



COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER at West Point

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22 May 2006

Problems with the Arabic Name Game

By William McCants

Some analysts have advised U.S. officials not to employ the terms our enemies use to describe themselves (“Jihadis” or “Mujahids,” i.e. those engaged in *jihad*) or their actions (e.g. “martyrdom operations”) since these terms legitimate them in the eyes of other Muslims. Instead, they argue, U.S. officials should use Arabic terms that will discredit the Jihadis among mainstream Muslims. This is a reasonable suggestion, but there are two reasons why it should be taken up with caution.

First, using alternative words may be counterproductive. For example, some have opined that enemy terror attacks should be called *hiraba* since the word evokes the Qur’an and condemns Jihadis on their own terms. Proponents of this suggestion point to verse 5:33 of the Qur’an, called the *hiraba* verse, which denounces those who fight (*yuharibun*) God and His messenger and strive to spread corruption in the land. The punishment for such people is execution, crucifixion, amputation of their hands and feet on opposite sides, or exile (5:33), unless they repent (5:34). Although the Qur’an is not clear as to what constitutes fighting God and His messenger and spreading corruption in the land, *hiraba* in the medieval Islamic tradition was understood as brigandage or armed highway robbery (in the first century of Islam the concept also included rebellion against the state). Obviously, terror attacks on civilians do not fit neatly into this category and it is hard to argue that Jihadis are fighting against God and Muhammad. Such imprecision will elicit derision from devout Muslims.

The same problem plagues the various alternatives for “Jihadi.” Take, for example, the current push to replace *jihadi* (which is what militant Salafis sometimes call themselves) with *irhabi* (“terrorist”) or *mufsid* (“corruptor”). *Irhabi* (“terrorist”) has a positive connotation because of some Qur’anic verses that call upon believers to terrorize (*turhibun*, from the same root as *irhab*) the enemies of God (cf. verse 8:60). *Mufsid* (“corruptor”, such as those mentioned in the *hiraba* verse above) is a slightly better term, but the spectacle of U.S. officials engaging in Arabic theological polemics will be received with scorn. It will also encourage debate over whom the real “corruptors” are (expect America to win the prize).

Second, while we should not necessarily privilege the labels our enemy chooses, they are sometimes more accurate and more polemically useful than the various alternatives proposed. For example, “Jihadi” is a more exact designation than “terrorist”, usefully separating violent Salafis from non-violent Salafis. Moreover, our use of the term forces non-Jihadis to contest the word’s meaning: “No, no—you in the West have it all wrong. Jihad is about spiritual struggle, not warfare.” The more the term becomes contested by mainstream Muslims, the more religiously-sanctioned warfare becomes delegitimized.

That said, if U.S. policy makers want a word that will really sting Jihadis, try calling their ideology “Qutbism” (KOO-too-bism). This designation has several things going for it:

1. It accurately names the ideology of our enemies, who cite Sayyid Qutb repeatedly and who consider themselves his intellectual descendants. (Qutb was an Egyptian Muslim militant who was executed by the Egyptian government in the 60s.)
2. The Muslim opponents of the Jihadis (including mainstream Salafis) call them “Qutbis” (KOO-too-bees), a designation our enemies hate (see the article [“Stealing al-Qa`ida’s Playbook”](#) by Brachman and McCants for a good example of this). They would much rather be called Jihadis or Salafis.
3. Because the word “Qutbism” is very unfamiliar to Americans and rather hard to say, calling the current struggle “the clash with Qutbism” would force them to learn a little about the roots of the ideology that is motivating our enemies.

Qutbism is our generation's Nazism; we should use the right word to describe it.

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