

September 21, 2010

**TO:** Interested Parties

**FROM:** Andy Johnson, Director, National Security Program  
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**RE:** The Real Security Costs of Anti-Muslim Rhetoric

The proposed "Park51" Islamic center in lower Manhattan (universally and improperly dubbed the "Ground Zero Mosque") and a fringe Florida pastor's plan to burn copies of the Quran on September 11<sup>th</sup> dominated much of the public discourse in recent weeks, bouncing around the media and Internet echo chambers and serving as cable television catnip. Though the Florida story may have passed, the debate over the center in New York continues with some of the rhetoric and actions devolving into outright anti-Muslim bigotry. Furthermore, it's likely there will be more anti-Muslim incidents to come. Copycat bigots are sure to have noticed the attention that merely the threat of action by one unknown crank can generate in the sensationalism of the 24-hour news cycle and information age.

The question for national leaders is whether any of this really matters. Should they view this as inconsequential rantings by fringe figures and meaningless cable chatter?

The answer, at least for now, appears to be no. There are, in fact, real consequences to this behavior. In the case of the threatened Quran burning, senior members of the U.S. national security establishment, including Defense Secretary Gates and General Petraeus, intervened both publically and privately to warn of the potential danger to our troops. However, there is a much broader, much more consequential, aspect of this debate that has largely gone under the radar. Nine years after 9/11, a growing chorus of anti-Muslim bigotry threatens our security by facilitating the environment for radicalization both in the U.S. and abroad, disrupting the work of U.S. law enforcement agencies, and undermining our troops in the field.

## **A Dangerous Shift Away from Tolerance**

In the aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, President Bush reminded the country that, "Ours is war not against a religion, not against the Muslim faith... [O]urs is a war against individuals who absolutely hate what America stands for." While Muslim Americans did face increased scrutiny and discrimination after the attacks, for nine years Americans avoided engaging in the kind of vehement anti-Muslim bigotry we are now seeing. In a sharp departure from President Bush's call for tolerance and understanding, we now have political leaders attempting to equate our fellow Muslim American citizens with terrorists who corrupt and warp the tenets of the Islam to justify their murderous acts:

- Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich compared the planned construction of the Park51 center to Nazis putting “up a sign next to the Holocaust museum in Washington.”<sup>2</sup>
- At an event for Tennessee gubernatorial candidate (and current lieutenant governor) Rod Ramsey, a man in the crowd asked Ramsey about “the threat that is invading our country from Muslims.” In explaining his views on the constitutionally protected right to freedom of religion, Ramsey suggested that Islam may not actually be a religion safeguarded under the Constitution, but “a nationality, way of life, or cult, whatever you want to call it.”<sup>3</sup>

Taken alone, this rhetoric is disturbing, but not dangerous. However, this heated debate has stirred up an environment of Islamophobia and has inspired others to act. For instance, a California Islamic center was recently vandalized three times in a single week. Protestors threw bricks through the windows and left signs expressing opposition to the Park51 project, with one sign reading, “No temple for the god of terrorism at Ground Zero.”<sup>4</sup>

## **What Is the Impact on American Security?**

To be fair, it is tough to say what the exact impact this will have on U.S. national security. Groups like al Qaeda, already determined to strike the U.S., will not become more radicalized as a result of these incidents. And while jihadists will try to use some of these incidents for recruitment and propaganda purposes, those willing to die for the twisted ideology of al Qaeda or the Taliban have pointed to justifications for their actions long before this recent debate emerged. Yet, there are real security implications in the U.S. and abroad if political leaders allow this anti-Muslim rage to fester:

### **Creating the environment for radicalization in the U.S.**

One of America’s greatest strengths is that the forces of inclusion trump intolerance, hate, and extremism. Muslim Americans are well integrated into American society, unlike many places overseas.<sup>5</sup> And, even though much of the recent outcry has centered around the placement of mosques, a study by scholars at Duke and the University of North Carolina found that American mosques actually deter the spread of militant Islam and terrorism because their leaders “put significant effort into countering extremism by building youth programs, sponsoring antiviolence forums and scrutinizing teachers and texts.”<sup>6</sup>

The inflammatory, counter-productive rhetoric springing up in the Islamic center debate threatens to upset this balance and create an environment where open hatred and exclusion of Muslim Americans from mainstream society is the norm. This has dangerous consequences. David Schanzer, Director of Duke University’s Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, warns that, “Open hostility to Islam may lead some alienated Muslim youth to seek a sense of value and purpose through violence. We do not know precisely why a small number of Muslim Americans have become radicalized, but most research suggests they latch on to radical Islam because they are disaffected and conflicted about their place in American society.”<sup>7</sup>

## **Reducing Muslim community cooperation with law enforcement**

Since September 11, 2001, the U.S. law enforcement community has worked diligently to build ties with American Muslim communities across the country. In case after case, members of local Muslim communities tipped off law enforcement officials, which led to the disruption of terrorism plots and American lives being saved.<sup>8</sup> Information sharing and cooperation with Muslim communities is a critical component of our counter-terrorism efforts and it has made the U.S. safer. Extreme anti-Muslim rhetoric hinders the work of our law enforcement professionals, as moderate American Muslims are forced to question both their place in U.S. society and the benefits of coming forward with information in such a hostile environment.<sup>9</sup>

## **Undermining our troops**

Responding to the plan to burn Qurans on September 11<sup>th</sup>, General Petraeus said, "It could endanger troops and it could endanger the overall effort in Afghanistan. It is precisely the kind of action the Taliban uses and could cause significant problems. Not just here, but everywhere in the world we are engaged with the Islamic community."<sup>10</sup>

General Petraeus is right. Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and other violent jihadist groups convince recruits and inflame passions by suggesting that the United States is at war with Islam. They preach that it is impossible to be a good American and a practicing Muslim, even though that is exactly what millions of American Muslims do every day. Efforts to demonize mainstream Muslim Americans play right into the terrorists' narrative by creating the false impression that there is a war of civilizations against Islam. This creates a more hostile and dangerous environment for our troops serving abroad as it will only add to the difficulty of gaining the trust and cooperation of Iraqi and Afghan populations. It also threatens to diminish America's greatest defenses against homegrown extremism—inclusion and tolerance.

## **Don't Play the Terrorists' Game**

Dalia Mogahed, from the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, noted that the extreme anti-Muslim views in the U.S. ironically mirror Al Qaeda's central ideology, "That the world is divided into two camps, and they're irreconcilable, and Muslims have to choose which side they are on."<sup>11</sup> Extreme rhetoric and violence aimed at Muslim Americans plays into the terrorists' hands, helping to build their case about the incompatibility of Islam and the West. What we need now—more than ever—is to reinforce moderate Islamic teaching in the U.S. and abroad that renounces violence and promotes respectful coexistence. Those taking extreme stances that marginalize American Muslims and enflame bigotry should reconsider both the validity of their arguments and the damage they are doing to U.S. national security.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Suhail A. Khan, "America's First Muslim President," *Foreign Policy*, August 23, 2010, Accessed September 20, 2010. Available at: [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/08/23/americas\\_first\\_muslim\\_president](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/08/23/americas_first_muslim_president).

<sup>2</sup> Andy Barr, "Newt Gingrich compares mosque to Nazis," *Politico*, August 16, 2010, Accessed September 20, 2010. Available at: <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0810/41112.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Jon Bershad, "Tennessee's Lieutenant Governor Ron Ramsey Thinks Islam May Be A Cult," *Mediaite*, July 27, 2010, Accessed September 20, 2010. Available at: <http://www.mediaite.com/online/tennessee%E2%80%99s-lieutenant-governor-ron-ramsey-thinks-islam-may-be-a-cult/>.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Picard, "Mosque Attack in California refers to Ground Zero," *International Business Times*, August 26, 2010, Accessed September 20, 2010. Available at: <http://www.ibtimes.com/articles/46449/20100826/mosque-islam-hate.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Leo Cendrowicz, "Study: European Muslims Feel Shut Out," *TIME*, December 16, 2009, Accessed September 20, 2010. Available at: <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1948078,00.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Laurie Goodstein, "Across Nation, Mosque Projects Meet Opposition," *The New York Times*, August 7, 2010, Accessed September 20, 2010. Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/08/us/08mosque.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/08/us/08mosque.html?_r=2).

<sup>7</sup> David H. Schanzer, "Opposing the mosque endangers security," *The Baltimore Sun*, August 17, 2010, Accessed September 20, 2010. Available at: [http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2010-08-17/news/bs-ed-islam-20100817\\_1\\_muslim-chaplain-muslim-women-muslim-american](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2010-08-17/news/bs-ed-islam-20100817_1_muslim-chaplain-muslim-women-muslim-american).

<sup>8</sup> "Politicizing America's Security," Report, National Security Network, July 29, 2010, Accessed September 20, 2010. Available at: <http://www.nsnetwork.org/node/1682>.

<sup>9</sup> Schanzer.

<sup>10</sup> David Nakamura, "Petraeus condemns Fla. church's plan to burn Korans," *The Washington Post*, September 7, 2010, Accessed September 20, 2010. Available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/07/AR2010090701595.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Scott Shane, "U.S. Anti-Islam Protest Seen as Lift for Extremists," *The New York Times*, August 20, 2010, Accessed September 20, 2010. Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/21/world/21muslim.html?\\_r=2&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1285005603-dcqmLPW0+ZnFga+gpbEtIQ](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/21/world/21muslim.html?_r=2&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1285005603-dcqmLPW0+ZnFga+gpbEtIQ).