



The Council on Global Security

WHITE PAPER

The Flawed Science Behind America's Counter-Terrorism Strategy

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Executive Summary

Both the Bush and Obama administrations have been criticized for their strategies towards Islamist terrorism. While criticism of Obama's policies has been sharper, some analysts of counter-terrorism policy argue that Obama has merely taken the Bush policies to the next level.

This paper argues that the policies of the two administrations are diametrically opposed.

President George W. Bush saw Islamist radicalism as unarguably evil, and his decision not to criticize Islam publicly or use the term *jihad* was a deliberate tactic intended to weaken the extremists, albeit one that inadvertently weakened the hand of law enforcement and counter-terrorism (CT) professionals.

In sharp contrast, President Barack Obama and a number of his top counter-terrorism advisors see Islamic extremism through the lens of Social Movement Theory, according to which extremists are viewed as "activists" with legitimate grievances, whether against colonialism, modernism, poverty and unemployment, or simply "the West."

As a result, Obama's CT strategy has focused primarily on targeting individual perpetrators and addressing "upstream causes," rather than on countering an ideology that is at war with the United States.¹

Moreover, if you see economic or political grievances at the root of all terrorism, you must then set yourself a course of solving all of those grievances. But because that is an impossible task, you are left, finally, having to use force. The Social Movement paradigm thus condemns the United States to perpetual war.

¹ See, for example, John Brennan's speech at the Wilson Center, "The Efficacy and Ethics of U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy," April 30, 2013.

The Challenge of Islam: 1979-2009

While a number of domestic terrorist attacks were carried out by Nation of Islam members in 1973-74, Islamic terrorism only emerged as a significant factor for the United States in 1979. In that singular year, Islamist rebels seized the Grand Mosque of Mecca; and in Iran, with its newly established theocratic Republic, terrorists stormed the U.S. embassy and took 60 Americans hostage.

Yet to confuse matters, in that same year Islamic fighters, mujahedeen, emerged as natural partners for the U.S. as they rose up to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan. The dilemma, then, for U.S. leaders and policymakers, one which has only grown in complexity over time, is how to talk about Islam in a way that is instructive in dealing with Muslims who are enemies but not destructive to those who are friends. Presidents and policymakers have tried to resolve this dilemma by publicly asserting American amity towards Islam.

A clear example of this stance is demonstrated in the 1992 statement of then-Assistant Secretary of State Edward Djerejian, serving under President George H.W. Bush, who said:

“If there is one thought I can leave you with tonight, it is that the U.S. Government does not view Islam as the next ‘ism’ confronting the West or threatening world peace.”²

The assertion that the U.S. is not at war with Islam has remained a constant refrain throughout successive administrations, even while the war against Islamist terrorists has escalated.³ George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, or senior members of their administrations, all went on record to acknowledge the threat of Islamic extremism in such countries as Iran, Sudan, Iraq and Libya. But they also made clear their belief that other countries in the Middle East did not pose a threat, and indeed were moving toward democracy. They therefore picked up the thread in Djerejian’s speech to assert that the U.S. was not at war with Islam. Anthony Lake, National Security Advisor to President Clinton, said in 1994:

In the Middle East as throughout the world, there is, indeed, a fundamental divide. But the fault line runs not between civilizations or religions; no, it runs instead between oppression and responsive government, between isolation and openness, and between moderation and extremism. . . . Our foe is oppression and extremism, whether in religious or secular guise. We draw the line against those who seek to advance their agenda through terror, intolerance, or coercion.⁴

² “The U.S. and the Middle East in a Changing World,” speech by Edward P. Djerejian, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs,” presented at Meridian House International, June 2, 1992, reprinted in *The DISAM Journal*, Summer 1992, pp. 32-38. http://www.disam.dsca.mil/pubs/Vol%2014_4/Djerejian.pdf accessed 2/18/2012.

³ The term “Islam” is used to refer to the religion in the broadest sense, whereas the term Islamist refers to the subset of Muslims who see Islam as an all-encompassing socio-political system; advocate for shari’a law as the basis of state law; believe that the Ummah, or Muslim community of believers, supersedes national identity, and who long to see the return of the Caliphate.

⁴ Anthony Lake, “Building a New Middle East: Challenges for U.S. Policy,” address at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington DC, May 17, 1994.

President Clinton went a step further. Not only was the West not at war with Islam, asserted Clinton, but the West could fully embrace Islam:

The traditional values of Islam—devotion to faith and good works, to family and society—are in harmony with the best of American ideals. Therefore, we know our people, our faiths, our cultures can live in harmony with each other.⁵

While efforts to assert an American absence of hostility toward Islam emanated primarily from senior levels of government, there is evidence that this mindset was having an impact on the ground, at the tactical level as well, in the work of fighting terrorism.

Both major attacks by Islamic terrorists on U.S. soil—the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and the 9/11 attacks in 2001—showed significant failures in law enforcement because of a reluctance to assess Islam critically. Several of the players in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing had been involved in the 1990 assassination of Rabbi Meir Kahane and therefore should have come to the attention of law enforcement, but they did not specifically because of the Islamic dimension. According to author Richard Miniter,

“Radical Islam would have been a legitimate angle of investigation in the Kahane assassination, but New York Police Department Chief of Detectives Joseph Borelli ordered detectives to ‘abandon any broad conspiracy theory’.”⁶

In spite of the fact that Kahane’s assassin was an Egyptian-born American named El Sayyid Nosair who had been fired from his job in part for trying to convert co-workers to Islam, and in spite of 40 boxes of evidence that included manuals for making bombs, articles about assassinations, and U.S. Special Forces documents translated into Arabic, the crime was never considered an act of terrorism.

Nor was the Islamic angle acknowledged or explored. If it had been, the subsequent 1993 World Trade Center bombing might have been prevented, because as Miniter points out, nearly all of those involved in the 1990 Kahane assassination also took part in the 1993 bombing.⁷

Similarly one finds noteworthy failings leading up to the 2001 attacks because of what would seem a very deliberate effort to not offend Muslims. Twenty Al Qaeda hijackers came to the United States to carry out those attacks, and according to Stewart Baker, former Assistant Secretary of Homeland Security Policy, “the entire government knew an attack was coming—somewhere.”⁸

In spite of that widespread knowledge, only one of the future hijackers, Mohamed al Kahtani, was stopped by border security, and even then only because

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⁵ Remarks by President Bill Clinton to the Jordanian Parliament, November 26, 1994, p. 3.

⁶ Richard Miniter, *Mastermind: The Many Faces of the 9/11 Architect, Khalid Shaikh Mohammed* (New York: Sentinel, 2011) pp. 50-51.

⁷ Miniter, *Mastermind*, p. 49.

⁸ Stewart Baker, *Skating on Stilts: Why We Aren’t Stopping Tomorrow’s Terrorism* (Stanford CA: Hoover Institution Press, 210), p. 31.

EVERY PRESIDENT
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of the insight and persistence of one U.S. Customs and Border Protection Inspector named Jose Melendez-Perez.⁹

If the entire government knew an attack was coming, why was there not greater scrutiny at the borders? Indeed the very opposite occurred. Four months before the 9/11 attacks, in June 2001, the U.S. State Department had instituted a Visa Express program for citizens of Saudi Arabia. Saudis no longer had to go through the process of application and scrutiny at a U.S. consulate in order to receive a visa to the United States. They merely had to submit a two-page application to their travel agency.

Moreover, pressure from the Saudi government prevented close scrutiny or questioning of Saudi citizens. Domestically, lawyers were bringing added pressure out of concern for infringement of civil liberties, and allegedly it was they who prevented the FBI from tracking the terrorists they knew had come into the country. Fifteen of the nineteen hijackers in the 9/11 attacks turned out to be Saudi citizens.

Only after the attacks of 9/11 did policymakers and law enforcement officials acknowledge that Islam as a distinctive and defining factor in acts of terrorism could no longer be denied or ignored. But again, the rhetoric that was used and the policies that resulted were contradictory. Then-President George W. Bush acknowledged that it was Muslims with openly professed religious motivations who had carried out the attacks. Yet he was equally resolute in asserting that Islam itself was not the problem.

The point here is simply to say that the contradictory nature of U.S. policy toward Islam has been a consistent one, at least since 1992. Every president since Ronald Reagan has tried to address the reality of terrorism against the United States by Muslims who claim jihad as their justification, while at the same time trying to avoid any direct condemnation of Islam in the context of that terrorism.

While this may seem a classic case of Orwellian doublespeak, in fact there had been a well-articulated rationale behind this policy. Policymakers believed that by tempering their language with regard to Islam, they might forestall further radicalization of moderate Muslims and indeed even potentially win moderates into the American circle of friendship.

Moreover, it was believed that a calculated use of language could delegitimize Islamic terrorists. Policymakers believed that the U.S. government “needed to win the hearts and minds of moderate Muslims and avoid glamorizing terrorists motivated by religious ideology.”¹⁰ Thus even the most notable—indeed notorious—of the instances of doublespeak—the decision not to call terrorists “jihadists”—had its rationale: it was believed by some that calling terrorists “jihadists” would confer religious legitimacy on their actions.

So while one might disagree with the reasoning detailed above, at least one can see a logic behind it. And one can see further elucidation of this thinking in the policies that ensued.

⁹ Statement of Jose E. Melendez-Perez to the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, January 26, 2004. http://www.9-11commission.gov/hearings/hearing7/witness_melendez.htm

¹⁰ Charles Johnson, “Who Advised the DHS/State to Ban the word ‘Jihad’?” Investigative Project on Terrorism, May 2, 2008.

For example, the Department of Homeland Security's Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties clearly manifested this mindset with their January 2008 publication, *Terminology to Define the Terrorists: Recommendations from American Muslims*, which stated

"We should not demonize all Muslims or Islam....Our terminology must be properly calibrated to diminish the recruitment efforts of extremists who argue that the West is at war with Islam."¹¹

This suggests both a concern not to offend but also a tactical calculation: that by not provoking Muslims, the U.S. might deter further recruitment of extremists.

In March of 2008 the State Department Counterterrorism Communications Center published its own set of guidelines entitled, *Words that Work and Words that Don't: A Guide for Counterterrorism Communication*, which reflected similar reasoning. The document, which was developed in concert with the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), offered the following guidelines for communicating with or discussing Islamic terrorist organizations, which reflect a paramount concern with denying legitimacy to extremist groups:

- Use terms like violent extremist or terrorist: Both are widely understood, define our enemies appropriately and simultaneously deny them any level of legitimacy.
- Use simply AQ, AQ network, or AQ and Associated Networks: Avoid the term AQ Movement which implies a degree of political legitimacy (civil rights movement, labor movement, etc.).
- Never use the terms jihadist or mujahedeen to describe a terrorist: Calling our enemies Jihadis and their movement a global jihad unintentionally legitimizes their actions.¹²

The conscious effort not to insult "peaceful" Muslims and at the same time not confer legitimacy on violent Muslims was not an illogical policy. However, policy-makers failed to foresee the unintended consequences: in the long run, this delicate balancing act served to tie the hands of law enforcement and essentially created a protective blind under which terrorists could operate with greater freedom. And the problem only grew worse with time.

The two documents cited above, both of which were published in 2008, resulted in a comprehensive rewriting of the lexicon used by the U.S. Government when discussing al Qaeda, other terrorist organizations, individuals or events. Whereas *The 9/11 Commission Report*, published under the presidency of George W. Bush in July 2004 as a bipartisan product, had used the word Islam 322 times, Muslim 145 times, jihad 126 times, and jihadist 32 times, *The National Intelligence Strategy of the United States*, issued by the Obama administration in August 2009, used the term Islam 0 times, Muslim 0 times, jihad 0 times.

¹¹ Department of Homeland Security Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, *Terminology to Define the Terrorists: Recommendations for American Muslims*, January 2008.

¹² Department of State, Counterterrorism Communications Center, *Words that Work and Words that Don't: A Guide for Counterterrorism Communication*, March 14, 2008 Volume 2 – Issue 10.

The report acknowledged that Islam has a part to play in terrorism, but only to the extent that the terrorists had *misappropriated* and *distorted* Islam. Combating Violent Extremism was now the number one mission objective, replacing the terms “Islamic extremist” and “religiously-motivated Islamic terrorism,” phrases used earlier by the Bush administration.

Additionally, the *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, released in June of 2011, stated that the preeminent security threat to the United States is “al-Qa’ida and its affiliates and adherents,” not Islamism, radical Islam, or global jihad. The report further states that the doctrine espoused by AQ is a *distortion* of Islam, their belief a “fabricated legitimization of violence.”¹³ In other words, AQ’s doctrine is not truly Islamic, and that argument was then used to justify the exclusion of Islam from all national security discourse.

From Counter-Terrorism (CT) to Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)

Officially Countering Violent Extremism was introduced in the summer of 2005, at a gathering of Special Forces commanders and intelligence directors from the U.S. and close allies. Presented as SAVE, Struggle Against Violent Extremism, it was meant to replace the Global War on Terror (GWOT). But in practice, for the duration of George W. Bush’s term in office, CVE remained a sub-strategic concept. It was just one mission within the Global War on Terror. For the Obama administration, on the other hand, CVE became the overall strategic mission.

The difference in the ranking of CVE within the broader national security framework by the two administrations is crucial. It reflects very different views of how terrorism and Islam relate to each other, and not surprisingly, it resulted in very different strategies for addressing the problem.

For the Bush administration, the shift from the Global War on Terror to ‘a global struggle against violent extremism’ reflected the recognition that a military solution was not sufficient in the fight against Al Qaeda and other Islamist terrorist groups.

Gen. Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that he had “objected to the use of the term ‘war on terrorism’ before, because if you call it a war, then you think of people in uniform as being the solution.” The threat instead should be referred to as violent extremism, he suggested, with terror the method used, and the response requiring “all instruments of our national power...more diplomatic, more economic, more political than it is military.”¹⁴

For the Bush administration, the conflict was still seen as an ideological battle between two opposing and irreconcilable ways of life—between those who embrace democracy and freedom and those who oppose them. It was merely the strategy for fighting that battle that was being recalibrated, with a shift toward deploying more than just military tools in the battle.

The Obama administration’s understanding of Islamist terrorism was very different. They saw it not as a categorical evil which stood opposed to America’s good.

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¹³ *National Strategy for Counterterrorism*, The White House, June 2011.

¹⁴ Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, “U.S. Officials Retool Slogan for Terror War,” *The New York Times*, July 26, 2005. http://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/26/politics/26strategy.html?_r=0

Islamist extremism was, rather, an extreme expression – among a range of expressions – of protest against legitimate grievances. It was just one more social movement, like other social movements throughout history, which utilized recognizable forms of protest, and where that protest erupted into violence, it was generally because violence had been provoked by the heavy hand of police or military or by an oppressive state.¹⁵ The social movement perspective is apparent both in Obama's presidency broadly and specifically in his counter-terrorism strategy.

Social Movement Theory and the Presidency of Barack Obama

Social movement theory seeks to understand the origins and consequences of collective mobilization. It had its origins in the socialist labor movements of the 1800s, and interest in social movement theory was revived and reborn with the social protest movements of the 1960s. Given its grounding in these periods of Marxist or socialist-inspired uprisings, it is not surprising that implicit in social movement theory is a perspective that sees the world divided between the owners of production and the workers, exploiters and exploited, slaves and masters.

This view of the world gave shape to the Obama candidacy. Marshall Ganz, long-time union organizer and an Obama campaign official, helped construct the notion of an Obama presidency based on a movement model of politics.¹⁶ In this conception, the Obama presidency would dispense with the partisanship of party politics and reach deep into the hearts of Americans to unite them around a higher moral purpose. It would be the ultimate triumph of the social movement.

One can see in Ganz, who was charged with training Obama volunteers, a world starkly divided:

There's a part in the Passover Seder when they point to the kids and say, "You were a slave in Egypt." I finally realized the point was to recognize that we were all slaves in Egypt and in our time that same struggle from slavery to freedom is always going on, that you have to choose where you stand in that.¹⁷

Ganz elaborates further: "All the inequalities between blacks and whites were driven by a deeper inequality—the inequality of power."¹⁸ His is a world of black and white, of slaves and oppressors, and because the inequality that existed between them was so unjust, the only justice now is to be found not in the compromises of party politics but in the triumph of one over the other. The other—the master, the oppressor, the Western imperialist—has forfeited his right to representation because he so unjustly treated his victims.

This perspective is reflected in the Obama administration's view of Islam:

¹⁵ Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed. *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004) p. 4. See also Thomas Olesen "Social Movement Theory and Radical Islamic Activism" (Denmark: Centre for Studies in Islamism and Radicalisation, 2009). http://cir.au.dk/fileadmin/site_files/filer_statskundskab/subsites/cir/pdf-filer/H%C3%A6fte2final.pdf

¹⁶ Sean Wilentz, "Live by the Movement, Die by the Movement," *New Republic*, Nov 9, 2010. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/politics/79004/you-said-you-wanted-revolution-midterm-elections-obama>

¹⁷ Marshall Ganz, "Why Stories Matter," *Sojourners*, March 2009. <http://sojo.net/magazine/2009/03/why-stories-matter>

¹⁸ Ganz, "Why Stories Matter".

THE SOCIAL
MOVEMENT
THEORY VIEW
OF THE WORLD
GAVE SHAPE
TO THE OBAMA
CANDIDACY

Muslims are the oppressed, and the Western colonial powers, along with corrupt governments everywhere, are the oppressors. In his seminal Cairo speech, delivered at Al-Azhar University in Egypt on June 4, 2009, and announcing “a new beginning” in U.S. relations with Islam, President Obama said this:

We meet at a time of tension between the United States and Muslims around the world—tension rooted in historical forces that go beyond any current policy debate. The relationship between Islam and the West includes centuries of co-existence and cooperation, but also conflict and religious wars. More recently, tension has been fed by colonialism that denied rights and opportunities to many Muslims, and a Cold War in which Muslim-majority countries were too often treated as proxies without regard to their own aspirations. Moreover, the sweeping change brought by modernity and globalization led many Muslims to view the West as hostile to the traditions of Islam.

In this statement Obama provides three powerful explanations for Muslim discontent: colonialism, by which the West denied rights and opportunities to Muslims; the Cold War, which caused the West to treat Muslims as proxies and to disregard their aspirations; modernization and globalization, which breed Western hostility toward Islam. Thus, in Obama’s conception, Muslim extremism is driven by legitimate grievances. The logic that follows is that once those grievances are addressed, the extremism will subside.

While Obama had one list of legitimate grievances, analysts who look at Islamist extremism through the lens of social movement theory identify other grievances as well:

- U.S. support for Israel and neglect of Palestinians
- The U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan
- U.S. intervention in Iraq
- Civilian casualties resulting from U.S. campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan
- Stationing of U.S. troops in Muslim countries

In each of these cases, the assertion is that Muslims have been wronged by the United States.

More recently, the list of “legitimate” grievances has tended more toward issues such as poverty, lack of opportunity, under-education, or disaffection with government. These types of grievances also tend to be cited outside of the Middle East, for example, with regard to such groups as Boko Haram in Nigeria.

While these types of grievances are not the direct fault of the United States, it is believed that the U.S. can and does have a role to play in rectifying the wrongs, most commonly through USAID-funded development programs or through diplomatic efforts to pressure governments to address these issues.

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Social Movement Theory and Islamic Activism

While it was President Obama who elevated to national policy the notion of legitimate Muslim grievances as the explanation for terrorism, the idea had been incubating for nearly twenty years. Recasting Islamist extremism as “Islamic activism” began around 1984 with academics who were concerned with what they saw as the relationship between “cultural imperialism” and “Islamic movements”.¹⁹

Donna Della Porta, an Italian professor of sociology, was influential with her biographical studies of Italian radicals.²⁰ But it was Quintan Wiktorowicz who brought the study of Islamic activism mainstream, with his 2004 publication, *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*.²¹

Wiktorowicz is an American academic who had studied “Islamic activism” in Jordan in 1996 and 1997, researching the impact of King Hussein’s political reforms of 1989 on mechanisms of collective empowerment of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis.²² Importantly, Wiktorowicz’s study suggests a worldview in which state power by its nature is oppressive, and “collective empowerment” is inherently good, thus echoing Marshall Ganz’s view of a world divided between oppressors and oppressed.²³ What would become critical for eventual U.S. policy was the way in which Wiktorowicz’s use of the social movement perspective in looking at Islamist radicalism turned the discussion away from ideology. As Wiktorowicz himself explains:

...the rich tradition of social movement research offers theoretical leverage over many of the issues related to Islamic collective action and can be used as an effective tool for enhancing our understanding of Islamic movements. In particular, it helps shift Islamic movement research away from a common focus on ideology to issues of organization.²⁴

In shifting the focus away from ideology, Wiktorowicz argued that Islamist violence is not a function of the call to jihad found in the Qu’ran or in various contemporary fatwas, but is rather a calculated and rational response to state oppression:

In contrast to popular views of Islamic radicals as fanatics engaged in irrational, deviant, unpredictable violence, we argue that violent contention is the result of tactical considerations informed by the realities of repressive contexts. Islamists engage in a rational calculus about tactical efficacy and choose modes of contention they believe

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¹⁹ David Snow and Susan Marshall, “Cultural Imperialism, Social Movements, and the Islamic Revival,” *Research in Social Movements, Conflict and Change* 7 (July 1984): 136.

²⁰ See also Khajag Aghazarian, *Islamic Activism Through the Lens of Social Movement Theories: the Case of Hamas* (Canada: Queen’s University, 2007); Joel Beinin and Frederic Vairel, eds. *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa* (Stanford University Press, 2013).

²¹ Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002).

²² Quintan Wiktorowicz, *The Management of Islamic Activism: Salafis, the Muslim Brotherhood, and State Power in Jordan* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001).

²³ For example, Wiktorowicz wrote, “The [Jordanian] regime is particularly concerned with managing Islamic activism, since this constitutes the most serious potential challenge to regime power and legitimacy.” (*The Management of Islamic Activism*, p. 15). But does not every state, even the most open and democratic, have the right to defend its power and legitimacy?

²⁴ Wiktorowicz, *The Management of Islamic Activism*, p. 7.

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will facilitate objectives or protect their organizational and political gains. Violence is only one of myriad possibilities in repertoires of contention and becomes more likely where regimes attempt to crush Islamic activism through broad repressive measures that leave few alternatives...From this perspective, violent Islamist contention is produced not by ideational factors or unstable psychological mentalities but rather by exogenous contingencies created through state policy concerning Islamists.²⁵

Thus terrorism becomes “violent contention,” and terrorists are not to blame for their violence; “exogenous contingencies” are at fault. Sources in the Koran, Islamic jurisprudence, or even contemporary calls to jihad are not to blame; state policy is. Dr. Mohammed M. Hafez, an associate professor at the Naval Postgraduate School, echoes this perspective in his book *Why Muslims Rebel*:

...Muslims rebel because of an ill-fated combination of institutional exclusion, on the one hand, and on the other, reactive and indiscriminate repression that threatens the organizational resources and personal lives of Islamists. Exclusionary and repressive political environments force Islamists to undergo a near universal process of radicalization...²⁶

In other words, radical Islamists bear no personal responsibility for their acts of terrorism or disruption. Rather, they are *forced* by a political environment that excludes or represses them to undergo an inevitable process of radicalization.

The social-movement approach to Islamic activism might have stayed deep within the recesses of academia, except that an administration came to power that embraced a social movement perspective more broadly, and thus social movement proponents became deeply influential in shaping U.S. counter-terrorism policy.

Quintan Wiktorowicz joined the National Security Staff in January 2011 as Senior Director for Global Engagement, and he is credited with having been an architect of Obama’s counter-extremism strategy.²⁷ Mohammed Hafez, while a professor at a U.S. government facility, also influenced the thinking at the National Security Staff. His thesis was noted by Steven Simon, who served on the National Security Staff as senior director for Middle Eastern and North African affairs. Simon wrote,

Hafez aimed to apply social movement theory to the Muslim world. In effect, his purpose was to normalize such movements, especially as they had emerged in the Middle East and North Africa: that is, to analyze them like other movements in other parts of the world rather than assume that, being Middle Eastern, they were somehow unique.²⁸

Hafez presented a rationale, which Simon affirms, for disregarding any role that religion or Islamist ideology might play in the radicalization or extremism process,

²⁵ Ibid., p. 62.

²⁶ Mohammed M. Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Muslim World* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. 2003) pp.21-2.

²⁷ As Wiktorowicz wrote in the introduction to the volume, “...this book provides form to an interest that has been emerging in strength over the past few decades.” (p.5)

²⁸ Steve Simon, “Why Egyptians Rebel,” IISS, August 19, 2013.

focusing the spotlight instead on the errors of the regimes trying to contain them as well as on the political, social and economic circumstances that lead to their discontent. This is the foundation on which the Obama administration built its counter-terrorism strategy.

Social Movement Theory and Counter-Terrorism Policy

What are the implications of the Social Movement paradigm for U.S. counter-terrorism policy? First and foremost, it dismisses the ideas and beliefs that inspire terrorists to act. It reduces their actions from religiously or ideologically inspired acts of will to merely reflexive reaction, little more than an involuntary response to abject circumstances. In this way it also serves to legitimize the actions of extremists, deeming them not as the unjust and horrific acts that they are but as the rational and justified response to negative circumstances, whether they be imperialism, colonialism, tyranny, or poverty.

To be clear, social movement theory can provide valuable and instructive insights into how groups form and behave, but as a unitary and all-encompassing lens through which to view Islamic terrorism and extremism, **it dooms the United States to strategic failure.**

Not surprisingly, this single issue is at the heart of the current debate. Today, in the United States, **the most important point of contention over U.S. counter-terrorism policy is its deliberate rejection of the ideological component, of the way in which Islam itself drives or inspires extremism or terrorism.**

A large number of authors and analysts, as well as lawmakers, have criticized the systemic failure of the U.S. government to address the ideological component of Islamist terrorism.

This paper argues that the roots of that failure lie here, in the application of social movement theory to Islamic activism. If one looks closely at the policy documents that emerged from Obama's National Security Staff around this time, one can see the influence of social movement theory as well as the criticisms these documents elicited.

For example, On August 1, 2011, the administration released *Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States*, which, according to *The New York Times*, Quintan Wiktorowicz had helped devise.²⁹ It advocates a community-based approach, which means the government looks to local Muslim communities as partners in fighting extremism:

Throughout history, violent extremists—individuals who support or commit ideologically-motivated violence to further political goals—have promoted messages of divisiveness and justified the killing of innocents.³⁰

²⁹ Scott Shane, "To Fight Radical Islam, U.S. Wants Muslim Allies," *The New York Times*, August 3, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/04/us/04extreme.html>

³⁰ *Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States* (Washington DC, The White House, 2011).

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Note that it does not specify Islamist terrorism, though that was its subject, and instead it creates a broad category of “violent extremists.” Many criticized the document for being too vague when describing the threats that face the United States. Daniel Greenfield summarized this argument saying,

“(The document) *Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States* replaces terrorism with euphemism. With words so generic that they mean nothing at all. Swap out a few words and it could be about any social problem.”³¹

That is precisely how social movement theory treats “Islamic activism”: as a form of collective engagement for channeling grievances into directed activism.³² Thus Islamic activism is seen as just another form of collective action, like other forms of collective action—whether the civil rights movement, the women’s movement, or the labor movement—that have emerged throughout history.

Senator Joseph I. Lieberman and Senator Susan M. Collins, members of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, openly voiced their concerns with this conceptualization in *Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States*, stating,

Characterizing the threat as ‘violent extremism’ is far too broad. This vague term is never defined and could cover a range of ideologies that, while capable of causing harm, do not pose the preeminent threat to our national security today that Islamist extremism does.³³

In spite of the criticisms, the administration continued to push forward. Four months later, they published their plan for implementing the CVE strategy, *Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States*. Like previous counterterrorism documents released by the administration, this document described the threats facing the United States only in the vaguest terms, and placed its focus on building a coordinated relationship between federal and local partners in the battle to “prevent violent extremism.”

It is this term that has garnered the most attention in the debate surrounding counterterrorism policy—“Countering Violent Extremism” or CVE, as it is a major hallmark of the Obama Administration’s domestic and foreign counterterrorism strategy. Counterterrorism expert Will McCants describes the ambiguity of CVE saying:

The United States and its allies devote considerable financial and human resources to countering violent extremism (CVE). Nevertheless the definition of CVE is unclear, ranging from fighting bad guys to creating good guys. This lack of precision makes it hard to design, execute, and evaluate CVE programs and makes it easy to slap the CVE

³¹ Daniel Greenfield, “Defeating Islamic Terrorism through Appeasement,” *FrontPage Magazine*, August 10, 2011.

³² Wiktorowicz, *The Management of Islamic Activism*, p. 7.

³³ Letter to John Brennan, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism and Deputy National Security Advisor, from Senator Joseph I. Lieberman and Senator Susan M. Collins of the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. September 12, 2011.

label on all manner of initiatives, including many that seem to have little to do with stopping terrorism and might otherwise be cut by Congress. The lack of precision also inhibits thinking about whether the CVE enterprise is worthwhile and what should constitute it.³⁴

While McCants is far from the only CT expert to call into question the usefulness of terms like Countering Violent Extremism, initially there was no major push back to the Obama Administration's counterterrorism policies in the first two years.

However, that quickly changed following the administration's response to two attacks: Major Nidal Hassan's attack on Fort Hood in November 2009 and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab's attempted airline bombing on December 25th, 2009. The administration characterized both events as unrelated to organized terrorism and instead described the attacks as "workplace-related violence" and "a lone-wolf attack."

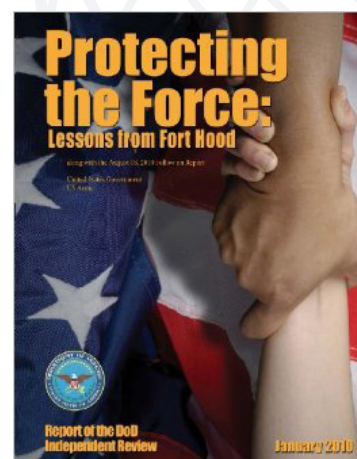
The report issued by the Department of Defense following the Fort Hood shooting, *Protecting the Force: Lessons from Fort Hood*, caused further controversy when it omitted terms such as Islam, jihad, and religiously-motivated attack from the report. *Time Magazine's* Mark Thompson described the issue this way:

(Major) Hasan wore his radical Islamic faith and its jihadist tendencies in the same way he wore his Army uniform. He allegedly proselytized within the ranks, spoke out against the wars his Army was waging in Muslim countries and shouted "Allahu akbar" as he gunned down his fellow soldiers...The (DoD) report lumps in radical Islam with other fundamentalist religious beliefs, saying that 'religious fundamentalism alone is not a risk factor.'³⁵

Several members of Congress also took issue with the DoD's report and the administration's response to Fort Hood. Chairman of the Senate Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs Committee Joseph Lieberman called the report a "disappointment" because it "does not adequately recognize the specific threat posed by violent Islamic extremism to our military."³⁶

Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee Buck McKeon called the Fort Hood report's failure to mention Islamic extremism a "strange silence."³⁷ Congressman John Carter also took issue with the omissions saying,

"The report ignores the elephant in the room—radical Islamic terrorism is the enemy. We should be able to speak honestly about good and bad without feeling like you've done something offensive to society."³⁸



³⁴ Will McCants, "Countering Violent Extremism, Part 1: Definition", Jihadica Online Blog, <http://www.jihadica.com/countering-violent-extremism-pt-1-definition/>.

³⁵ Mark Thompson, "The Fort Hood Report: Why No Mention of Islam?" *Time Magazine*, January 20, 2010.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Patrik Jonsson, "Terrorism? Fort Hood Report Doesn't Mention Islamic Extremism," *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 January 2010, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Military/2010/0120/Terrorism-Fort-Hood-report-doesn-t-mention-Islamic-extremism>.

³⁸ Mark Thompson, "The Fort Hood Report: Why No Mention of Islam?" *Time Magazine*, January 20, 2010.



As a direct challenge to the administration's response to the Fort Hood shootings, Senator Lieberman's Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs Committee published its own report in February 2011 titled, *A Ticking Time Bomb: Counterterrorism Lessons from the U.S. Government's Failure to Prevent the Fort Hood Attack*. The report strongly condemned the Department of Defense:

DoD still has not specifically named the threat represented by the Fort Hood attack as what it is: violent Islamist extremism. Instead, DoD's approach subsumes this threat within workplace violence or undefined "violent extremism" more generally....DoD should revise its policies and training in order to confront the threat of violent Islamist extremism directly.³⁹

Following the Fort Hood attack and several other foiled terrorist plots within the United States (including the Times Square Bomber, the Underwear Bomber, and the Portland Christmas tree lighting plot), Congress held various hearings to investigate the threat posed by radicalized individuals.

During these hearings several Obama administration officials were called in to testify on the growing terrorist threat both within the United States and around the world. Their responses uniformly echoed the Obama administration's broader counterterrorism strategy of labeling the enemy solely as Al Qaeda or as violent extremism, and they refused to associate terrorism specifically with Islam.

But if one understands the perspective of social movement theory and how deeply this perspective influenced the administration's thinking on Islamist terrorism, the persistent effort to remove any mention of Islam from the discussion makes perfect sense.

³⁹ Senator Joseph I. Lieberman & Susan M. Collins, "A Ticking Time Bomb" United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. Washington D.C. February 2011, p. 9.

Conclusion

The United States is not winning the war against Islamist extremism. Indeed, one can argue that radical Islam has made great strides since President Obama took office in 2009.

In the six years since that time, domestic acts of Islamist terrorism have included the Ft. Hood shooting and the Boston Marathon bombing. Internationally, the United States suffered the attack on the Benghazi compound, which saw the first murder of a serving U.S. ambassador in 25 years. Numerous countries have seen a rise in domestic instability at the hands of Islamist extremists. And not least, the United States has had to re-engage in Iraq in order to combat the meteoric rise of ISIS.

At a recent hearing of the US House Subcommittee on Terrorism, Frederick Kagan of the American Enterprise Institute said Al Qaeda's "brand is spreading like wildfire, the groups affiliating themselves with it control more fighters, land and wealth than they ever have, and they are opening up new fronts."⁴⁰

Another analyst recently wrote, "The ideologies that promote, recruit and train Islamist jihadists are alive, well, and growing."⁴¹

Even the administration's Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, had to acknowledge that Al Qaeda has not been weakened. Testifying before the Senate on January 29, 2014, he said, "There are some five different franchises at least and 12 countries that this movement [Al Qaeda] has morphed into, and we see sort of chapters of it, of course, in Yemen, Somalia, North Africa, in Syria, etc."⁴²

While Social Movement Theory might provide insights into the formation and operation of Islamic activists, it cannot provide a foundation for American counter-terrorism policy. To do so is both detrimental to U.S. national security as well as to the security of numerous nations who are in a life-or-death struggle with the threat.

The failure to slow the brand of Al Qaeda over the past thirteen years, or to prevent the emergence of ISIS, should be proof enough that the current strategy is failing. But the faulty logic of Social Movement Theory should by itself lead to its rejection as the foundation of American counterterrorism policy. To say that local grievances are the root of terrorism is to say that solving grievances will end terrorism. We know that not to be the case. Moreover, to solve all grievances is an impossible task.

Without an ideological catalyst, grievances remain merely grievances. They are dull and banal. They only transform into acts of transcendental violence when ignited by Sayyid Qutb or Osama bin Laden or Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. It is the narrative of Holy War that gives value to local grievances, not the other way around.

THE UNITED STATES MUST STOP THE MISGUIDED NARRATIVE THAT TERRORISM AND EXTREMISM HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH ISLAM.

⁴⁰ House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee Hearing: "Is al-Qaeda Winning? Grading the Administration's Counterterrorism Policy," April 8, 2014. <http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/hearing/subcommittee-hearing-al-qaeda-winning-grading-administrations-counterterrorism-policy>

⁴¹ Jordan Schachtel, "One Year After Boston: America's Self-Blinding Foreign Policy Against Islamist Extremism," Breitbart News, April 16, 2014 <http://www.breitbart.com/Big-Peace/2014/04/15/One-Year-After-Boston-America-s-Self-Blinding-Foreign-Policy-Against-Islamist-Extremism>

⁴² http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/transcript-senate-intelligence-hearing-on-national-security-threats/2014/01/29/b5913184-8912-11e3-833c-33098f9e5267_story.html

The United States therefore must stop the misguided narrative that terrorism and extremism have nothing to do with Islam.

As Dr. Sebastian Gorka said in testimony to members of Congress, “We need to bankrupt transnational jihadist terrorism as its most powerful point: its narrative of global religious war.”⁴³

Until the U.S. begins to acknowledge and address the ideology, we will not be able to challenge its ability to recruit, motivate and inspire those wish to kill us.

Concretely, what does that require?

First, hollow terms that identify the enemy as a tactic, such as “Countering Violent Extremism,” must be dropped. In its stead language must be used that accurately identifies and distinguishes the enemy, for example, the Global Jihadist Movement.

Once we agree as a nation on the name for the enemy, we must establish a national counter-ideological campaign that incorporates Muslim-partner nations and Muslim Americans to rob groups such as ISIS and Al Qaeda of their claim to be the paramount representatives of Islam.

Only then will we have clarity on what victory in the war against the jihadist movement entails. That victory will not come as the result of force against individual threat groups or their leaders. It will come when we have fully discredited their supremacist, exclusionary and absolutist version of Islam.■

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⁴³ Dr. Sebastian L. v. Gorka, “Ten Years On: The Evolution of the Terrorist Threat,” House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, June 22, 2011, p. 6.
<http://dailycaller.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/GORKA-HASC-Testimony-FIN18JUN2011.pdf>

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