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Islamist Extremism – Potential for Greater U.S.-Australian Cooperation
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Though not the beginning of the war between Islamist extremists and the United States, 9/11 was the moment when most Americans realized that such a war was underway. Understandably, the challenge often is thought of as a problem of terrorism, but it is broader.

Islamist extremism—sometimes also referred to as radical Islamism or jihadism—motivates a diverse global movement. Its leaders strive to shape the future of the world’s Muslim community, which numbers more than 1.6 billion souls, approximately a quarter of the world’s total population.² The movement has potential to affect the peace, prosperity and security of nations world-wide. American and Australian interests in the movement’s influence and power are various, including:

- the stability of governments in a number of predominantly Muslim countries and the nature of their foreign policies,
- nuclear proliferation,
- the international oil trade,
- humanitarian concerns, including the safety of Christian and other minority communities in predominantly Muslim countries,
- difficulties of assimilating Muslim immigrants into Western societies, and
- the religiously-based philosophical rejection of liberal democratic principles.

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² See “The Future of the Global Muslim Population: *Projections for 2010-2030*,” Pew Research Center, Forum on Religion and Public Life, January 2011 at http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Muslim/FutureGlobalMuslimPopulation-WebPDF-Feb10.pdf.

One could add other items to this list, but the essential point should be clear: The ambitions of Islamist extremists to expand their influence and to confront their Muslim and non-Muslim enemies represents more than a terrorism problem.

This paper will examine the challenge of Islamist extremism. After a preliminary comment about the U.S.-Australian alliance, it will:

- highlight key points in the ideology of radical Islamism;
- review the security problems the movement poses in the form of terrorism, political campaigns within predominantly Muslim countries and hostility and subversion directed against the West;
- discuss U.S. and Australian policies relating to jihadist ideology; and
- suggest ways that Australia and America can work better together to counter that ideology.

Preliminary thoughts: On the US-Australian alliance

Sustaining an alliance between democratic nations over a long period requires active cultivation. Since World War II, Australian officials have demonstrated their appreciation of this point. They have invested in the U.S.-Australian alliance and shown commitment through deployments of forces to operate alongside Americans in military missions from Korea, through Vietnam, the Gulf War, Afghanistan and to Iraq. The creation of the U.S. Studies Centre at the University of Sydney also impressively signifies commitment. The Centre educates Australians about the United States and promotes awareness of the alliance's value.

The United States has a large number of formal and de facto alliance relationships. It is an unfortunate but understandable fact of life that an alliance with the United States tends to loom larger in the thinking of America's allies than in the collective mind of Americans. The United States, after all, is a power with uniquely global capabilities and responsibilities. Nonetheless, the need to cultivate alliances applies also in the United States; arguably, it is more important here precisely because it takes effort to focus the attention of Americans on a given alliance relationship.

If the U.S.-Australian alliance is to remain reliable, American officials, scholars, journalists and members of the general public should learn something of its history and consider its current purposes. They should be made aware of ideas for keeping the alliance active in the service of common interests.

This paper on U.S.-Australian cooperation regarding Islamist extremism is written in that spirit.

Defining the Islamist Extremism Problem

Security cooperation between allies begins with a common threat assessment. U.S.-Australian cooperation is not as developed as it should be on Islamist extremism, not least because the U.S. government is not organized to deal with the problem.

Islamism – also known as political Islam – is the ideology of an international movement. The term “movement” is used to make clear that the people involved are not working within a single organization, nor do they all follow a single leader. They do not coordinate their actions among themselves on a movement-wide basis. They are diverse. They include Sunnis and Shiites, Wahhabis and Muslim Brothers; indeed, some parts of the movement are antagonistic to others. The unifying factor, however, is commitment to ideas about Islam, about the proper way to organize a political community under Muslim law (*sharia*) and about the necessity to fight Islam’s putative enemies.

Given the range of views among Islamists and the fact that not all Islamists support terrorism, it is prudent to describe the hostile ideology as Islamist extremism rather than simply Islamism. This is especially important now that Islamists are in power in Turkey, Egypt and Tunisia and, perhaps soon, in Syria. It would be beneficial if the leaders there govern pragmatically in ways that sharpen ideological differences within the ranks of the Islamists.

John Hopkins University professor Mary Habeck has succinctly summarized the principle dogmas of the Islamist extremist movement:

that Islam is the one true faith that will dominate the world; that Muslim rulers need to govern by the shari’a alone; that the Qur’an and hadith contain the whole truth for determining the righteous life; that there is no separation between religion and the rest of life; and that Muslims are in a state of conflict with the unbelievers ...³

Islamism is referred to as “political Islam” because of its emphasis on the importance of state power. The goal of Islamists is not simply to influence the thinking or address the souls of individual men and women, it is to establish Muslim rule so that society can be governed by *sharia*. Islamists focus on statecraft, beyond soulcraft. They stress the unity and sovereignty of God, revering God as the only proper legislator or source of law for human beings. Popular sovereignty – the right of a community to legislate for itself – is anathema on the grounds that it gives God-like status to human beings and thus blasphemes against God’s unity and sovereignty.

³ Mary Habeck, *Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 17.

Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi, founder of Jamaat-i-Islami, described Islam as “the very antithesis of secular Western democracy.”⁴ The Turkish-American scholar Zeyno Baran writes:

To the [Muslim Brotherhood] and groups like it—whether in the Middle East or the United States—the Quran and Islam are not merely one *possible* source of law; they are the *only* source of law. As the Muslim Brotherhood declares in its motto, ‘Allah is our objective, the Prophet is our leader, the Quran is our law, jihad is our way, dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope.’⁵

In his article on the Islamization of Arab culture, Hassan Mneimneh of Hudson Institute defines “Islamization” as “the application of the Islamic template to state and society” and calls it “the foundational base of the political program advocated by the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups.” Other political arrangements are to be “superseded by a totalitarian regime having, as its immediate or delayed mission, global expansion.”⁶ Mneimneh adds:

Some Islamists have been willing to use democratic means to achieve the political power necessary to establish Islamization, though that ultimate goal is incompatible with democracy. Other Islamists reject democratic means even as a tool.

[The Muslim Brotherhood] understands participatory and electoral politics not as an intrinsic reflection of the democratic character of the political system, but as a means to an end—that end being the “Islamization” (*aslamah*) of society and the individual and the ‘restoration’ of the ‘Islamic State.’”

Mneimneh goes on to note that the democratic concept that political power should change hands continually as a result of popular elections “is noticeably absent from the Muslim Brotherhood political program.” On the two distinct approaches to Islamization in competition within Arab Islamist circles, he writes:

The top-down approach is promoted by those who hold that the creation of the ‘Islamic State’ is a prerequisite for the ‘Islamization’ of institutions, society, and the individual. Such a state must be established promptly, therefore, and by any means necessary. (This approach is the *modus operandi* of the al-Qaeda network.) The bottom-up approach, by contrast, is favored by those who believe that the creation of the new ‘Muslim Man’ is necessary for the Islamization of society, institutions and state. It is the apparent

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁵ Zeyno Baran, “The Muslim Brotherhood’s U.S. Network,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Vol. 6 (2008), p. 95, 97-98.

⁶ Hassan Mneimneh, “The Islamization of Arab Culture,” *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Vol. 6 (2008), p. 48, 51.

compatibility of the latter approach—espoused by the mainstream organizations of the Muslim Brotherhood movement— with democratic practice that constitutes the basis for the claim of ‘moderation’⁷

Bernard Lewis, the eminent scholar and former editor of the Encyclopedia of Islam, defines the term “jihad” as “an Arabic word with the literal meaning of ‘effort,’ ‘striving,’ or ‘struggle,’” adding: “In the Qur’an and still more in the Traditions, commonly though not invariably followed by the words ‘in the path of God,’ it has usually been understood as meaning ‘to wage war.’” He notes that the great collections of the Prophet Mohammed’s pronouncements “all contain a section devoted to *jihad*, in which the military meaning predominates” and the same is true in the classical manuals of *shari’a*.” Observing that “There were some who argued that *jihad* should be understood in a moral and spiritual, rather than a military sense,” Lewis writes:

Such arguments were sometimes put forward by Shi’ite theologians in classical times, and more frequently by modernizers and reformists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The overwhelming majority of classical theologians, jurists, and traditionists, however, understood the obligation of *jihad* in a military sense, and have examined and expounded it accordingly.⁸

According to Muslim teaching, *jihad* is one of the basic commandments of the faith, an obligation imposed on all Muslims by God, through revelation.... The basis of the obligation of *jihad* is the universality of the Muslim revelation. God’s word and God’s message are for all mankind; it is the duty of those who have accepted them to strive (*jahada*) unceasingly to convert or at least to subjugate those who have not. This obligation is without limit of time or space. It must continue until the whole world has either accepted the Islamic faith or submitted to the power of the Islamic state.⁹

For Western national-security officials, the central fact about jihadist ideology is that it posits the West’s inherent hostility to Islam. The founder of Jaish-e-Mohammad, Maulana Mohammed Masood Azhar, writes:

It is in the nature of the unbeliever to hate Islam and Muslims. They will do their utmost and their sole aim of living is to destroy or cause harm to the Muslims. This is why the unbelievers have always been fighting against the Muslims and will carry on doing so.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid. p. 49 (endnote omitted).

⁸ Bernard Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 72.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

¹⁰ Maulana Mohammed Masood Azhar, *The Virtues of Jihad* (Ahle Sunnah Wal Jama’at, 1996), p. 112.

Professort Habeck comments that, according to Azhar's "essentialist" view of the enemies of Islam, the depiction of the unbelievers in the Qur'an and hadith is "valid today in every detail."¹¹ Faithful Muslims are obliged to fight against Islam's enemies and this fight is inherently defensive.

Why is Islamist extremism an international security problem?

In the West, jihadism's most salient manifestation is terrorist violence, but that is not the extent of the problem. Islamist groups are trying to undermine governments in Indonesia, Pakistan, Mali, Saudi Arabia, Palestinian Authority territories and elsewhere.

In Indonesia, the problem is not just large-scale terrorism, though memories of the 2002 Bali bombings remain vivid. Sunni extremists attack Shiites and Ahmadis. The Islamic Defenders Front harasses shop owners that sell liquor and attacks nightclubs. Locally-based Islamist vigilante groups work to intimidate local police and political leaders. Activities of non-violent Islamists challenge liberalism, democracy and stability in Indonesia. The Prosperous Justice Party, an Islamist political party known as PKS, calls for a *sharia* state.

The situation in Indonesia, including the declared aspiration of Islamist political parties to achieve power non-violently, should be analyzed in light of political and cultural developments in Turkey, where Islamists have achieved political dominance through democratic elections. Turkey's Justice and Development Party, the Islamist political party led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is using government power to imprison and intimidate political opponents, weakening liberal democratic institutions. Turkish officials have imprisoned large numbers of journalists and hundreds of general and flag officers of the Turkish armed forces; many remain in prison for extended periods without being charged with any crimes. Statistics from the Erdogan government's own Ministry of Justice reveal that murder of woman has increased ten-fold in the last decade, since the Justice and Development Party's ascendancy.¹² Turkey's constitution is being redrafted and it is not clear whether the new constitution will preserve liberal democratic principles.

In Pakistan, Islamist groups have celebrated the assassination of political leaders and others who oppose their views on *sharia*, blasphemy laws, the education of girls and other issues. Islamist terrorist organizations in Pakistan include Jaish-e-Mohammed, Lashkar-i-Taiba and the Pakistani Taliban. U.S. officials categorize all three of these organizations as al Qaeda affiliates.

¹¹ Habeck, p. 51.

¹² See Banu Eligur, *The Mobilization of Political Islam in Turkey* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Meanwhile, Islamist parties have risen to power in Yemen, Egypt and Tunisia. Islamist forces are prominent among the insurgents fighting to topple the Assad regime in Syria. In all these countries, there are questions about the role that *sharia* will play in the constitution and laws, about the freedom that will be afforded to political parties opposed to the Islamists, about whether the Islamists will allow themselves to be removed from power by democratic means, about the rights of non-Muslim citizens and about the foreign policies their Islamist parties will pursue (for example, whether Egypt will preserve its peace treaty with Israel and how Egypt will cooperate with Iran.)

The Islamist insurgents in Mali have engaged in brutal attacks against individuals (for example, amputations of limbs of people as *sharia* punishment for alleged crimes) and destruction of ancient manuscripts and monuments, including Muslim works condemned by the Islamist extremists. The French-led international military intervention against the Islamists has liberated substantial areas in Mali and the public there has shown gratitude to the French. (The repudiation of the al Qaeda-affiliated Islamist extremists by Muslims in Mali recalls the repudiation of the al Qaeda forces by the Sunni Arab tribes in Anbar province in Iraq in 2007-08. Western officials interested in countering Islamist extremism should make the most of such examples of Muslim communities rejecting domination by Islamist extremists.)

Islamist organizations work within Western countries to promote actions and ideas inimical to liberalism and democracy. They work to introduce *sharia* in various spheres of life, including the law of marital relations. They are particularly active in striving to influence the way universities and high schools teach about Islam. They capitalize on the openness of Western institutions, rooted in liberal and democratic principles, to argue that such principles are wrong and contrary to God's commandments. Islamist organizations often oppose freedom of speech in the name of countering "Islamophobia."

How Bush administration understood terrorism challenge

The Bush administration saw the enemy in the war on terrorism in ideological terms: as a diverse, global movement of Islamist extremist organizations and individuals – and their state and non-state supporters – who use terrorism to advance their cause.¹³

¹³ "The enemy is a transnational movement of extremist organizations, networks, and individuals -- and their state and non-state supporters -- which have in common that they exploit Islam and use terrorism for ideological ends. The Al Qa'ida Associated Movement (AQAM), comprised of al Qa'ida and affiliated extremists, is the most dangerous present manifestation of such extremism. Certain other violent extremist groups also pose a serious and continuing threat.

"There is a direct relationship between the enemies' motivations and the willingness to use terror tactics. The enemies of the United States and its partners are motivated by extremist ideologies antagonistic to freedom, tolerance, and moderation." General Peter Pace, *National Military Strategic Plan for the War on*

From President Bush on down, officials were sensitive to the danger that the war might be seen as an attack on Islam. Within days after 9/11, the president made a well-publicized visit to a Washington, DC mosque to clarify that America was not at war with Muslims as such or with Islam. Over time, the administration achieved increasing clarity about the distinction between Islam as a religion and Islamist extremism as a totalitarian political ideology, but there remained concern that describing the enemy publicly in terms that referenced Islam could be misinterpreted as anti-religious bigotry.

The officials most interested in a serious effort to counter the enemy's ideology understood that it was necessary to label the ideology accurately. The government could hardly develop the necessary strategy if officials could not use such terms as Islamist extremism, radical Islamism or jihadism. But they also understood the importance of not appearing to confirm the extremists' arguments about the West's hostility to Islam. It bears noting that *Muslim* commentators themselves often make the distinction between Islam and Islamism.¹⁴

After 9/11, there was, of course, intense interest in preserving lives and property from anticipated follow-on attacks. But the larger concern was that a series of 9/11-scale attacks on the United States could change the nature of American society, as the public could be expected to demand severe action to prevent such attacks, even at the expense of the free and open nature of the country.

History provided many examples of free peoples willingly trading civil liberties for public safety. Many of those examples involved Americans, even though Americans have traditionally been highly protective of their civil liberties. A key reason to fight terrorism vigorously was worry that the terrorists' success would inevitably damage civil liberties. The terrorists could harm us directly by murder and destruction and indirectly by driving us to actions that could undermine our constitutional system and freedoms. This argued for a counter-terrorism strategy that did not rely chiefly on defensive measures at home, but rather on initiative abroad. A key goal was to compel our enemies to have to scatter, hide and move continually so they had less ability to plan large-scale operations against us. As I put it, the president decided that in dealing with the terrorists he had to change the way we live or change the way they live.

As the Bush administration war-on-terrorism strategy developed, it had three main components:

- Defend the homeland.

Terrorism (Washington, DC, February 1, 2006)(“NMSP-WOT”), available at: <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/gwot.pdf>.

¹⁴ See, for example, the writings of Hassan Mneimneh, Zeyno Baran, Husain Haqqani.

- Attack and disrupt terrorist networks abroad.
- Counter ideological support for terrorism.

In the National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism, issued by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in classified form in 2005 and in unclassified form in 2006, ideology was described as the “the enemy’s strategic center of gravity.”¹⁵ To counter its ideology is to attack the enemy at the strategic level, the plan said. Recognizing that the Defense Department was not the lead agency in the ideological effort, the plan stated: “A principal focus of this strategic plan is to support other U.S. Government agency efforts to counter the extremist ideologies that fuel terrorist networks.”¹⁶

Much was done in the Bush administration’s war on terrorism to defend the homeland and to attack and disrupt terrorist networks abroad. The effort to counter ideological support for terrorism, however, was never highly developed. The U.S. government did not rise to the challenge.

The role of the State Department

No U.S. government office was given the mission to counter jihadist ideology – and none has that mission today. This has been a hole in the American strategy for the war on terrorism since 9/11. The Bush administration failed to engage in a global battle of ideas with the jihadists. And the Obama administration has failed likewise, though for different reasons.

In the Bush administration, there were senior officials who understood the importance of confronting America’s Islamist terrorist enemies on the level of ideas. Civilian and military leaders in the Pentagon were especially outspoken in support of an ideological component for the war on terrorism, as is clear from the National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism, quoted above.

Around the government, it was generally assumed that the State Department would take the lead. For a number of reasons, this did not occur. It is worthwhile reviewing those reasons because they are of more than historical importance. They help explain why the State Department would not be best suited to lead a government-wide effort to counter jihadist ideology in the event that a U.S. president someday decides to initiate such an effort.

When State officials addressed “Muslim world outreach” in interagency meetings in the years immediately after 9/11, their ideas usually aimed at reducing anti-American sentiment or improving the image of what they called America’s “brand.” In response, other officials commented that anti-Americanism, while a bad thing, is not at the heart of the problem of jihadist ideology and terrorism. If it were, some

¹⁵ NMSP-WOT, p. 7.

¹⁶ NMSP-WOT, p. 14.

grimly joked, the war would focus on the French and not just on extremists in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

State's public diplomacy office produced glossy brochures showing pictures of smiling Muslim children freely attending their religious schools in the United States and distributed these at interagency meetings as examples of "ammunition" that could be used in a battle of ideas against the terrorists. This was all well and good, but hardly amounted to a comprehensive, global strategy for countering jihadist ideology.

More to the point, State officials developed programs to promote civil society and democratic institutions in predominantly Muslim countries. These efforts aimed to remedy conditions believed to make some young Muslims more receptive to Islamist extremist ideas. This was serious and valuable work, though it did not directly attack the jihadists' ideology.

As an institution, State was comfortable with "public diplomacy" and "strategic communications," but not with the idea of a counter-ideology strategy. The State Department has an Under Secretary-led office for public diplomacy. The department's essential function is to transmit and receive messages and, when asked how they could help counter jihadist ideology, State officials naturally offered ideas about how American officials can transmit useful messages to Muslim audiences. This could be an element of a comprehensive strategy, but it is not of the essence because what American officials say to Muslims cannot be as significant in shaping Muslim thinking about jihad, *sharia* and other Islamist themes as what Muslims say to one another.

What is required is a strategy to stimulate and influence a debate among Muslims. To develop it requires an operational frame of mind. American officials should be asking themselves what they should *do* to influence the actions of Muslims that are or might be important voices in such a debate. That is a broader and more difficult question than what American officials should *say* to the Muslim masses.

Urging State officials to think of operations rather than messages was ineffective. Though standard among military planners, the operational frame of mind is uncommon among foreign-service professionals. In the State Department, the institutional culture is not receptive to suggestions that our diplomats should make strategies and plans and conduct campaigns with defined objectives and metrics for gauging progress. Such suggestions don't comport with prevailing notions of the role of diplomats. Foreign service officers commonly see themselves as too individualistic, cerebral, creative and improvisational to be confined, as military personnel are, within the bounds of written strategies and detailed plans with metrics. This comment on the foreign service is, of course, a gross generalization that does not apply in all cases, but it is well-grounded and helps explain why successive secretaries of state have said they would like to see their department expand its role and become more operational.

There were also other reasons why State officials did not take on the mission of developing and implementing a strategy to counter jihadist ideology. State's main function, as noted, is diplomacy, much of which takes the form of discussion that aims at resolving problems through mutual accommodation. State's work generally is pragmatic, not ideological. When confronted with a problem, State officials tend to analyze it in terms that preserve the possibility that it can be resolved through compromise or through an appeal to someone's practical interests. A problem perceived as a matter of principle or of ideology will not appear susceptible to diplomatic resolution. The so-called "realist" school, which downplays the importance of ideology in international relations and stresses instead the importance of military power and economic interest, tends to predominate in the State Department, as it does also in the U.S. intelligence community. This is evident in the readiness of State (and CIA) officials to view the problem of terrorist extremism not in ideological terms, but as a reflection of economic, social and political grievances that can be remedied, or at least mitigated, through more generous and accommodating U.S. policies.

In the Bush administration's last few months, James Glassman, a political appointee, was confirmed as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Not typical of State officials, he was intent on leading a serious interagency effort to counter Islamist extremist ideology, but with the election of Barack Obama in 2008 Mr. Glassman's promising efforts ended almost as soon as they began.

It is not clear that those efforts would have succeeded even if he had had more time. The reason is that an ideas campaign will continually run afoul of the demands of diplomacy. A campaign to counter jihadist ideology might include providing resources to a critic of the government of Saudi Arabia, for example. But it is easy to imagine that U.S. diplomats there would object because the action could harm their efforts to win Saudi cooperation on a matter of immediate importance. They could argue that their concern should trump the speculative and long-term benefits of aiding the critic. If both the ideas-campaign officials and the diplomats report to the Secretary of State, the latter can be expected to prevail, given that State's principal focus is the practical business of diplomacy.

For all these reasons, if a U.S. president decides that countering Islamist extremism is a strategic priority, it would be wise to locate the head of the campaign outside the State Department. Disputes between the campaign and State officials would then be decided in the White House, which might better weigh short-term foreign-relations considerations against strategic interests in countering the hostile ideology.

The Obama administration

Senior Bush administration officials acknowledged the ideological essence of the terrorism problem but failed to organize a serious counter-jihadism effort.

President Obama and his team redefined the problem altogether. They have rejected the term “war on terrorism” and have said rather that America is at war with al Qaida and its affiliated groups. This move from an ideological to an organizational definition of the enemy, President Obama says, is a sign of the clarity and precision of his counter-terrorism strategy.

Obama administration officials make a point of denying that Islamist extremism is even relevant to terrorism. They say that labeling terrorists as Islamists or jihadists is inaccurate because Islam categorically disapproves of terrorism. They also assert, perhaps somewhat inconsistently, that such labeling benefits the terrorists because it gives them dignity and legitimacy among Muslims.

John Brennan, a former CIA official, was President Obama’s chief counter-terrorism adviser and the president recently nominated him to serve as the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. In an August 2009 speech, Brennan explained the administration’s redefinition of the terrorism problem as a “war against al Qaida” and its new understanding of the nature of the extremism that spawns terrorists. Stressing that it is “critically important” that President Obama has “a clear, more precise definition of the challenge,” Brennan said “the president does not describe this as a ‘war on terrorism’” and “the president does not describe this as a ‘global war.’” Brennan declared:

Nor does President Obama see this challenge as a fight against jihadists. Describing terrorists in this way, using the legitimate term “jihad,” which means to purify oneself or to wage a holy struggle for a moral goal, risks giving these murderers the religious legitimacy they desperately seek but in no way deserve.

Brennan here failed to note that jihad also means war in the service of Islam. While he repeatedly emphasized the importance of America’s respect for Muslims, he shows no compunction about speaking imam-like as to what is “legitimate” in Islam. This may be seen by Muslims as more condescending than respectful, though it is intended to flatter.

Along the same lines, in his June 2009 Cairo speech, President Obama invoked “the Holy Koran” and declared that the killings done by the extremists “are irreconcilable with ... Islam.”

Obama administration officials emphasize the importance of countering “violent extremism,” but their concept of extremism is unrelated to ideology. They explain terrorism-producing extremism by reference to “legitimate grievances” about economic, social and political matters. In that same August 2009 speech, Brennan describes the effort to counter extremism as “a political, economic and social campaign to meet the basic needs and legitimate grievances of ordinary people – security for their communities, education for their children, a job and income for parents and a sense of dignity and worth.” As examples of such grievances, he cites

lack of democratic rights in some countries, inter-ethnic tensions, and frustration about the lack of resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. He does not address the possibility that a person may become a terrorist for ideological reasons – for example, because he believes that his Muslim faith requires him to kill the enemies of Islam.

President Obama enforces this idea that terrorist extremism cannot be discussed in ideological terms relating to Islam. This compels administration officials to perform contortions that produce such headlines as: “[Attorney General Eric] Holder balks at blaming ‘radical Islam’ for terror attempts.” In a congressional hearing, the administration’s Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Security Paul Stockton had the following colloquy with Representative Dan Lungren (R-California):

LUNGREN: Al Qaeda—how does al Qaeda define itself? Are they dedicated to violent Islamist extremism?

STOCKTON: Al Qaeda would love to convince Muslims around the world that the United States is at war with Islam.

LUNGREN: I didn't say that.

STOCKTON: That is a prime propaganda tool. And I'm not going to aid and abet that effort to advance their propaganda goals.

LUNGREN: Is there a difference between Islam and violent Islamist extremism?

STOCKTON: Sir, with great respect, I don't believe it's helpful to frame our adversary as Islamic with any set of qualifiers that we might add, because we are not at war with Islam.

LUNGREN: I understand that. I never said we were at war with Islam. One of the questions we're trying to deal with is the radicalization of Islam, is the radicalization of Islamic youth. And if we can't distinguish between violent Islamist extremism and Islam, then all of this stuff about behavioral indicators doesn't mean anything.¹⁷

The Obama administration has a number of offices working on what they refer to as “CVE” or “countering violent extremism,” but none has the mission to challenge Islamist extremist ideology. The new State Department office of Strategic Counter-Terrorism Communications produces useful material – for example, videos deprecating Usama bin Laden and al Qaida for sitting passively on the sidelines as the early Arab Spring uprisings were burgeoning. But it does not make efforts to encourage Muslim voices to refute or contradict the extremist Islamism promoted

¹⁷ House Committee on Homeland Security and Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *Joint Hearing on Homegrown Terrorism Threat to U.S. Military Communities* (panel 1), December 7, 2011, available at <http://homeland.house.gov/hearing/joint-hearing-homegrown-terrorism-threat-military-communities-inside-united-states>.

by al Qaida. Equally constrained is the CVE office of the National Counter-Terrorism Center.¹⁸

Professor Mary Habeck has commented trenchantly on the refusal to acknowledge the relationship between terrorism and ideology rooted in Islam:

The consistent need to find explanations other than religious ones for the attacks says, in fact, more about the West than it does about the jihadis. Western scholars have generally failed to take religion seriously. Secularists, whether liberals or socialists, grant true explanatory power to political, social, or economic factors but discount the plain sense of religious statements made by the jihadis themselves. To see why jihadis declared war on the United States and tried to kill as many Americans as possible, we must be willing to listen to their own explanations. To do otherwise is to impose a Western interpretation on the extremists, in effect to listen to ourselves rather than to them.¹⁹

Australia's Counter-Terrorism White Paper

The Australian government's 2010 Counter-Terrorism White Paper stresses the centrality of jihadism. It effectively distinguishes between jihadist ideology and the conditions that make people receptive to that ideology. It recognizes that countering extremism requires plans to mitigate such conditions and also efforts directly against the ideology. The White Paper does not imply that the extremism problem is Australia's fault (in contrast to the 2010 U.S. Counter-Terrorism Strategy, which does imply that America bears substantial guilt for the grievances that underlie violent extremism around the world).

The Australian strategy is clear-eyed on the need to counter jihadist ideology. The White Paper says it aims to "create an international environment that is hostile to terrorism." That phrase echoes the Bush administration's National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism, which aimed at "promoting an international environment inhospitable to terrorists and their supporters."²⁰

Australia has done effective work in training Indonesian security forces to confront Islamist extremists. Australian officials have also developed approaches to domestic counter-radicalization. (Regarding counter-radicalization, it bears noting that a number of countries, including the United Kingdom as well as Australia, appear to

¹⁸ See Barack Obama, Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States (Washington, DC, August 2011), available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/empowering_local_partners.pdf.

¹⁹ Mary Habeck, *Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 7.

²⁰ NMSP-WOT, p. 4.

have done considerably more in this field than have U.S. officials, so the latter have much to learn from international consultations.)

Organizing the U.S. government to counter jihadist ideology

Even under the Obama administration approach, there can be bilateral cooperation on relieving conditions that contribute to extremism. Bilateral cooperation would be more valuable, however, if U.S. policy once again acknowledged that Islamist extremism is a national security problem.

The only way the U.S. government could embark on a serious effort to counter jihadist ideology would be to make some organizational changes. The author of this paper, together with his Hudson Institute colleague Abram Shulsky and Brookings Institution scholar William Galston, recently published a study entitled “Organizing for a Strategic Ideas Campaign to Counter Ideological Challenges to U.S. National Security.”²¹ Among its key recommendations:

First, the U.S. government should create a strategy for countering Islamist extremism.

Second, the U.S. administration should create an interagency body to direct the efforts of country teams and combatant commands to implement the strategy. A Deputy National Security Adviser with a statutory mandate should chair this body. Consideration was given to assigning primary responsibility to an office at State or at the Defense Department, but there were compelling reasons not to do that. State would not be well suited for the reasons discussed above. Defense would not because, if the counter-ideology effort were seen as a military project, it would impede international cooperation and hurt the effort’s general effectiveness.

Third, Congress and the president should create a new private organization modeled on the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), a private not-for-profit corporation. Like NED, the new organization should take direction from an independent board of directors and receive appropriations from the U.S. government. The new organization should engage transparently in grant-making to support constructive voices in the Muslim world. It should also perform research on Islamist ideology, groups and activities and on efforts in opposition thereto made by Muslims and non-Muslims.

²¹ See Douglas J. Feith, William A. Galston, Abram N. Shulsky, “Organizing for a Strategic Ideas Campaign to Counter Ideological Challenges to U.S. National Security,” (Washington, DC: Hudson Institute, April 2012).

Potential for U.S.-Australian cooperation

It would be a formidable accomplishment if senior American and Australian officials worked together on a common threat assessment and pooled experience to produce common doctrine to counter jihadist ideology. There would be value in obtaining insights also from officials of other Western nations – for example, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom – and of some predominantly Muslim countries. The goal would be a general agreement on:

First, a definition of Islamist extremist ideology. What are the key tenets of national security concern? What distinguishes Islamists from Islamist extremists – for example: Is it the attitude toward violence? Is it the belief in the inherent hostility of the West to Islam? Is it the commitment to replace liberal democratic institutions with Muslim rule based on *sharia*?

Second, the nature of the national security threat posed by Islamist extremist ideology – for example: Terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, destabilization of governments of predominantly Muslim countries, and subversion of Western political institutions and freedoms.

Third, identification of the key individuals and groups in the Islamist extremist movement and the keys to their success – for example: The role of funds; the role of sermons, speeches, mass media appearances, publications, websites, social media; the role of schools; and the role of social or political organizations.

Fourth, doctrine for countering the ideology: What actions of governments or private organizations have proven effective – and what actions have proven ineffective? As is routine with the U.S. military, counter-ideology officials should analyze each of their operations or projects, derive lessons learned and institutionalize those lessons in professional training and in written doctrine.

Structuring a major effort to counter Islamist extremism

A campaign to counter Islamist extremism could have five elements:

1. Mapping the voices—individuals, institutions, publications, etc.
2. Network analysis—where do the key voices get their support?
3. Plan of action in cooperation with local governments—see immediately below.
4. Metrics—how does one know if the plans of action are working well?
5. Tracking—it's not enough to set metrics, one should measure progress against them.

Plans of action would comprise two main categories of activities:

1. Amplifying constructive voices: Promoting networks among Muslim opponents of extremism. Prestige-enhancing invitations – for example to Western universities or think tanks. Support useful scholarship regarding religion, history, government and other subjects. Funding for humanitarian work. Getting the message out through such means as:
 - Multimedia efforts – TV shows (including soap operas and sitcoms), public talks and debates, comics, cartoons, video games.
 - Translations of books – promote reading as such. Note the following observation from a United Nations-sponsored study: “Indeed, the total number of books translated into Arabic during the 1,000 years since the age of Caliph Al-Ma’moun [a ninth-century Arab ruler] to this day is less than those translated in Spain in one year.”²²
 - Online discussion boards and chat rooms to encourage debate – perhaps modeled on those used by jihadist networks as recruitment tools.
 - Schools – note the importance of educating girls and of providing an alternative to extremist madrassas.
2. Countering extremist voices by various means: Promote rivals – undermine extremist voices through alternative preachers, alternative entertainment, alternative schools, alternative publications, and alternative sources of welfare and humanitarian relief. Cultivate development of ideas from credible sources to refute jihadist teachings. Expose corruption, hypocrisy and dishonesty of extremist voices. Ridicule extremist views and those duped by them; humor is a powerful weapon. Work to shut off or curtail sources of funding and other support. Counter-radicalization efforts aimed at individuals and local communities.

An important part of the effort would be promoting ideas so basic that many Westerners simply take them for granted, but should not. For example: the possibility of debate, the possibility of compromise, the idea that reasonable people can differ, the idea that one should make an effort to learn about other people in the world who are not part of your own community.

Westerners are faced with murderous hostility from communities that readily consider us their enemies despite knowing practically nothing about us. This is not

²² United Nations Development Programme, Arab Fund For Economic And Social Development, *Arab Human Development Report 2002: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations* (New York: United Nations Development Programme, Regional Bureau for Arab States, 2002).

to say that to know us is to love us, but the willfulness of the ignorance makes the hostility problem harder for us to remedy. Many cultures believe in studying the enemy. It is not uncommon to find Muslims, especially some extremists, arguing that such study is unnecessary – and undesirable.²³ Mohammed Dajani, the head of the American studies center at al-Quds University in Jerusalem recounted how difficult it was to obtain approval from the Palestinian Authority for creation of his center; officials argued that the United States is the enemy, so it should not be studied.²⁴

Activities should reflect recognition of the centrality of the rights of women. Much of the most intense Islamist condemnation of Western culture relates to freedom and equality for women. For many, this is where the ideology ceases to be abstract and becomes personal.

In countering jihadist ideology, there is no one right approach. People are diverse. They respond to different messages and media. A comprehensive approach would deal with intellectual and theological matters and with popular entertainment and everything in between.

It could be useful to study historical cases in which ideas campaigns changed the way millions of people think about important issues. Nineteenth century examples include the abolition of slavery and the suppression of dueling.

The campaign against slavery exemplified an all-instruments-of-national-power effort, involving the British navy, diplomats, churchmen, legislators and business people. It is also noteworthy that the slave traders were mostly Arab Muslims. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, important voices, including in the Western world, defended slavery and the slave trade as a positive good. By the end of that century, though slavery was not entirely eliminated, it was no longer respectable anywhere, especially not in the West, to speak up in defense of slavery.

Dueling may be worth studying because it touched on intense convictions about personal honor. As with slavery, attitudes toward dueling throughout much of the world changed drastically over the course of the nineteenth century. How was this mass change of view accomplished?

Twentieth century cases could include: Massive changes in popular thinking about race, environmentalism and homosexuality. What lessons can be learned about how such changes were encouraged by the people who drove the campaigns?

²³ See Habeck, p. 48, citing ALM Pakistan branch and a website: “Thus a jihadist writer could assert that ‘Muslims are not required to make political analysis of what the [unbelievers] desire of the Muslims by reading their newspapers or watching what they say on television. Rather Allah ... has favored the Muslims with Islam which informs us, through the Qur’an, about all their plans.’”

²⁴ Lecture by Mohammed Dajani at Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, DC, August 6, 2012.

Private-sector actors can do some tasks far more effectively than government officials can. The latter can encourage the former but should take care not to compromise their independence. The special effectiveness of private-sector actors in a strategic ideas campaign inheres in their acting on their own, for their own purposes and free of governmental control. Relevant private-sector actors may include academics, journalists, labor unions, philanthropic foundations, religious groups and humanitarian organizations. Efforts to tackle the religious beliefs at the core of jihadist ideology will be far easier for private-sector actors than for government officials. Also, some Muslim opponents of the extremists prefer to receive support from private-sector actors rather than Western government officials.

A comprehensive strategy would consider covert as well as overt means of amplifying constructive voices and countering extremism voices.

As discussed in the Feith-Galston-Shulsky study cited above, there are some significant conceptual impediments to U.S. government's developing a strategic ideas campaign to counter Islamist extremism. First, due to concerns rooted in the religion-clauses of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment, officials tend to be uneasy about any proposal that would involve challenging religion-based ideas. Second, U.S. officials are sensitive to allegations of Islamophobia; this is why it is of importance to distinguish between Islam and Islamist extremism – that is, between a religion and a totalitarian political ideology. And third, there is a deeply rooted belief among many Americans that government should be neutral in the marketplace of ideas.

The idea underlying the latter point is that a liberal democratic government should lay the groundwork for an open marketplace of ideas, but should not be telling anyone what to think about the substance of a matter. This raises the question of whether a liberal democratic government can properly defend the idea of liberal democracy against those who argue and fight against it in principle. Opponents of liberal democracy, after all, often use the freedoms offered by liberal democratic societies to try to destroy those very freedoms. British Prime Minister David Cameron, on February 5, 2011, entered this debate by criticizing multiculturalist approaches to dealing with immigrant communities, advocating instead “a muscular liberalism.”²⁵

Summary and Conclusion

Islamist extremism is not a subset of the problem of terrorism. Western national security officials would do well to recognize that it is the other way around. To combat terrorism and address the other security challenges posed by jihadist ideology, American and Australian officials—together with officials from other

²⁵ David Cameron, “PM’s Speech at Munich Security Conference,” February 5, 2011, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference/>.

relevant countries—should develop an understanding of (1) the key tenets of the ideology, (2) its principal Muslim proponents and opponents and (3) the methods that have proven most effective in countering its influence.

Because the Obama administration is opposed in principle to viewing terrorist extremism problem in terms of radical Islamist ideology, the United States cannot now be expected to lead such an international effort. But it is hard to imagine that it would refuse to participate in international consultations on the subject.

Several key thoughts that could serve as the foundation for U.S.-Australian consultations—and ultimately for broader international consultations:

First is the importance of clarifying, for government officials and the general public, the distinction between Islam and Islamist extremism, the former being a religion and the latter a totalitarian political ideology. One can fight the latter without being at all hostile to the former.

Second is that the main matter is not what Western officials say to Muslims about extremism, but what Muslims say to one another. The key challenge is not “public diplomacy” or “strategic communications” but how to stimulate and influence a vigorous debate among Muslims. Western officials need to devise operations—action plans—for this purpose, rather than focus on crafting messages to transmit. They should be developing ways to amplify constructive voices and counter extremist voices.

Third is recognition that private sector actors can play a crucial role. Government officials need to consider ways to encourage them without trying to exert control or compromising their independence.

And fourth is appreciation that an effort to change the way millions of people think requires many approaches. Refuting Islamist theorists is important, but the effort should not be entirely theological, philosophical and intellectual. There can be an enormous payoff also from promoting popular entertainment that can convey important but simple ideas powerfully to mass audiences.

The problem of Islamist extremism cannot be solved through operations to capture or kill terrorists. And it will not be solved by focusing exclusively on economic, social and political “grievances” within Muslim communities. To ascribe the problem to poverty and political alienation fails to account for why many Islamist terrorists – for example, the Nigerian so-called “underwear bomber,” the U.S. Army medical doctor who shot his colleagues at Ft. Hood and the Saudi engineer who captained the 9/11 hijackers – are highly educated and financially well-to-do. And it fails to account for why terrorists are so often young Muslim men, not poor and politically alienated non-Muslims. The key to solving the terrorism and Islamist extremism problems is to discredit the ideology that persuades young Muslims that

Islam requires them to identify the West (and many of their fellow Muslims too) as mortal enemies.