

Response to the 9/11 Commission Report

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The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (the “9/11 Commission”) set up to investigate the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks calls for a new and more candid relationship between America and its Muslim allies. The report insists that “America’s strategy should be a coalition strategy that includes Muslim nations as partners in its development and implementation.”^[1] This is a positive sign that the American Muslim community must welcome and do what it can to nurture such a relationship.

Since virtually every policy of the United States vis-à-vis Muslims is now filtered through the lens of September 11, the report and its recommendations cannot be ignored by the American Muslim community. In addition, since many of the conclusions reached by the Commission resonate with the opinions of Muslim scholars worldwide, the report should be seen as an opportunity to engage in a more positive manner with the US administration. It is therefore imperative for American Muslims to thoroughly understand, proactively engage and enthusiastically assist in implementing the report’s recommendations while taking note of some of its shortcomings.

Muslim Relationship

Acknowledging how unpopular America has become in the Muslim world, the report makes plain that successive administrations have done a poor job in promoting the country and its values. “If the United States does not act aggressively to define itself in the Islamic world,” it declares, “the extremists will gladly do the job for us.” It is here that the American Muslim community can and should help.

The most useful yet untapped coalition partner the United States has in providing insight, resources and partnership with the Muslim world that understands the Muslim world, is the Muslim community of America – indigenous and immigrant – faithful citizens with more than a century of practice and contributions to the country.

Heretofore, the US administration has made incalculable errors by depending upon a rash of “experts” whose neoconservative ideology and Islamophobic policy recommendations often exhibit a subtle yet tangible disdain for the Muslim world. Many such “experts” are driven by an Orientalist worldview, a colonialist mentality and the polemics of the Middle East. These individuals surfaced prior to the invasion of Iraq from a web of connected origins and their influence was evident through their active presence in electronic and print media. Not surprisingly, their recommendations have proven to be incendiary and counterproductive and, most unfortunately, have rendered the United States more vulnerable and more despised in the Muslim world.

Part of this cooperation, as the report suggests, is the reexamination of American foreign policy vis-à-vis the Muslim world in general and the Middle East in particular. The report states: American foreign policy is part of the message. America's policy choices have consequences. Right or wrong, it is simply a fact that American policy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and American actions in Iraq is dominant staples of popular commentary across the Arab and Muslim world.[\[2\]](#)

While the 9/11 Commission urged Washington to reexamine its Middle East policies, there does not unfortunately appear to be any sign that either Democrats or Republicans are ready to do so. This needs to change.

Defining the War on Terrorism

One of the report's most important recommendations is that the enemy, and by implication, the war on terrorism, must be clearly defined – implying that the definition has up to now been fuzzy. Part of the fuzziness is due to the administration's unwillingness to define the threat more clearly. Immediately after the September 11th attacks, President Bush addressed the American people, defining the war on terrorism in the most simple of terms. "Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." In declaring the war on terrorism, President Bush stated his intent to pursue any nation that provides aid or safe haven to terrorism, suggesting that every nation had a decision to make on the issue. Yet even three years after the September 11 attacks, the White House has yet to clearly define what constitutes a terrorist organization. The failure to do so has increasingly contributed to the country's limited success in making America and the world a safer place.

Unfortunately, rather than merely making the suggestion, the 9/11 Commission has attempted to fill the gap and proposed its own definition with worrying and potentially disastrous results. Even though its report emphasizes that the war on terrorism is not a war on Islam, the report goes on to define it in exactly those terms. In the chapter entitled "What to Do?" the Commission concludes the enemy is not just terrorism, what it terms "some generic evil," but specifically *Islamist terrorism* (report's emphasis). With the stroke of a pen, the authors of the 9/11 report appear to have redefined the war on terrorism, converting it into a war on Islamist terrorism alone.

The problem with substituting Islamist terrorism for terrorism as the enemy is that the 9/11 Commission unfortunately plays into the hands of Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden's rhetoric has unceasingly sought to conflate Islamist violence and terrorism with Islam itself so as, at a minimum, to sow doubt in the hearts and minds of the Muslim street.

The 9/11 Commission came up short with its insufficient use of terminology. It missed an opportunity to clearly delineate the threat and the scope of the war on terrorism. While the vast majority of the Muslim world and the 9/11 Commission will undoubtedly acknowledge that Islam as a religious tradition and modern day Islamist terrorism are two wholly separate concepts, the 9/11 Commission could have provided the administration and Congress with a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the enemy.

Thus the administration's failure to define the scope of the war on terrorism while the Commission's effort to redefine it as exclusively Islamist terrorism directly contributes to the growing confusion about the nature of our enemies. Struggling to show progress in the war, the White House is now eager to apply the al-Qaeda label to virtually any Islamic group threatening violence or terrorist attacks. With little or no proof, regional groups invariably have been labeled al-Qaeda supporters or affiliates. In so doing, the administration has contributed to the false impression, despite data to the contrary in its own *Patterns of Global Terrorism* report, that the sole enemy is a global conspiracy of Islamist groups, rather than terrorist groups of all religious stripes.

Similarly, the Commission's use of the broad and vague term of Islamist terrorism may play well with conservative elements in the U.S., it is clearly the wrong strategy as the government's own terrorism report amply demonstrates. By identifying every organization as Islamist the administration will continue to fight the wrong war.

Conclusion

The global war against terrorism will be a long, protracted conflict and it will not be won by military means alone. In order for us to win this war, the US must clearly define the threat we face and should work closely with the American Muslim community to flush out that definition. In addition, the 9/11 Commission emphasized that the war on terrorism must be fought by political and diplomatic means as much as by military means – which implies the current focus may be unduly narrow. It goes on to point out that the US must enlist the help of its diplomats and academics and development experts, as well as its soldiers and spies. This would imply a need to reach out to the Muslim community around the world and American Muslims in particular. By doing so, the US will not only better understand the threat it faces, with all of its variety and nuances, but will provide affirmative evidence that its war on terrorism is not in fact a war on Islam. Failing to do so, US actions in the war on terrorism may continue to be interpreted in the Muslim world as a war on Islam and the fight for the hearts and minds of the Muslim world will needlessly last for many more years, if not decades and could become a self-fulfilling prophecy with no victory in sight.

- See more at:

http://www.ispu.org/content/Response_to_the_911_Commission_Report#sthash.48pqJvDo.dpuf