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The Language of Jihad

by
Katharine Cornell Gorka

Many are blaming political correctness for the breakdown in security that allowed the murders of 12 soldiers and 1 civilian at Fort Hood last week. They suggest that fears over offending a member of a religious minority caused a breakdown in an otherwise functioning security apparatus. Neil Livingstone, a terrorism expert, stated on CBS News, “The Army and everyone else is being too politically correct right now. No one wants to use the M word or the J word—Muslim or Jihadist.” The fact is that this problem runs through the American military and security structures. *The 9/11 Commission Report*, released in July 2004, clearly stated the nature of the perpetrators and the ideology that was driving them. As Stephen Coughlin, an expert on radical Islam, has recently pointed out, the 9/11 Report used the word Islam 322 times, Muslim 145 times, jihad 126 times, and jihadist 32 times. In sharp contrast, The National Intelligence Strategy of the United States, issued in August 2009, uses the term Muslim 0 times, Islam 0, and jihad 0. Similarly, The FBI Counterterrorism Analytical Lexicon, the purpose of which is “to standardize the terms used in FBI analytical products dealing with counterterrorism,” uses the term Muslim 0 times, the term Islam 0 times, and the term jihad 0 times.

At the Department of Defense, the situation is no better. A high-ranking Defense Department official, speaking at a recent conference said, “We are not at war with jihad. Jihad is a legitimate component of Islam.” And from the White House, John Brennan, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, said on August 9th we should not use “the legitimate term ‘jihad’,” in part because it risks reinforcing the idea that the United States is at war with Islam itself.

Even our President is guilty of obfuscation. Obama said in his inaugural address, “Our nation is at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred.” How can the United States craft an effective strategy against an enemy as vague and fuzzy as hatred and violence? The short answer is we cannot. And because we now refuse to call the enemy what he is, we must chase lesser enemies that will both distract us from the true enemy and ultimately will be impossible to defeat. John Brennan said that among the long-term challenges the United States faces are the political, economic and social factors that help put so many individuals on the path to violence. In short, he is suggesting that we simply need to solve all the problems of the world in order to make the vague problem of violent extremism go away.

We cannot fight an enemy we refuse to name. Indeed the United States does not want to convey the notion that it is at war with Islam itself, but we should not allow that to cow us into denying the reality that now tens of thousands have engaged in battle against the United States because of their perception that their religion, Islam, calls them to fight a holy war, a jihad, against infidels. The fact that we wish to protect the majority of moderate Muslims from that harsh reality does not change it.

The ancient Chinese strategist Sun Tzu wrote, “If you know yourself but not your enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat.” Fort Hood was the price we paid for not knowing our enemy.

The Westminster Institute

Katharine Cornell Gorka is Executive Director of The Westminster Institute, which is based in McLean, Virginia.

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