

MAKING *JIHAD* WORK FOR AMERICA

J. Michael Waller

In the “war of ideas,” words matter. By accepting the enemy’s terminology and adopting its definitions as our own, we cease fighting on our terms and place our ideas at the enemy’s disposal.

We would never fight a military engagement under such conditions; we have highly trained personnel who know the enemy’s order of battle and how to apply exactly the technologies, weapons and timing to ensure rapid victory at the lowest cost. We have doctrines for doing so. Yet we currently have no corresponding doctrine for public diplomacy and its action-oriented cousins.

This shortcoming has crippled the war effort. By not understanding the nature of the battle, and by not appreciating the meanings of words, we reward the enemy and demoralize our friends and potential allies. Such is very much the case with one of the terms central to today’s debate on the war: *jihad*. These days, most Americans, including national leaders, tend to use the word as a synonym for terrorism. But speakers of Arabic and adherents of Islam are not at all in agreement about this definition, even—or perhaps especially—within the Muslim world.

Jihad, in short, may be defined in any number of ways. The terrorist enemy is using it effectively as a political weapon. It has redefined not only the word, but the idea embodied by it. When U.S. officials use the word, they should be certain about what the enemy takes it to mean, how the non-enemy (neutral, potential ally or friend) understands its American usage, and how the U.S. wants



J. MICHAEL WALLER is the Walter and Leonore Annenberg Professor of Political Communication at the Institute of World Politics in Washington, DC, where he teaches courses on public diplomacy, propaganda and political warfare.

its target audience and the rest of the world to understand it. By doing so, we can make *jihad* work for us.

Americans and *jihad*

Muslim terms are relatively new to the United States. Most Americans first learned of *mujahideen*, or Islamic holy warriors, with the Soviet takeover of Afghanistan in 1979. They viewed the *mujahideen* as heroes, and with strong bipartisan majorities they funded and armed the Muslim fighters battling the Soviet invasion.

At about the same time, the word *jihad* entered the common lexicon, to an entirely different response. *Webster's* definition of the time shows how the public understood *jihad*: as “a holy war waged on behalf of Islam as a religious duty” and “a bitter strife or crusade [sic] undertaken in the spirit of a holy war.”¹ *Webster's* updated the second definition, matter-of-factly and without irony, to mean “a crusade for a principle or belief.”² Most recently, *Webster's* has preserved the holy war and crusade definitions and added a third: “a personal struggle in devotion to Islam especially involving scriptural discipline.”³ To most Americans, however, *jihad* is a horror committed by Muslim sociopaths.

In truth, the reality is a good deal more complex. Today, the meaning of *jihad* is so controversial, even within Islam, that some interpretations are irreconcilably opposed to one another. Among radical fundamentalists there are three levels of *jihad*, one of which is an obligatory armed struggle for a global Islamic order (as the Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Washington has pronounced in its Wahhabi interpretation).⁴ For scriptural fundamentalists, *jihad* has substantially different meanings, and can refer to childbirth for women and a struggle for spiritual betterment. More traditionalist Mus-

lims see *jihad* mainly as a struggle for personal moral improvement, but one that can include warfare on behalf of the faith when “necessary and appropriate.” Reformist traditionalists, for their part, define *jihad* as a personal, moral journey; only in cases of life or death, or in case of attack or when the survival of Islam is at stake, does *jihad* become “holy war,” according to a dominant view.⁵ By contrast, Islamic moderates refer to *jihad* exclusively in terms of personal spiritual development. Secularists, meanwhile, tend to view *jihad* as a historical phenomenon in holy wars of old, and though they accept the term to refer to spiritual improvement they tend to avoid it because of its controversial underpinnings and overtones.⁶

With so many accepted meanings, both within and outside of Islam, the United States has the opportunity to decide how to make the word work for its national interests. Ironically, both Islamic extremists and the United States government currently are content with sharing the narrow, revisionist definition of *jihad* as terrorism, to the exclusion of the rest of the Islamic world.

But should they be? After all, which idea of *jihad* does the United States wish to see prevail: the benign and charitable idea of self-improvement and self-discipline, or the idea of total warfare against civilization? The extremists know what they want both Muslims and “the infidel” to believe. Indeed, among most Americans, they succeeded long before al-Qaeda ever surfaced.

Hijacking *jihad*

In the late 1970s, Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) dominated the Middle Eastern terrorist scene. Secular-nationalist in nature, it included many non-Muslims

(and even an anti-Islamic Marxist-Leninist faction). But while members appeared not to mind the killing of those deemed to be collaborators, most Muslim members drew the line at the idea of murdering their co-religionists. Over time, however, new and more extreme groups carried the war beyond Israel to advocate the killing of other Muslims, including women and children, and developed an ideology to justify these tactics in heavily religious terms.

One of the most infamous called itself Islamic Jihad. Founded in Egypt in the late 1970s, Islamic Jihad dedicated itself to the establishment of Islamic rule by force.⁷ Its founders chose the group's name purposefully, not to frighten Americans but to convince other Muslims of the holiness of their war, even though the methods were antithetical to the virtues that most believers valued. The name was a conscious effort to justify terrorism in the name of Islam, at a time when most "Muslim terrorists" were terrorists who happened to be Muslim.

In a manifesto entitled "The Methodology of the Islamic Jihad Group," written in the Turah Penitentiary in Cairo in 1986, Islamic Jihad "group leader" Aboud al-Zumur outlined the organization's semantic strategy.⁸ "[W]e chose the term *jihad* to be part of our name and that people know us by that name, given the fact that 'to struggle' is an essential matter to our movement," Zumur wrote. Basing its ideology on the teachings of 13th century theologian Ibn Taymiyya (considered the inspiration of Wahhabi extremist thought), the group was careful to establish the religious justifications for its name and actions by getting religious leaders to approve what normal Muslims considered un-Islamic tactics of subversion and violence.

The document explained the Islamic Jihad ideology in careful and legalistic terms, citing archaic theological tracts that repeatedly call for subjecting oneself to "martyrdom," not merely by personal sacrifice but by "giving up one's life." Al-Zumur spelled out the group's ideology clearly, refuting traditional norms by stressing the un-Islamic methods the group embraced in the quest for political power. He broke some widespread taboos, arguing that Muslim fighters did not need the support of their spiritual leaders, that they could indeed attack non-Muslim civilians, that they could strike offensively and not just in self-defense, and that they could seize political power in foreign countries. In an assault on the sanctity of the family, the Islamic Jihad document said that young Muslims could join the fight against their parents' will and without consent of a duly recognized political authority.

Al-Zumur went even further, arguing that any person or authority who attempts to stop the rogue fighter is himself thwarting the will of God and, by implication, is an infidel who must be killed. The document prepared people that most members of the movement would be expected to die on their mission, either in combat or by suicide, and receive supernatural pleasures in return. The "jihad" would be permanent; it would break traditional discipline between young people and their families and spiritual leaders; it would slay Muslim political leaders whom the Islamic Jihad would deem insufficiently Muslim (the group had already assassinated Egyptian President Anwar Sadat) and would install Islamist clerics in their place, under the moral authority of Shaykh Abu al-Tayyib, a 10th-century Muslim poet.

This new concept of *jihad* was radical. It rejected traditional beliefs about family authority and unity, as well as filial responsibility to parents and siblings, all the while using medieval militant Ibn Tamiyya as its source of moral authority. It demanded a permanent revolution “until the Day of Judgment” under an elite shock force to overthrow the established political and cultural order. “All Muslim scholars have agreed,” the document claimed, that good Muslims should fight and oust present-day governments and “install in their place Muslim spiritual leaders.”

The Islamic Jihad’s methodology paper serves as a telling indicator of a bitter internal battle within the Muslim religion. That clash was a struggle for legitimacy between the extremism of a fringe group and adherents of traditional Islam. It was a battle that the extremists effectively won, shaping words for their own political purposes and creating a new belief system for an emerging generation of the faithful who would break from their families and the bonds of their established religious leaders to perform missions, mainly against fellow Muslims, that would result in their own physical destruction.

A decade later, Osama bin Laden would use the same terminology in his declaration of war against the United States.⁹ Today’s terrorists have adapted extremist medieval interpretations of *jihad* to suit their political agendas. In the process, they have hijacked the terms of religious discourse in the Muslim world. The resulting propaganda victory has silenced more moderate Islamic voices—and imposed a false definition upon American political discourse regarding the Middle East.

The results have been predictable. Without even realizing it, the

United States began its post-9/11 counterattack at a political disadvantage, largely because the enemy had already framed the terms of the “war of ideas.” In the four-and-a-half years since, the United States has only exacerbated this problem. It has undermined “moderate” Muslims who oppose but fear the extremists by effectively declaring that all practitioners of *jihad*—and not merely the extremists who had hijacked the word—were the sworn enemies of the United States. It has validated the enemy’s ideological worldview by appearing to declare war on Islam (even as it has taken pains to stress the opposite). And it has given undue power and prestige to the enemy leadership, enhancing their reputations and inspiring more recruits to their cause.

Toward a new vocabulary

If not *jihad*, then what? If foreign terrorists are not, in truth, holy warriors but rather mass murderers, what do we call them, and what should our message to the rest of the Muslim world be?

True political warfare requires undermining the enemy and destroying its ideas—not merely refuting them or “competing” with them in an intellectual “marketplace.” So far, the United States has fallen far short of this objective, contenting itself with trying to convince Muslims worldwide of its good intentions. Such an approach is profoundly self-defeating; the objective should not be to try and convince skeptical Muslims that the U.S. is not engaged in a “war against Islam,” but to show, relentlessly and in the most vivid terms, that the extremists are un-Islamic and that the nations of the great Abrahamic religions are united against a common mortal enemy.

By necessity, the American political counterattack in the “war of ideas” should be geared toward depriving radical elements of the ability to dominate religious semantics and rhetoric. In so doing, the U.S. will be helping to destroy the image of the enemy as hero and martyr—a crucial mechanism currently fueling the fight against the United States and its Coalition partners.

Doing so means adjusting U.S. rhetoric so as not to hinder civilized Muslims in the recovery of their ideas. If the current idea of *jihad* as terrorism is offensive to the average Muslim, who sees the same word as a just and good action blessed by God, then the U.S. must find another word to describe its enemy and its deeds. Working with Muslim clerics, Arab scholars and regional experts, American policymakers should develop a new vocabulary that, if used boldly and consistently, could shift the terms of debate in the Arab-speaking and Islamic worlds and marginalize the terrorists from their support networks, diminishing their stature and their appeal to young prospective recruits and sowing uncertainty among recruits about one another and about their cause.

Such an approach would help our allies and would-be allies in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Carnegie Scholar Asma Afsaruddin, Associate Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Notre Dame, is studying the semantic content of *jihad*. She observes,

The important battle of semantics is not about window-dressing but about reclaiming the true meaning of *jihad*—which refers to the noblest human “struggle” or “endeavor” to realize God’s will for a just and merciful society on earth—from those who would

willfully abuse it. The Qur’anic and classical notion of *jihad* signifies a continuing enterprise on the part of the religious to uphold what was good and resist what is evil: this enterprise, is, after all, at the root of every civilized society and thus ultimately conducive to true peace.¹⁰

The United States, then, must find ideas already in the Arabic language and Muslim culture that can be applied to describe Islamist terror. Fortunately, a thousand years of Islamic jurisprudence have already provided us with the proper word: *hirabah*. As Layla Sein of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists explains:

Since the concept of *jihad* comes from the root word *jahada* (to strive or struggle for self-betterment from an ethical-moral perspective) and that of *hirabah* comes from the root word *hariba* (to fight, to go to war or become enraged or angry), an etymological and theological examination of these words provides a valid framework through which the religious legitimacy of suicide bombings in today’s global community can be analyzed...

To delve into a comparative study of these Islamic concepts is to expose how *hirabah* is being paraded by terrorist groups as *jihad*. By defining *hirabah* as *jihad*, such terrorist groups as al Qaeda and others promote their terrorist agendas by misleading young, religiously motivated and impressionable Muslims to believe that killing unarmed and non-combatant civilians are activities of *jihad*, and hence a ticket to paradise...

If activities of fear and terror associated with *hirabah* are used to define the meaning of *jihad* in hopes of recruiting Muslim

youth to undertake suicide bombings and other criminal activities, Muslim theologians need to define the nature of what is happening to stop the hijacking of Islam by terrorists.¹¹

“Given the all too common tendency to employ *jihad* and terrorism as synonymous,” says Antony T. Sullivan of the Center for Middle Eastern and North African Studies at the University of Michigan, “there is now perhaps no traditional Islamic concept that cries out louder for revival than *hirabah*.”¹²

Hirabah would be more appropriate and useful, not only for public diplomacy or political reasons, but for the purpose of destroying terrorist networks. U.S. federal law enforcement officials refer to Islamist terrorists as “jihadis,” as do the Armed Forces and counterterrorism strategists. This, writes University of Michigan Professor Abdul Hakim in an important article on terrorism, is a misnomer:

Hirabah appears... to parallel the function of terrorism as an American legal category... *hirabah* actually goes beyond the FBI definition of terrorism, inasmuch as *hirabah* covers both directed and coincidental spreading of fear... *Hirabah*, as it turns out, is the most severely punished crime in Islam, carrying mandatory criminal sanctions.

Hakim writes that “the severest punishments... are explicitly outlined in Qur’an 5:33-34, virtually the beginning and end of all juristic discussions on *hirabah*.” The punishments include execution, crucifixion, or amputation of hands and feet, the latter for humiliation in this life and for “grievous chastisement” in the next.¹³

One finds little doubt, then, that the idea of *hirabah* is a proper means

of demonizing those we call “jihadis.” Moreover, many Muslims, both those one would consider “moderate” and even some who have sympathized with those the U.S. considers extremist, readily accept the idea of *hirabah* as a proper means of demonizing “jihadis.” Immediately after the September 11th attacks, Dr. Ezzeddin Ibrahim, the former chancellor of Al Ain University in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, made the point that:

What occurred on September 11, 2001, is one of the most loathsome of crimes, which in Islam goes under the name of *al-hirabah*. *Hirabah* is the most abominable type of murder, in that it involves killing with terrorism and intimidation.¹⁴

Professor Akbar Ahmed, Chair of Islamic Studies at the American University, concurs:

Properly understood, this is a war of ideas within Islam—some of them faithful to authentic Islam, but some of them clearly un-Islamic and even blasphemous toward the peaceful and compassionate Allah of the Qur’an ... As a matter of truth-in-Islam, both the ideas and the actions they produce must be called what they actually are, beginning with the fact that al Qaeda’s brand of suicide mass murder and its fomenting of hatred among races, religions and cultures do not constitute godly or holy “jihad”—but, in fact, constitute the heinous crime and sin of unholy “*hirabah*”... such ungodly “war against society” should be condemned as blasphemous and un-Islamic.¹⁵

Even some Saudi-associated Muslim organizations are in agreement about the use of the word. One such group is the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), one of the

most influential Muslim groups in the United States and Canada—and reportedly an important promoter of more fundamentalist, even extremist, forms of Islam, with extensive Saudi Arabian funding.¹⁶ According to ISNA Secretary General Sayyid M. Syeed:

The Qur'an and the sayings of the prophet emphatically distinguished the term *jihad* from *hirabah*, a destructive act of rebellion committed against God and mankind. *Hirabah* is an act of terrorism, a subversive act inflicted by an individual or a gang of individuals, breaking the established norms of peace, civic laws, treaties, agreements, moral and ethical codes... While as [*sic*] different forms of *jihad* are highly commendable acts of virtue, *hirabah* is respected as a despicable crime... *Individuals and groups indulging in hirabah are condemned as criminals, subjected to severe deterrent punishments under Islamic law and warned of far more punishment and humiliation in the life after life.*¹⁷ (*Emphasis added*).

Syeed's statement is especially important. His organization is the largest supplier of Saudi-funded Islamic literature in more than 1,100 North American mosques, and the source of much of the ideologically extreme interpretations of Islam including the Salafist/Wahhabi interpretations of *jihad*.

"Think of the disincentive to young, hungry, cynical Muslims—angry at their own governments and angry at ours for bolstering theirs," notes Anisa Mehdi, a journalist who produced the documentary "Inside Mecca" for National Geographic Television. "If they heard 'hirabah' instead of 'jihad,' if they heard 'murder' instead of 'martyr,' if they heard they were bound for hell not heaven, they might not be so quick to sign up to

kill themselves and a handful of so-called 'infidels' along the way."¹⁸

A linguistic offensive

It takes little effort and no money to change the rhetoric and the thinking about *jihad*, *hirabah*, and related Islamic terminology that shape and define ideas. There need be no bureaucratic restructuring, no congressional appropriations or approval, no turf battles; just awareness from public officials and a substitution of words.

To that end, the president and other senior officials can and should take the lead in changing the rhetoric of the War on Terror, generating headlines, controversy, and ultimately reflection around the world. They should also help to properly define *jihad* and *hirabah* in U.S. government glossaries and directories, and enforce such a rhetorical change throughout the United States government, including the Departments of Defense, State and Justice, as well as the counterterrorism and law-enforcement agencies within them.

Elected officials should also undertake to promote a similar transformation abroad. In particular, they should challenge the Saudi government and Saudi-funded entities like ISNA to renounce the pro-terrorist interpretations of *jihad*, revive the concept of *hirabah*, and then identify and marginalize practitioners of *hirabah* and those who support them. The U.S. is entitled to make this challenge because Saudi propaganda has fueled the justification of terrorism in the name of *jihad* around the world, and especially in and against the United States. Simultaneously, Washington should make a point of highlighting the works of journalists, commentators, clerics and others worldwide that denounce Islamist terrorism as *hirabah*—and promote similar steps among Muslims at large.

If we are indeed engaged in a global war of ideas, then words are the principal armaments. Words define ideas, and ideas govern how people think. The enemy has succeeded in redefining certain key words, and consequently changed much of the world's perceptions by warping the language of the Qur'an and of historical Islam. The results have provided the principal justifications for terrorists to murder innocents—mainly Muslims—in their war against society.

Yet the linguistic and cultural foundations of the societies in which terrorists are raised and operate offer powerful weapons that civilization can use against them. Islamic words, ideas, laws and customs can be the United States' best ally in the war, if only the U.S. would recognize and deploy them.



1. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (Springfield, MA: G&C Merriam Company, 1971).
2. *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G & C Merriam Company, 1979).
3. *Merriam-Webster Online, August 2005; Encyclopædia Britannica* adds, "In the 20th and 21st centuries the concept of jihad has sometimes been used as an ideological weapon in an effort to combat western influences and secular governments and to establish an ideal Islamic society." *Britannica Concise Encyclopædia*, retrieved August 17, 2005 from Encyclopædia Britannica Premium Service.
4. The Islamic Affairs Department of the Embassy of Saudi Arabia in Washington issued the following exhortation on *jihad* on its website (<http://www.iad.org>), in 2003: "Muslims are required to raise the banner of Jihad in order to make the Word of Allah supreme in this world, to remove all forms of injustice and oppression, and to defend the Muslims. If Muslims do not take up the sword, the evil tyrants of this earth will be able to continue oppressing the weak and [the] helpless." The wording no longer appears on the Islamic Affairs Department site, but the Middle East Media Research Institute preserved the wording for posterity. See Steven Stalinsky, "The 'Islamic Affairs Department' of the Saudi Embassy in Washington, DC," Middle East Media Research Institute *Special Report* no. 23, November 26, 2003.
5. Cheryl Benard, *Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources and Strategies* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2003), 12-13.
6. *Ibid.*
7. U.S. Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, "Chapter 6—Terrorist Groups," *Country Reports on Terrorism 2004*, April 27, 2005 (<http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/45394.htm>).
8. Aboud al-Zumur, *Jama'at al-Jihad al-Islami* (The Methodology of the Islamic Jihad Group) (Cairo, Egypt: Turah Penitentiary, 1986). Translated by the U.S. Department of State.
9. "[J]ihad against the infidel in every part of the world, is absolutely essential," Bin Laden declared in his 1996 communiqué demanding the ouster of U.S. forces from Saudi Arabia. That mission, the terrorist financier said, was to be carried out by "my brothers, the *mujahideen*, the sons of the nation." Osama Bin Laden, "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," published in *Al Quds al Arabi* (London), August, 1996.
10. Asma Afsaruddin, letter to Jim Guirard, President of the TrueSpeak Institute in Alexandria, Virginia. Guirard solicited and collected quotations on *jihad* and *hirabah* from Arab and Islamic scholars, and is considered the principal figure behind taking back the language from the extremists. The author acknowledges and thanks him for providing many of the quotations used in this article.
11. Layla Sein, "Editorial," *Association of Muslim Social Scientists AMSS Bulletin* 3, no. 4 (2002), 2.
12. Antony T. Sullivan, letter to Jim Guirard.
13. Sherman A. Jackson (a.k.a. Abdul Hakim), "Domestic Terrorism in the Islamic Legal Tradition," *Muslim World* 91, no. 3/4 (2001), 293-310.
14. "Interview: Ezzeddin Ibrahim," *Middle East Policy* VIII, no. 4 (2001).
15. Akbar Ahmed, letter to Jim Guirard.
16. Matthew Levitt, "Subversion from Within: Saudi Funding of Islamic Extremist Groups Undermining U.S. Interests and the War on Terror from Within the United States," Testimony before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology and Homeland Security of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, September 10, 2003.
17. Sayyid M. Syeed, letter to Jim Guirard, cited by Guirard, "Properly Condemning the al Qaeda Blasphemy," *The American Muslim*, April 21, 2003.
18. Anisa Mehdi, "Let's Rescue a Once-Beautiful Word from Its Captors," *Star-Ledger* (Newark), December 29, 2004.