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CANADA: TALKING ABOUT TERRORISM

Issue: Brian Williams, an associate professor of Islamic history at the University of Massachusetts (Dartmouth) appeared as an expert witness before the Mohammed Harkat Security Certificate hearing earlier this month.

Williams testified that al-Qaeda has “lost its meaning” since 9/11 and that jihad existed long before it was popularized by AQ. He also criticized the tendency (presumably on the part of Canadian security and intelligence officers) to link all “Muslim fighters” to AQ. This observation was made in reference to the Ibn Khattab terrorist organization, to which Harkat has been linked. According to Williams, Khattab — who fought the Russians in Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Chechnya, where he was killed — was a committed Jihadist. He was not a terrorist, however, because he never targeted civilians.

Comment: There are a number of flawed assumptions in Professor Williams’ arguments. The most obvious of these is the assertion that AQ has “lost its meaning.” The Canadian security and intelligence community has long argued (based on credible information) that whatever the “physical” status of AQ, its significance is rooted primarily in its ideological role. “Al-Qaedaism” — as a political philosophy, as a worldview and as a rallying cry — is as potent a force as Bolshevism was in the early 20th century. The AQ message — that both “the West” (which includes Canada) and apostate Islamic regimes are engaged in a war of annihilation against Muslims and that Muslims must fight back in kind — has driven terrorist plots the world over since 9/11.

Professor Williams’ use of the term “Muslim fighters” strays into the “freedom fighter vs. terrorist” dichotomy. Whether or not a man like Ibn Khattab was a “member” of AQ is irrelevant (if indeed it is actually possible to “belong” to AQ). He emerges from the same ideological milieu. More importantly, he is closely associated with a network — the Chechen resistance — that employs terrorist strategy and tactics and was responsible for the 2004 Beslan School Massacre, among other things.

The linkage between terrorism and jihad remains highly problematic. Despite Professor Williams’ testimony, the Canadian security and intelligence community (in documents like NSCI’s 2007 discussion paper *Words Make Worlds*) is careful to differentiate between the two. The problem is that terrorists do not.

Jihad has become a catchall term for extremism of any kind. Translated literally from the Arabic as “striving,” jihad often refers to physical struggle and combat in early Islamic texts. However, jihad also refers to spiritual struggle — the effort to live in the way that God intends for human beings. Islamic teachings often stress the importance of the “greater” (spiritual) jihad over the “lesser” (physical) jihad.



The concept of jihad as an all-out offensive war is largely a 20th century phenomenon. It was developed primarily in the writings of extremist ideologues — like Sayyed Qutb, the intellectual “father” of AQ, among other groups — who reframed jihad from a spiritual concept to a political one. So while Williams is correct in pointing to the difference between jihad and terrorism, virtually all contemporary Islamist terrorists would characterize (rightly or wrongly) their activities as in the service of jihad, and themselves as jihadis.

This leaves us with a problem. If we refer to terrorists as jihadis, we effectively recognize their actions as righteous. We legitimize them. In opposing jihad, however, we risk alienating Muslims for whom the spiritual jihad is meaningful. Nor are terms like “Islamist terrorist” any more accurate. Not only are they clumsy, but it is not necessarily correct to couple Islamism to terrorism.

In October 2009 testimony before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, US terrorism expert Marc Sageman made repeated use of term “neo-Jihadi” to refer to the type of terrorism that is either affiliated to, or inspired by, AQ and its ideology. “Neo-jihadi” as an adjective, and “neo-jihadist” as a noun, is appropriate terminology. The prefix “neo” implies a new concept of jihad, wholly separate from pre-existing, legitimate uses of the word. More importantly, by isolating “neo-jihadism,” we emphasize that it is a concept that has been appropriated purely as a justification for terrorist violence.

The very fact of this point by point rebuttal of the reported version of Professor Williams’ testimony points to a number of specific RCMP-related issues.

- As an organization, we should be cultivating and actively promoting our own experts. This would allow us to counter what are often inaccurate assessments of our level of knowledge and understanding of issues under our purview.
- While terrorism is defined for us in statute and legislation, we need to be able to address the “terrorism vs. freedom fighter” dichotomy effectively. The “Telling Our Story” communications piece currently being developed by Alternative Analysis may be an appropriate vehicle for this discussion.
- Terminology remains a problem for us. If we don’t say exactly what we mean, then we will inevitably be misquoted. “Neo-jihadism” is a useful means of describing our most critical NS priority, as long as we can justify its usage fully. Review and documentation of key NS- and terrorist-related terminology should be undertaken, preferably in consultation with CSIS.



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