



DEFEATING TERRORISM

STRATEGIC ISSUE ANALYSIS



Avoiding Holy War: Ensuring That the War on Terrorism Is Not Perceived as a War on Islam

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Conclusions:

- U.S. cannot prevent extremists from declaring jihad in response to military attacks.
- Imperative for the U.S. to limit appeal of such calls with diplomacy and restrained rhetoric.
- U.S. should try to discredit those calling for jihad.
- At least initially, U.S. should limit targeted groups to al Qaida and its direct supporters while avoiding widespread attacks that would look like war against Islam.

The war on terrorism will undoubtedly fail if it is perceived as a war on Islam and generates a call for Muslim solidarity in a holy war against the United States and the other powers combating terrorism. Understanding how to avoid that perception first requires some familiarity with the concept of jihad. Strictly speaking, translating jihad as “holy war” is incorrect. *Harb mukaddasah* is the Arabic phrase for holy war. The Arabic word *jihad* means striving or exertion. In an Islamic context, it would mean striving in the way of God: perpetually struggling for the triumph of the word of God among men, doing good deeds and performing the prescribed duties of the faith. A Muslim strives in the way of God with his sword, tongue, and wealth, thus giving the concept of jihad a multifaceted nature that applies to the individual believer and the community.

One meaning of jihad is the duty of preaching the faith, since Islam is a proselytizing religion: “And let there be from you a nation who invite to goodness, and enjoy right conduct and forbid indecency”

(Qur’an 3:104). This meaning of jihad could be accomplished through such activities as teaching, preaching, publishing, and establishing Islamic centers and schools.

Another meaning of jihad is in the sense of fighting: “Sanction is given unto those who fight because they have been wronged: and Allah is indeed able to give them victory” (Qur’an 22:39). The word *qital* (Arabic for fighting in the narrow sense—fight as it appears in this Qur’anic verse) as used here is not synonymous with the broader concept of jihad, which includes fighting where the context so requires. Jihad in the sense of fighting has always been a defensive principle. Muslims were allowed to fight only in self-defense and were forbidden to be aggressive. Furthermore, Muslim scholars are generally in agreement that jihad in the sense of fighting must meet several conditions to be religiously sanctioned. There must be a just cause for the conflict, it must be declared by the right authority, and the fighting must be waged in accordance with Islamic ethical

principles, including sparing the lives of women, children, and the elderly.

The United States can do little, if anything, to prevent Muslim extremists—including al Qaida's Osama bin Laden and the Taliban's Mullah Mohammad Umar—from declaring jihad in response to U.S. military action against them. Questions about the "right authority" to call jihad will constrain the number of Muslims who would answer that call. However, an abundance of anti-American sentiments in the Arab and Islamic worlds—sentiments generated over the past several decades by U.S. pro-Israeli and perceived anti-Islam policies and compounded by deteriorating socioeconomic conditions—guarantee that a call to jihad by the Taliban and bin Laden will fall on many receptive ears across the Islamic world. "Striving with sword, tongue, or wealth"; those who do respond might be enough to cause the stability of friendly Arab and other Muslim nations to be of concern. The United States could make that response even greater by expanding military action beyond bin Laden and the Taliban regime that harbors him. If that happens—at least without some conclusive evidence proving a connection to the attacks of September 11—there is a high risk that other "religious authorities" would be enticed to join in the call for jihad against the "aggressor." Emotional broadcasts of war conditions showing Muslim mujahideen being defeated by American and other Western forces would do more than call into question the stability of friendly Muslim states; it would put at significant risk the U.S. ability to prosecute the war on terrorism to a successful end.

How then should we extract justice for the attack on our country on September 11? How can we wage a war on terrorism and not elicit a holy war in response? Refraining from military action against Afghanistan, the Taliban, and al Qaida—or any other country

or organization suspected of involvement in terrorism—would be a simple answer. Use of the other instruments of U.S. national power—diplomatic, economic, and informational—would not engender holy war. Neither would it appease the American public, which expects some form of military revenge for the deaths of thousands of citizens from America and around the world. The suggestion of not responding militarily also has the serious flaw of being an incentive for extremists in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the Muslim world to engage in further acts of terrorism. It would promote the belief that the United States would refrain from military response because of American leaders' fear that the threat to declare jihad would be heeded by Muslims across the Islamic world.

Rather than being concerned with avoiding even illegitimate calls for "holy war"—a situation over which the United States has no control save for the absurd option of not responding militarily—the focus should be on how to contain the validity of a bin Laden or Taliban declaration of jihad to their immediate adherents and like-minded extremists. Perhaps only rewriting the history of U.S. policies and strategies toward the Arab and Islamic worlds since World War II would ensure success in this endeavor. However, the Bush administration has thus far made many proper moves in responding to the crisis. Declaring war on terrorism, not on Islam, was one of the most critical. It leaves no doubt, at least in national rhetoric, that America's enemies are those who pervert Islam with unacceptable violence. Building an international coalition with partners from the Arab and Islamic worlds is also key. This gives great credibility to the U.S.-led efforts, just as was the case in the Gulf War, when Arab allies demonstrated that aggression by an Arab and Muslim country would not be tolerated. Use of all the elements of national power—not just the military one—is also important in containing the response to the call for jihad. It

is hard to justify fighting the antiterrorism coalition when it is providing humanitarian assistance and other economic incentives to assist Muslims.

The military action—with the immediate task of defeating bin Laden and his training bases in Afghanistan—is only the first part of a complex campaign. The United States must take several additional actions to contain any call for jihad. First, it should work to discredit the legitimacy of a jihad declaration by an entity that sanctions terrorism. The desired outcome would be an Islamic world convinced that American military response is in self-defense against criminals who will repeat their deeds unless stopped. To contain any fallout from the inevitable calls to jihad, the United States should work with its closest Muslim allies to nudge Egypt—the seat of Al-Azhar Mosque and the center of orthodox Sunni theology—to question bin Laden's qualifications and authority to issue *fatwas* (religious edicts) and to declare jihad. It is strongly in the U.S. interest to increase across the Islamic world the numbers of *mufti* (clerics) articulating this point of view. The brief exposition of the meaning of jihad outlined above suggests important errors in bin Laden's call, such as his declaration of offensive war against innocents, and raises serious doubts about the qualifications of bin Laden and the Taliban to declare a jihad of any kind. Bin Laden's doctrine—claiming legitimacy for the use of terror in a jihad against a strong enemy—could and should be refuted by Muslim clerics. A well-prepared psyops team will be able to play a major positive role in this effort.

The temptation exists to go after several "affiliates" of al Qaida. Many of these—like Hamas and Hizbollah—are scattered across the Arab world and are viewed by most Arabs and Muslims as organizations engaged in legitimate self-defense and national liberation efforts. Overt military action against

such groups would be a grave strategic error if the United States wishes to contain the spread of the call to jihad. More grave would be a military campaign against so-called "rogue" states that for some time have graced the State Department's list of nations that support terrorism. In such an eventuality, containing the appearance that the United States was waging a war against Islam might be impossible.

The United States has much to lose if it is unsuccessful in its efforts to avoid its war on terrorism being characterized as a war against Islam. Military action is unavoidable—although it must be accompanied throughout the war by use of the nonmilitary elements of power—but it must be carefully applied to avoid the specter of a Muslim world united behind bin Laden.



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