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War on terror: Obama softened the language, but hardened Muslim hearts

The Obama administration's shift in counterterrorism language sought to bridge the divide with the Muslim world and soften Americans' fear of Islam. But the new rhetoric hasn't matched policy, and the unintended costs at home and abroad have been high.

By Stuart Gottlieb
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 New Haven, Conn. —

One of the most defining aspects of the Obama administration's counterterrorism strategy has been its effort to change America's rhetorical approach to the threat of terrorism, particularly Islamic terrorism. "The language we use matters," President Obama told the Arabic satellite television station Al Arabiya in an interview during his first week in office. Scrubbed were George W. Bush-era terms like "war on terrorism," "radical Islam," and "jihadist." The White House's 2010 National Security Strategy formally replaced the term "Islamic terrorism" with "violent extremism." The purpose of the shift in semantics was two-fold.

First, it aimed to repackage the fight against terrorism as a specific fight against Al Qaeda, not against Islamic extremism, which Mr. Obama believes contributed to a post-9/11 perception that America was "at war with Islam." Indeed, the new rhetoric has gone hand in hand with Obama's outreach to the Muslim world to build "a new partnership based on mutual respect and mutual interest."

Second, it was part of a broader effort to soften Americans' fear of Islamic terrorism, which Obama officials believe plays directly into the hands of extremists.

Language change ineffective

Now it is fair to ask whether Obama's use of language regarding terrorism has proven effective. Startling new polls suggest it hasn't. The first, by the Brookings Institution in Washington, shows that between May 2009 and May 2010 the number of Middle Eastern Arabs expressing optimism in Obama's approach toward their region dropped from 51 percent to just 16 percent, with those describing themselves as "discouraged" by the Obama presidency rising from 15 percent to 63 percent.

The second, by the Pew Research Center, shows that in August 2010 fewer Americans held a favorable view of Islam (30 percent) than five years earlier during the Bush administration (41 percent), with more Americans (35 percent) saying Islam encourages violence more than other religions (in 2002, it was 25 percent).

These starkly negative trend lines suggest the limited utility of language in fighting terrorism. Yes, terrorism is a propaganda-fueled activity — an ongoing battle to win hearts and minds and attract new recruits to fight for the cause. And of course the language used in combating terrorism is vital — the counterproductive "smoke 'em out" rhetoric of the Bush administration is a case in point.

But if rhetoric does not match policy, or appears to discount or play down threats, the credibility — and thus effectiveness — of the overall counterterrorism strategy may be undermined. It appears the Obama administration has dug itself into just such a hole.

Rhetoric doesn't match policy

When looking beyond the nuanced language and appealing promises, what Muslims around the world see is an administration that has ramped up the war in Afghanistan; is killing scores of Muslim civilians with drone strikes; continues to hold more than 1,000 Muslim detainees in Guantánamo, Bagram, and other prisons; and maintains seemingly unconditional support of Israel.

This is not to critique these policies, but to point out that they do not match the raised expectations of the Muslim world and have only muddled Obama's oft-stated goal of turning Muslims toward America and away from extremist movements.

The price of downplaying the threat

A large price is also being paid domestically for disconnected rhetoric. Despite maintaining nearly all of Bush's hard-line tactics – the USA Patriot Act, warrantless surveillance, indefinite detentions – the White House has consistently played down the threat, even in the face of a clear uptick in terrorism activity.

For example, following the failed 2009 Christmas Day airline bombing, Obama described the suspect as an "isolated extremist," despite his ties to Al Qaeda. And the administration's initial response to the failed May 2010 Times Square bombing by an American Muslim trained in Pakistan was to call it a "one-off" event. Attorney General Eric Holder stated in congressional testimony that he believed these and other recent Islamic terror plots were unconnected, and unrelated to radical Islam.

There is little doubt that the administration's unwillingness to speak candidly about Islamic terrorism has taken a toll on the public's trust. A Gallup poll released last month shows Americans favoring Republicans over Democrats on the issue of terrorism 55 percent to 31 percent – up from 49 percent to 42 percent last fall.

Time to reverse the trend

Obama entered office promising to fight a smarter and more effective war on terrorism, and in many ways he has. His instincts to maintain aggressive tactics while toning down inflammatory rhetoric were sound. Yet his administration seems to have overlearned a key lesson of the Bush years – that overstating the threat of terrorism has costs attached. So, too, does rhetoric that understates the threat, especially when detached from policy.

It is not too late to reverse this troubling trend. The White House can begin by focusing less on overly reassuring rhetoric – which has not paid dividends at home or abroad – and more on a candid accounting of the threats faced and the policies employed to confront them.

Stuart Gottlieb, a former foreign-policy adviser and speechwriter in the US Senate (1999-2003), is now director of policy studies at the Jackson Institute for Global Affairs at Yale. He's the editor of "Debating Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Conflicting Perspectives on Causes, Contexts, and Responses." The original version of this piece appeared in the online edition of The National Interest.

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