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War of Words

by AZIZ HUQ

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The latest front in the Bush Administration's "war on terror" lies far from the wilds of Waziristan--it's on the tongues of American bureaucrats and diplomats. It is a battle being waged in the current season of presidential politicking, with real consequences for civil liberties and national security.

The issue is how to talk about terror without aiding terrorists. In particular, it's about how government officials communicate to a world that is often skeptical of American motives without seeming insensitive, ignorant or bigoted. An internal effort to frame this question has already sparked a Beltway brushfire. In 2005, the Bush Administration briefly **cast aside** the standard terminology for its global war on terror--GWOT--for the Global Struggle Against Violent Extremism (GSVE). Not as catchy as Kanye, but the acronym at least had the virtue of accuracy: terror cannot be eradicated by government fiat. And counterterrorism is a process, not a war, which depends on ideas and political suasion as much as brute force.

The GSVE idea **didn't last**. But in early May two government documents surfaced, providing insight into continued efforts within the government to address the ideological and psychological demands of counterterrorism without partisan blinkers.

The Department of Homeland Security and the Department of State each circulated intra-agency documents urging care in the way that officials use language.

The DHS report advised that terminology should be "strategic--it should avoid helping the terrorists by inflating the religious bases and glamorous appeal of their ideology." Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff met with a group of American Muslims and asked for their input on how to communicate effectively.

The "expert recommendations" that resulted are at once no-brainers and critically important. Don't feed the notion that America is engaged in a broad struggle against the so-called Muslim World, American Muslims advised DHS. Don't use terms that concede the religious legitimacy of terrorists, a legitimacy that terrorists use to garner new recruits. Find ways to emphasize that Muslims have been, and will continue to be, part of the fabric of our country.

The State Department's memo similarly aimed "to raise awareness among communicators of the language issues that may enhance or detract from successful engagement"--surely an uncontroversial goal for diplomats.

Its guidance was similarly to the point: Avoid ill-defined and offensive terminology. Don't use religious terms like "jihadist" or "mujahideen" because in some circumstances this "unintentionally legitimates their actions." Don't use too many non-English terms, especially theological terms, the memo advised, "unless you are prepared to discuss their varying meanings over the centuries."

Directed at officials engaged in delicate diplomacy and policy-making, these seem undeniably good ideas. Why deliberately provoke those populations or persons terrorists seek to recruit? What benefit is there in inaccurate use of religious terms that few in the US government even understand?

Yet this modest advice triggered a furious response. Both memos were leaked to a right-of-center blog run by Steven Emerson. And in due time, media reports labeled the documents a "**speech code**." Mark Krikorian, posting on **NRO Online** and Andrew McCarthy on the AARP's more centrist **Divided We Fail** condemned the reports for drawing false "moral equivalences." A particular critique was the notion in the two documents that Islam was not the cause of terrorism. In the words of one blogger, the reports erred by failing to see that "Islam is a hurdle you need to get over" and to obscuring "the Islam we actually have to deal with."

Nor was the backlash limited to the virtual fringe. In Congress, Rep. Peter Hoekstra (R-NY) introduced an **amendment** to the Intelligence Authorization bill that would have prohibited "the intelligence community from adopting speech codes"--what Hoekstra called "McCarthyism in reverse."

But neither report imposes anything close to a speech code. The Homeland Security document reproduces--albeit approvingly--recommendations from "experts." The Department of State paper begins with a caveat that it is "not binding." Ironically, it is Hoekstra and his allies who seek ideological conformity and bar debate about effective counterterrorism strategy.

This kind of pre-emptive censorship of debate has real-world consequences. A conflation of Islam and terrorism has fostered and justified a steady tide of hate crimes against Muslims, and the ambient discrimination against those perceived to be Muslim is visible every day in airports, train stations, shops and workplaces. For those who bear the brunt of this animus, what the government says--and how government speech sanctions private hatreds--is hardly a private matter.

It would be bad enough if this kind of careless and harmful analysis were limited to a fringe. Unfortunately, the facile invocation of theology as a substitute for informed understanding is visible in the mainstream press, including a recent *New York Times* op-ed piece by **Edward Luttwak**.

Arguing that Muslims will be "horrified by the fact of Senator Obama's conversion [from Islam] to Christianity," Luttwak claims that because Islamic law sanctions the murder of apostates, a President Obama would need extra security when abroad, and would be disabled from persuading Muslim-majority nations from aiding us in counterterrorism operations.

Yet Luttwak fails to explain why Obama hasn't yet been attacked by one of America's several million Muslims or why the streets of Muslim communities around the world don't daily drip with apostate blood. Inconvenient facts--that the lived reality of Muslims in the United States and around the world is not terribly different from anyone else's--do not deter Luttwak. Like Hoekstra and his allies, he assumes that his theological understanding of Islam is not only correct but also is the only way to describe a diverse faith community compromising millions.

If Obama becomes the Democratic candidate, Luttwak's ignorant comments will be among the least offensive aspects of the national debate. Already, it's a given that being labeled "Muslim" is a slur. And efforts to leverage public fear about Islam will only increase as the campaign season goes on.

If ideas like Luttwak's become part of the conventional wisdom, things will be no easier for American Muslims, who live daily with the fallout from facile caricatures of their faith. If the voices of true experts

is drowned out by shrill and exclusionary arguments, the politics of polarization will thrive and little light will be shed on the difficult problems of counterterrorism. And in the absence of real debate, it is not just American Muslims who will suffer this election year but the nation as a whole.

About Aziz Huq

Aziz Huq directs the liberty and national security project at New York University's Brennan Center for Justice. He is co-author of ***Unchecked and Unbalanced: Presidential Power in a Time of Terror*** (New Press, 2007)

He is a 2006 recipient of the Carnegie Scholars Fellowship and has published scholarship in the *Columbia Law Review*, the *Yearbook of Islamic and Middle Eastern Law*, and the New School's *Constellations Journal*. He has also written for *Himal Southasian*, *Legal Times* and the *American Prospect*, and appeared as a commentator on *Democracy Now!* and NPR's *Talk of the Nation*. [more...](#)

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