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Words that Work and Words that Don't: A Guide for Counterterrorism Communication

The following set of suggestions regarding appropriate language for use in conversations with target audiences was developed by the Extremist Messaging Branch of the National Counterterrorism Center [NCTC] and vetted by the interagency "*Themes and Messages*" editorial board at the CTCC. This advice is not binding and is for use with our audiences. It does not affect other areas such as policy papers, research analysis, scholarly writing, etc. The purpose of this paper is to raise awareness among communicators of the language issues that may enhance or detract from successful engagement.

We are also attaching an excellent Homeland Security paper entitled *Terminology to Define the Terrorists: Recommendations from American Muslims*, a guide for USG officials to use to describe terrorists who invoke Islamic theology in planning, carrying out, and justifying their attacks.

Basic Principle: *It's Not What You Say, But What They Hear:*

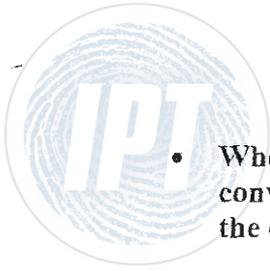
- **Don't Take the Bait:** When Osama bin Ladin or others try to draw the USG into a debate, we should offer only minimal, if any, response to their messages. When we respond loudly, we raise their prestige in the Muslim world.
- **Don't Compromise Our Credibility:** What al-Qaida and its affiliates do is damning enough without ascribing to al-Qaida and its affiliates motives or goals they have not articulated. Our audiences have more familiarity with the terrorist messages than we do and will immediately spot USG embellishment.
- **Don't Invoke Islam:** Although the al-Qaida network exploits religious sentiments and tries to use religion to justify its actions, we should treat it as an illegitimate political organization, both terrorist and criminal.
- **Don't Harp on Muslim Identity:** Avoid labeling everything 'Muslim.' It reinforces the "U.S. vs. Islam" framework that Al-Qaeda promotes. Be specific (Egyptian, Pakistani) and descriptive (South Asian youth, Arab opinion leaders), where possible.
- **Avoid Ill-Defined and Offensive Terminology:** We are communicating with, not confronting, our audiences. Don't insult or confuse them with pejorative



terms such as ‘Islamofascism,’ which are considered offensive by many Muslims.

- **Keep the focus on the Terrorist, not us.** Change the discussion from “the West vs. Islam” or a “Clash of Civilizations” to the fight between civilization as a whole and terrorists. We need to emphasize that terrorists misuse religion as a political tool to harm innocent civilians across the globe.
- **Use the terms ‘violent extremist’ or ‘terrorist.’** Both are widely understood terms that define our enemies appropriately and simultaneously deny them any level of legitimacy.
- **Use simply al-Qaida, al-Qaida network, or al-Qaida and Associated Networks (AQAN).** We suggest you avoid the term ‘al-Qaida *movement*,’ which implies a degree of political legitimacy (e.g., ‘labor movement,’ ‘civil rights movement,’ ‘women’s movement,’...). There is no legitimacy to al-Qaida’s activities.
- **Use ‘totalitarian’ to describe our enemy.** It evokes the correct image of what we face. It is a term understood in the Muslim world.
- Avoid the term ‘**caliphate**,’ which has positive connotations for Muslims, to describe the goal of al-Qaida and associated groups. The best description of what they really want to create is a ‘**global totalitarian state**.’
- **Never use the terms ‘jihadist’ or ‘mujahideen’** in conversation to describe the terrorists. A **mujahed**, a holy warrior, is a positive characterization in the context of a just war. In Arabic, jihad means “striving in the path of God” and is used in many contexts beyond warfare. Calling our enemies **jihadis** and their movement a global **jihad** unintentionally legitimizes their actions.
- **Avoid negation, such as “We are not at war with Islam.”** Sadly, studies show that people tend to forget the negative part of a statement, so that when you say, for instance, “I do not hate them,” the words that get remembered are **hate** and **them**.
- **Try to limit the number of non-English terms you use if you are speaking in English.** Mispronunciation could make your statement incomprehensible and/or sound ill-informed. If you must use such a word, make sure your pronunciation is validated by an expert. Don’t use words that require use of consonants that do not exist in English and whose nearest English approximation has a totally different meaning.

Example: “*Qutbist*” refers to the ideas of mid-twentieth century Egyptian extremist Sayyid Qutb. Pronounced in English, the closest sounding Arabic word means “books.”



- **When possible, avoid using terms drawn from Islamic theology in a conversation unless you are prepared to discuss their varying meanings over the centuries.**

Examples: salafi, wahhabist, caliphate, sufi, ummah. Do not use “ummah” to mean “the Muslim world.” It is not a sociological term, rather, it is a theological construct not used in everyday life.