prophylactic one meant to confront people and belief systems that presumably threaten to become violent before they do adopt violent methods. The promise of a war waged in these terms is nearly breathtaking in its potential sweep.

Policymakers and opinion leaders should be clear about what they intend when they invoke efforts to confront extremism. The contracted media environment makes understanding the contexts for the term itself especially important. In the Arab Middle East, the term "extremism" has a local history in a number of countries and conflicts and it will inevitably be heard against these specific historical backdrops.

On the positive side, introducing the concept of extremism into the communications environment offers an opportunity for political leaders to make beneficial statements about what extremism-free communities look like and what they value. Political leaders who can articulate the line between mainstream communal values, on both a global and domestic scale, and unacceptable extremist behavior, put their policymaking communities in a position to draw those lines in action.

These lines may be drawn at the border of belief and action, as a recent EWI report, *Lessons from the Abrahamic Faiths*, suggests: "We must ... distinguish between those who represent a genuine security threat—that is, the people who are willing and able to carry out violence—and those whose orthodoxy may be at the far end of the religious spectrum. So long as the latter do not coerce others, they must be free to practice their religion. Evaluating the threat from extremist groups espousing a politicized theology is more complicated. Often these groups may not espouse or support violence but do seek to impose their religion on a state's legislative and social regimes. It is certainly wrong to conflate such groups with terrorists. Yet it would be folly to exclude these groups from consideration as having no influence on violent extremists."<sup>21</sup> Political leaders who can clearly draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior are in a solid position to link policies, actions, and language in a visibly coherent way.

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<sup>21</sup> Dina Kraft, et al., *Countering Violent Extremism: Lessons from the Abrahamic Faiths* (EastWest Institute, October 2007), v.

## CONCLUSION

The meaning of words varies according to the social, cultural, and political context. Language cannot be controlled. It is a dynamic tool with the power to defuse or inflame tensions in the discourse surrounding violent extremism and terrorism. U.S. policymakers and opinion leaders have spent a great deal of time and energy explaining what terrorists and extremists putatively believe and what the United States and its allies oppose. Comparatively less time has been spent thoughtfully articulating what the United States is for and what its values.

The three assumptions discussed in this paper highlight the danger of demonizing religious ideology, over-generalizing the aims and motivations for violent extremism and groups, and taking a superficial approach to terminology as a solution. An exhaustive examination of religious texts will not yield an answer to the complex and multifaceted phenomenon of violent extremism. Ignoring the complexity of the actors and groups involved is unlikely to contribute positively to the fight against violent extremism. It is only by adopting consistent, accurate, and constructive communication strategies that we will advance towards a solution.

It is vital that policymakers shift their language focus toward countering the three prevalent assumptions about violent extremism. The recommendations made in this paper propose a broader communications strategy that acknowledges the weakness of focusing on specific terminology and religious ideologies. Instead, we must go beyond words and toward a newly holistic communications practice in which media and message are harmonized in the interest of countering extremism.

## KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Actions speaks as loudly as words**

*Only throwing this or that strongly evocative word into the communications environment is a hit-or-miss proposition. Speakers will be judged by their deeds and policies, as well as by their rhetoric. Communications must be crafted in which actions, policies and rhetoric are mutually reinforcing activities.*

A communication effort that begins with a search for the right word (or the right movement or ideology) cannot end there and be expected to succeed. Words in themselves are simply vessels for human intention. Their meanings derive

from context and collective consent: who speaks, who listens, and the circumstances of their interaction. Simply throwing this or that strongly evocative word into the communication environment is a hit-or-miss proposition. Speakers who appear to say one thing while doing another will not be viewed as credible. Speakers whose actions, policies, and words embody a coherent intention have a greater chance of being viewed as credible. Those whose communications understand both the medium and the intended recipient of the message have a greater chance of being heard and understood. And those whose communications engage their listeners as stakeholders in their shared circumstances have the best chance of being accepted.

A holistic communication strategy will be context based and will strategically, and reflectively, assess the entire environment in which communication takes place: who speaks, their medium, what they say, how they act, and who is listening.

### **Work with—not against—global media realities**

*Acknowledge the multiple, dynamic, and contextual meanings of terms and language related to violent extremism. Where possible, identify the variety of interpretations for events.*

The Internet ensures that there are always many different interpretations of both words and events circulating at once and that no single media outlet or speaker can establish authoritative versions. Policymakers and media should avoid the insoluble question of which word is the right word by seeking to use the most appropriate terms for a particular context. They should work with—rather than against—this environment by recognizing multiple points of view, being able to articulate whose purposes are served by different terms in different contexts (e.g. Islamic, Islamist, Zionist, fundamentalist, al-Qaeda linked, imperialist, terrorist, Wahhabi, neo-Salafi), and being able to explain where they stand, and which terms they reject. Media members should, where possible or appropriate, showcase different points of view or interpretations or otherwise model appropriate dialogue in a tolerant and open society.

### **Ideological archaeology is not the answer**

*Avoid engaging in debate on any particular religious claims or specific religious doctrines.*

Leaders of multi-faith, pluralistic communities will be most credible by speaking and demonstrating their promotion of religion in general and

removing themselves as far as possible from engaging in ecumenical discussions. Policymakers should limit statements on any particular religion from a theological perspective. Instead, they should speak to the values of communities who value religion and address the behaviors—including speech—that democratic societies accept. And they should model these behaviors in public addresses. Policymakers and other influential speakers who are not professional claimants for a religious community should be aware that essential claims on behalf of a religion, whether positive or negative, are likely to feed the clash of civilizations premise. Even positive claims (Islam is a religion of peace) put a policymaker on the same rhetorical level as other claimants while pitching him/her into the realm of religious absolutes.

This does not mean that the search to learn about the history and theology of Islam and Muslim communities should be abandoned. This understanding is crucial to communication. However, it should not be undertaken with the intention to pin down the school, movement, sect, or word that perfectly characterizes an adversary.

### **There is no “Them” or “Us”**

*Use communication strategies that recognize the potential for all communities to eradicate or contain extremist tendencies.*

Communications technologies have effectively eroded the line between domestic and global audiences and created new ways of creating local and transnational alliances. Policymakers can have no expectation that what they say to one audience will not be heard by others. Their credibility in this environment will flow from the transparency of their statements and their ability to articulate common global principles in the context of violent extremism. Speakers will strengthen their credibility by demonstrating willingness to show how the United States addresses issues like those of countries facing the threat of growing extremism—social fragmentation, political rifts, marginalized or impoverished communities, and religious and other forms of extremism.

Speakers who can illustrate what we—we Americans, we who are for extremism-free communities—are for, will stand on a stronger platform than those who can only reiterate what we are against. In this vein, policymakers can state not only their commitment to liberty and pluralism but describe how communities that live these values behave; how healthy communities deal with their marginalized and disenfranchised; which behaviors moderate people everywhere, and of every faith, embrace, and which they reject.

## **Take the politics out of personal faith**

*Shape messages in ways that encourage the adherents of a religion to freely decide for themselves its virtues.*

When religion is addressed, policymakers, opinion leaders, and other stakeholders must speak with the awareness that no religious community is a monolith. There are internal variations in belief and practice that extend beyond sect. The normative claims of any religion (what should be done) are not the same as what is and has been done by real people in different circumstances. They must be aware that religious beliefs, practices, and claims are generally not separable from other beliefs, practices, and claims. Credibility will be enhanced by addressing people and communities as complex and variegated in their motivations and actions.

## **Specifics speak louder than overgeneralizations**

*Draw connections and comparisons between groups, actors, ideologies, and conflicts with care, evaluating the cost-benefit of comparing or connecting.*

One of the most basic ways we make sense of the world is by grouping like objects and separating unlike objects. Grouping all violent actors, or all violent Muslim actors, inaccurately spawns fear domestically and cynicism globally about U.S. motives. Just because two movements or groups or acts [e.g. an assassination in Lebanon and an assassination in Pakistan] share some characteristics does not automatically mean their comparison serves the larger communication intended.

To increase accuracy and reduce potentially inflammatory comparisons, those producing public speech should check groups, movements, or individuals they would like to compare and ensure that (a) the comparison stands up to logical scrutiny; (b) the likenesses between groups or movements are stronger and more meaningful than their differences; (c) that these points of comparison will be logical in multiple contexts and for multiple audiences, and if not, that the risk to credibility or acceptance of the message intended is worth the comparison.

### **About The Author\***

**Amy Zalman** writes and performs research aimed at improving communication between the United States and foreign audiences. She is a senior strategist at Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), where she focuses on the design and method of transculturally astute research for U.S. government clients. She also writes the "About Terrorism" reference website for New York Times online division About.com.

Dr. Zalman's recent presentations on violent extremism and communication include congressional testimony on "winning hearts and minds" and recommendations for media at the EastWest Institute Fifth Worldwide Security Conference. She has served on the faculties of New York University, Cornell University, and the New School University. She received her Ph.D. from the Department of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies at New York University and a Master of Fine Arts degree in poetry from Cornell University. She is highly proficient in Arabic and conversant in Hebrew.

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