Words Matter in the Fight Against Islamism

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Articles & Testimony

The U.S. government needs to be clearer about the distinctions between Islam, political Islamism, and violent Islamism, in part by putting political correctness aside and involving Muslim Americans in the conversation.

The exchange happened at an evening gathering in Tunis several years ago -- long before "the Arab Spring" toppled the local dictator -- but it just as easily could have been Cairo, Amman, or another Arab metropolis. As the conversation turned to politics, I asked everyone around the dinner table who they thought posed the most potent opposition to the established order. Without losing a beat, one of the guests -- a well-dressed, well-coiffed, professional-looking woman -- interjected, "It's the Muslims, of course."

She was referring to the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, the region's oldest and best-organized Islamist organization. But she didn't call them "violent extremists," "radical Islamists," "Islamic fundamentalists" or any of the terms now in fashion; she didn't even use the Arabic term for "brothers" -- Ikhwan -- that is a common term for members of the now widely banned Brotherhood. Rather, she just called them "Muslims." And only I seemed to notice how incongruous it was for her to apply that term to her most-hated, most-feared ideological opponents when she was herself a Muslim, as was virtually every other person in the room.

This episode came to mind as I followed the recent back-and-forth between President Obama and his would-be successors on what to call adherents to the ideology that animates much of the terrorism around the world today. The President seems to want to exclude from our political lexicon all particularistic cultural references -- that is, any word that could associate the terrorists with the religion or adherents of Islam and thereby tar Islam with the brush of terrorism. Somewhat counterintuitively, he apparently fears that using terms that reflect a unique connection between terrorism and Islam may have the perverse impact of legitimizing these heinous acts in the eyes of certain Muslims.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Donald Trump suggests that victory over the terrorists begins (and may even end) with using terms that highlight the terrorists' connection with Islam. Hillary Clinton advocates a middle course,

checking off the box of using terms like jihadist, perhaps so as not to be accused of avoiding them, but not really focusing on the meaning of these terms in the broader battle of ideas.

I cite the story of that dinner in Tunis not because my mealtime companion was correct in using the term "Muslims" -- she wasn't -- but because she didn't even know how politically incorrect she was. And therein lies part of the reason why we shouldn't let hypersensitivity get in the way of accuracy.

With that as context, what is the proper terminology for the ideology that motivates the killers of Raqqa, Paris, and, perhaps, Orlando? The answer is "violent Islamism." Given President Obama's reluctance -- or, alternatively, Donald Trump's enthusiasm -- for terms that have "Islam" embedded within them, should we refrain from employing it in political discourse or policy debates? The answer is no. Let me explain.

Islam is, like Christianity and Judaism, a religion that provides moral guidance, social cohesion, and transcendent meaning to the lives of millions around the globe. It places high value on charity, modesty, prayer, learning, and caring for the less fortunate. Like Christianity, Islam advocates proselytization, which has historically taken both violent and peaceful forms. Like Judaism, Islam is a religion of law, including codes governing all aspects of daily life. And like both of the older Abrahamic faiths, Islam is practiced in a broad variety of ways around the world.

A person who follows the religion of Islam is a Muslim. That noun, Muslim, is also one of the two adjectival forms of the word Islam, the other being Islamic, as in "a mosque is a Muslim house of worship" and "what lovely Islamic calligraphy there is on the mosque wall." The two adjectives are often, but not always, used interchangeably; depending on context, they have slightly different connotations. This is where terminology begins to get complicated. That's because Islamic sounds very close to the word Islamism but the two words are, in fact, very different.

Islamism is an ideology, like Communism, and like its secular cousin, it is about power, not faith -- in this case, asserting the primacy of Muslim power over all others. A cornerstone of Islamism is the spread of an all-encompassing and supremacist interpretation of sharia, Islamic law. Of course, many religions promote fidelity to the laws of the faith, but Islamism seeks the imposition on entire societies of a certain form of Muslim religious rule, together with the destruction of everything that Islamists believe is antithetical to their understanding of the proper practice of Islam. Essentially, this is the difference between advocating orthodoxy, a personal matter, and establishing a totalitarian theocracy, a very public and political matter.

An adherent to the ideology of Islamism is properly called an Islamist. The adjectival form of the term is also Islamist, as in "In a video taped before his suicide bomb attack, the Islamist terrorist pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda" or "When they broke into the accused's apartment in Molenbeek, the Brussels police found stacks of Islamist propaganda." It is important to recall that something -- a book, a song, a speech -- can be Islamic without being Islamist. There is a big difference.

Islamists differ among themselves in various ways. One dividing line is whether they engage in Western-style electoral politics in order to achieve the hoped-for political outcome, an Islamist-ruled society. It would be accurate to call those who view politics as the route to an Islamist victory as political or electoral Islamists.

A second distinguishing factor is whether they employ violence to advance the Islamist project. This is often reflected in a group's embrace of the concept of jihad. While the term jihad can sometimes refer to an individual Muslim's personal struggle to overcome spiritual obstacles, the more common political use of the term connotes religiously inspired war or violence to achieve a strategic objective. In this sense, jihadists -- those who use or advocate violence to achieve their political goal -- are a subset of Islamists.

But the term jihadism can be confusing, given that some may infer from its use that jihadists do not share the same ultimate political goal as other Islamists. Therefore, I prefer the more straightforward term violent Islamism. One

can reasonably differentiate between those who employ violence and those who merely endorse, advocate, or sympathize with those who employ violence -- calling the former violent Islamists and the latter radical or extremist Islamists. (Some employ the term fundamentalist but given its roots in Protestant Christianity in the United States, it really doesn't apply. And as Martin Kramer has pointed out, both Bernard Lewis and John L. Esposito reject its usage -- perhaps the only issue upon which they ever agreed.)

While tactics matter, the shared strategic objective among Islamists matters even more. Some groups, like the Renaissance (an-Nahda) party in Tunisia, appear non-threatening because they currently reject violence, engage solely in politics as the pathway to create a sharia-based state, and are willing to make political compromises and accept tactical defeats on the path to eventual victory. However, though their tactics may be incrementalist, their goal is not fundamentally different from that of groups like the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement, known more commonly by its Arabic acronym Hamas, that alternate between using political and violent paths to power. And then, at the far end of the spectrum, there are groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, who reject electoral politics altogether and revel in the most gruesome violence. Normally, Islamists debate among themselves about means -- politics, violence -- but these two groups fight over the idea of declaring a caliphate and the wisdom of purposefully targeting Muslims in that effort. That intra-Islamist fight over strategic goals is both bloody and unusual.

With this primer as background, it appears our current debate over how to characterize our adversaries in this battle -- and ultimately, how to conceive of the ideology that animates our adversaries -- may be moving in the wrong direction. Twenty-two years ago, then-President Bill Clinton's National Security Advisor Anthony Lake offered one of the most important insights on the topic when he noted that "What distinguishes Islamic extremism from other forms of extremism is not terrorism but the naked pursuit of political power." In other words, the ends matter most, not the means. This is a very different approach from the more fashionable focus on combatting violent extremism, with its emphasis on means over ends and its reluctance to recognize any connection, however warped or deluded, with the religion or adherents of Islam.

At the heart of our national debate over terminology is the concept that all Islamists are Muslims but not all Muslims are Islamists. We don't really know what percentage of the world's Muslims subscribe to the ideology of Islamism. Polls routinely suggest that a clear majority of Muslims reject the Islamist agenda, though a regrettably substantial minority -- around 30 percent -- say they endorse groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, which advocates a largely political path to an Islamist objective.

The percentage that supports the most extreme form of violent Islamism is much, much smaller, but in absolute terms it is still scary. Polling by my Washington Institute colleague David Pollock, for example, shows that a firm 1 to 3 percent of Egyptians and Saudis approve of the Islamic State, which is more than a million people in those longtime U.S. allies. If even a tiny fraction of that million are willing to act on their views, the threat could be paralyzing.

So, against this backdrop, what words should we use to discuss this phenomenon? I vote for clarity. The challenge we face emanates from Islamism, a sinister ideology that rejects the ideals and freedoms on which our nation is founded. Adherents of that ideology -- Islamists -- can use both violent and non-violent means to achieve their ends and we should, I believe, counter them, with the full range of means at our disposal. Our greatest allies in these fights will be Muslims, especially believing, observant Muslims, many of whom are genuinely aghast at the thought that their faith could be distorted by a minority bent on imposing a certain skewed view of Islam on them, the broader society, and the world in which they live.

In my experience, most Muslims -- especially Muslim Americans -- know what's at stake. They know the difference between a Muslim and an Islamist. Many are insulted by the fact that so many of our public figures infantilize them

to the point of reducing the threat to "violent extremism," a vague, anodyne phrase devoid of cultural context or practical meaning.

If we, in our public rhetoric, have figured out how to differentiate between Christians and Klansmen, we should be able to talk with sensitivity and humility about the difference between Muslims and Islamists. At the very least, our leaders need to talk candidly and sensibly about the threat of Islamism in order to make the case for building partnerships between Muslim communities around the country and federal, state and local governments -- partnerships that are essential to winning the battle against this pernicious ideology. Indeed, it borders on inconceivable how public officials could legitimately discuss the urgency of building closer ties with Muslim communities without a sober, open, and honest discussion about the Islamist threat that fuels the need for such ties. Let's not run away from this bogeyman. Indeed, I believe the vast majority of Muslim Americans would cheer their inclusion in a national conversation from which they have otherwise been erased.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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