



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

Words are Important

Jeffrey D. Vordermark

Americans love to throw around foreign words, be it in casual conversation or while waxing eloquent on your favorite blog. I recall as a kid – long before blogging was even a concept - the joke about being able to speak Japanese. “Sure I can, I know Suzuki, Kawasaki, karate, and a few other Japanese words.” Then it was fun and games, but in today’s era of transnational terrorism and globalism it does more than just point to cultural gullibility, is a dangerous predilection. It is time that our lexicon’s level of sophistication matches our commitment to winning the Global War on Terror.

We have fallen into the “*jihad*” trap. The term is used in casual banter yet most remain clueless regarding its origin or meanings. We think, therefore we know. Pundits, academics, and laymen profess to know its meaning, and the term is daily news in the mouths of reporters and in the banners of headlines. Unfortunately, its very use assumes that Islam is simple and monolithic – something we can easily grasp merely by purporting to understand the basic tenets of the religion and of course, we must use it because everyone else does. As a nation and society, we could not be more incorrect. A simple Google search for the term *jihad* yields over 15 million hits. Why not, as the perpetrators of international terror themselves often use “*jihad*” to describe the attributes and actions of their organizations. Face it, there is meaning in a name, and groups struggling for legitimacy will cling to what they can in order to sell their product.

Groups like Egyptian Islamic Jihad, Harekat ul Jihad ul Islami (Islamic Struggle Movement), and Palestinian Islamic Jihad provide some key illustrations. Too bad the Western media has bought the lie as well. Of course, we are equally culpable in using the term *mujahedeen* (one who participates in a *jihad*), which actually sounds good rolling of the tongue and can make you appear knowledgeable to the unenlightened. However, the term, a derivative of “*jihad*”, is equally overused and misunderstood. To illustrate just how much, both are even available in your Windows spell checker.

“*Hirabah*” is much the better term when it comes to the activities of AQ and other terror groups.

According to Dr. Robert D. Crane, an advisor to the Center for Understanding Islam, “*hirabah* refers to public terrorism in a war against society and civilization. In legal terminology it is defined as “spreading mischief in the land,” but its precise meaning, as defined by Professor Khalid Abou el Fadl, is “killing by stealth and targeting a defenseless victim in a way intended to cause terror in society.” This is the Islamic definition of terrorism. It is the very opposite of *jihad*”ⁱ. Google the term *hirabah* and you will discover a mere 12,200 hits. It does not appear in the Windows spell checker either. The closest suggestion is “herbal”, which of course is not

even close. According to the AltMuslim website, modern “Muslim scholars are promoting the use of the word *hirabah* as a more accurate Muslim description of terrorism.”ⁱⁱ

Indeed, this is a distinction which we all may be wise to consider. In a very astute posting on the *Small Wars Journal* website, *Jim Guirard discusses a key angle to the idea* by Dr. David Kilcullen (Australian Army officer and former advisor to General Petraeus in Iraq) of developing a new lexicon for the war on terror which includes more accurate terms.ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, while it may seem to be a relatively inconsequential step in Western eyes, the implications are not lost on Muslims.

Why should we endeavor to change our habits, now that these other terms are in vogue? Quite simply because failure to do so, in a professional sense, is counter to achievement of our long term national interests. Endorsing and perpetuating use of the term “jihad” as applied to the actions of terrorists (*irhabiyoun*) undercuts U.S. interests in our current war on terror. Its use actually glorifies a concept which is honored in Islam. Historically the term applied to the concept of either a “greater Jihad,” or a “lesser Jihad.” The former denoting the daily struggle of the believer to overcome “self” in the pursuit of Allah’s will, and the latter traditionally meaning defense of religion, family, or homeland. Both of these terms are seen in a positive light within Islam, and conjure up images that are meaningful in the same sense for Westerners.

Another reason to consider a change is to be consistent with emerging strategic communication doctrine. Per Joint Publication 3-13, strategic communication is “Focused United States Government (USG) efforts to understand and engage key audiences in order to create, strengthen or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of USG interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products synchronized with the actions of all elements of national power.”^{iv} We must continue to shape the battlefield in meaningful ways, and anyone familiar with the Middle East understands that words are indeed important. Perpetuation of use of the terms jihad and mujahedeen actually serve to legitimize what many Muslims find to be abhorrent actions, thus work at cross purposes with policy aims.

Perhaps most importantly, use of the term does little to force a highly necessary discourse within the broader Islamic umma (community) concerning the meaning and application of the terms *hirabah* and *irhab*. Without a very public and academic assessment among Muslims, there can be no social or cultural stigma attached to actions that are actually counter to the teachings of Islam. Absent that, Al Qaeda and the like will not be as challenged in this regard in attracting adherents. Only by forcing the issue – not for Western literal accuracy, but for Islamic sufficiency – can we hope to turn the tide on those conducting *hiraba* packaged as jihad.

So, in sum both the West and Islam need to conduct separate but commensurate discourse on this simple yet misunderstood set of terms. The West to correct its own predilection for fad language, and Islam in order to highlight and perhaps undercut the appeal of “jihadists.”

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ⁱ http://www.irfi.org/articles/articles_301_350/hirabah_versus_jihad.htm

ⁱⁱ http://www.altmuslim.com/a/a/a/muslim_scholars_its_not_jihad_its_hirabah/

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2007/06/david-kilcullens-call-for-a-ne/>

^{iv} Joint Publication 3-13, [Information Operations](#), 13 February 2006, p. GL-12