

Testimony Before the House Armed Services Committee
Between Terrorism and Religious Extremism

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Let me say at the outset that the gravest threat to the United States today is neither Islamic groups nor Islamic fundamentalism as such. The central threat facing the United States of America is the threat of catastrophic terror by al-Qaeda and its allies. The nature of this threat justifies the allocation of significant resources to counter the threat and defeat al-Qaeda and its allies. But we must be very careful in identifying who the core enemy is and not waste resources and energies on strategies that do not confront the primary threat, and worse yet, could backfire.

First, while we must oppose all terrorism, and we have many local enemies in various parts of the world, most such enemies do not pose the kind of catastrophic threat that al-Qaeda and , and thus do not warrant the kind of resources that could take away from our effort to directly confront the primary threat.

Second, although religious extremism is something most of us would oppose, we have to be very careful not to jump to the conclusion that the threat to the United States stems from religious extremism as such. We have extremists all over the world, as we do in our own country, but most of them do not seek to cause catastrophic harm to us and most do not have the capacity or the support to do so even if they wanted to.

Third, al-Qaeda presents such a high threat to the United States primarily for three reasons: Unlike most local extremist groups around the world, it has a demonstrated capacity to organize on a global scale and a demonstrated global reach. As a non-state actor, it is not sensitive to deterrence and thus is capable of being maximally reckless in its operations and thus poses the potential for catastrophic attacks that are limited only by its capabilities. And while it may care about local issues in the Muslim world, in the end its agenda is broader and more dangerous and could thus not be realistically satisfied by political means. In the end, it is reasonable to conclude that al Qaeda does aim to overthrow the existing political order in the Muslim world and replace it with a Taliban-like fanatical order, and it sees the United States as the anchor of the existing order.

But it is wrong and even dangerous to assume that this aim of al-Qaeda is their primary strength, or that it is the primary reason some in the Muslim countries have expressed sympathy with it. It is also wrong to assume that most Muslim groups, including local extremist groups, share its objectives. We must differentiate above all what we see as pervasive unfavorable views in the Muslim world from the views of al-Qaeda and like-minded groups. We must also differentiate between the causes of anti-Americanism and the causes of al-Qaeda terrorism. If we don't, we risk helping push vastly diverse groups together in a way that undermines our effort to defeat al-Qaeda.

It is no secret that the United States has faced significant resentment in the past few years in Muslim countries. Is this a consequence of a rising clash of values that plays into the strengths of al-Qaeda? Most public opinion surveys in Arab and Muslim countries

indicate otherwise. In my most recent survey completed October 24th, 2005, (with Zogby International) among 3900 Arabs in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco, 78% say that they base their views on American policies and only 12 percent say they base them on values. When given a number of Western, Muslim, and other non-Western countries to choose from as possible places to live or send family members to study, most of them name Western European countries or the US and those who name the other countries, including Muslim Pakistan, are in the single digit.

More importantly the cause of the sympathy that some have for al-Qaeda is vastly different from al-Qaeda's own aims: When asked what aspects of al-Qaeda, if any, they sympathize with most, only six percent said they sympathize with the aim of establishing a Taliban-like state, and only seven percent sympathized with al-Qaeda's methods. On the other hand, 35% said they sympathize with its standing up to the US and another 19 percent said they sympathize with its stand on behalf of Muslim causes such as the issue of Palestine. 26% said "none."

These results are bolstered by other findings. Contrary to the Taliban world view, the vast majority of Arabs (88%), including in Saudi Arabia, want women to have the right to work outside the home either always or when economically necessary. That is precisely why al-Qaeda primarily highlights issues that resonate with the public in its recruitment tapes and strategies, such as Iraq, Palestine, and authoritarianism. Even those who oppose the US presence in Iraq and want to see the US defeated do not wish to have Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi as their ruler. That is not what they wish for their own children.

It is dangerous to have a high level of resentment of the United States, whatever its sources, not only because it may increase the ability of al-Qaeda and its allies to recruit, but also because people's incentives to help the United States to effectively combat the threat of al-Qaeda diminishes. If they resent us more than they fear al-Qaeda, our challenge increases dramatically. If they start believing, as most have, that one of our real aims is to weaken the Muslim world, not just to defeat al-Qaeda, al-Qaeda gains by default.

What are the issues for most Muslims in their attitudes toward the U.S.? What makes a difference in bridging the gap? Before I make some ending remarks on this issue, allow me to note that the Muslim world is not the only place where resentment of the United States runs high today, so some of the answers are not particular to the Muslim world and may have to do with the role of the United States in the current international system. But in the Arab and Muslim world there are some specific issues that we can identify.

From the public opinion surveys that I have conducted in the Middle East, the single most important demographic variable in the Arab world explaining unfavorable views of the United States was income. It speaks volumes about the rampant poverty and unemployment, linked to poor education, which must be confronted.

Second, regional issues are paramount. Iraq is certainly central, but the Palestinian-Israeli conflict remains the “prism of pain” through which Arabs see the United States. This speaks to the need for active American diplomacy to resolve regional conflict.

Third, Zogby International polls have shown clearly that those who have visited the United States or studied here, and those who have had other encounters with Americans in the region, were far more disposed to having a favorable opinion of the United States than those who didn’t. This speaks to the need for major public diplomacy programs to encourage interactions.

In the end, we must define the central enemy correctly. It is primarily al-Qaeda and its allies as organizations that must be defeated. It is not terrorism broadly and it is not Islamism broadly. Terrorism is not an ideology, and al-Qaeda’s ideology of seeking a Taliban-like world order is its source of weakness in the Muslim world, not its source of strength. Our strategy must isolate it by addressing the issues that most Muslims care about—not blur the distinction between the vast majorities with whom we have no principled quarrel and those few whose aims can never be reconciled with America’s.

Allow me to end on a cautionary note. In broadly defining the threat as “Islamic extremism” without specifying what we mean exactly, we risk much. In fighting serious threats like that posed by al-Qaeda there is certainly a need to rely in part on significant covert operations as well as overt ones. But, there have recently been reports of the possible broadening of such operations to include extremist groups, leaders, and clergy. My worry is that we do not have, and probably never will, the kind of expertise that allows us to determine who’s a friend and who’s an enemy simply on the basis of utterances. One could end up targeting as suspects millions of people in a world 1.2 billion Muslims. Given the deficient expertise in our bureaucracies in the languages, religions, and cultures of the Muslim world, we risk the chance of mistakes that could backfire, relying on locals who have their own agendas, and wasting precious resources. The strategy in the first place must remain focused on the operational and the logistical, not on what people say.