

The 9/11 Museum & Islam

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Duke professor David Schanzer calls for changes to the National 9/11 Memorial Museum al-Qaeda video

by DAVID SCHANZER for ISLAMiCommentary on MAY 15, 2014:



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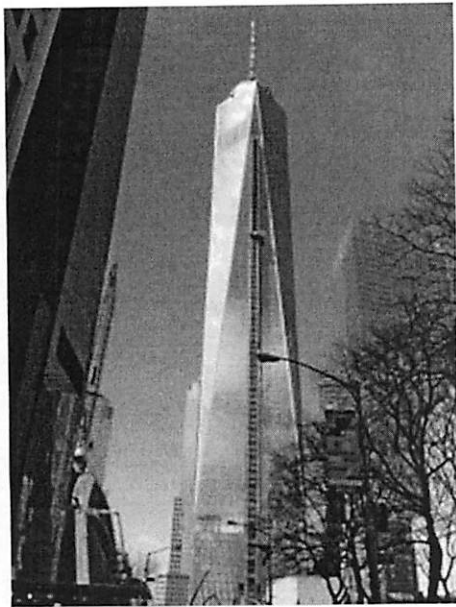
President Obama today joined dignitaries, Sept. 11 survivors, rescuers and victims' relatives for a solemn ceremony dedicating the National 9/11 Memorial Museum. He called the museum "a sacred place of healing and of hope."

But controversy over the language used in a short film on al-Qaeda, showing at the museum, continues to cast a shadow over the museum's May 21 public opening. The museum's religious interfaith advisory panel says film's use of the terms "Islamist terrorism" and "jihad," when referring to al Qaeda terrorists casts aspersion on all Muslims. The panel, a group of academics, and Muslim advocates, have requested changes, but museum officials are resolutely standing by this seven-minute film called "The Rise of Al Qaeda."

As one who teaches and speaks often on this topic, I recognize the challenge of using terminology that is historically accurate, understandable and inoffensive. I, like many commentators and scholars, cavalierly used to use the term "jihadists" to refer to al-Qaeda and other groups that claim a religious duty to use violence against civilians to bring about a society governed by a rigid interpretation of Islamic law. But as I interacted with more Muslims and

learned more about Islam, it became clear just how inaccurate and inappropriate this use of terminology was.

There is a way to talk about 9/11 that accurately reflects the religion of the perpetrators, explains why they attacked, and avoids conflating the religion of Islam with the ideology of al-Qaeda extremism. It is not too late for the museum to back down and achieve all of these important goals.



One World Trade Center. photo by Julie Poucher Harbin, March 2014

To devise an acceptable way to talk about 9/11, we have to be guided by certain truths. The first is that the 19 hijackers and the people that planned and funded the attacks were all Muslims. It won't do to say that anyone who could do such a thing was not a "real" Muslim or must have been insane. These men were of sound mind and firmly believed their killing was not only justified, but dictated, by Islam. As uncomfortable as this is for many Muslims to acknowledge, any telling of the story of 9/11 would be incomplete without references to the radical religious beliefs of the hijackers.

Yet, the story is equally incomplete without explaining how these beliefs are based on a deeply distorted interpretation of Islam that is unambiguously rejected by the vast majority of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims.

Bin Laden believed violence against innocents is religiously justified to bring about a society governed exclusively by Islamic law. His ideas are accurately called "radical Islam," which is practiced and preached by a small faction of Muslims. It is inaccurate and unfair to associate these views with most of the world's Muslims, who believe violence against innocent civilians is inherently un-Islamic.

Problems arise when we fail to make these important distinctions.

While it is technically accurate to label al-Qaeda as an “Islamist” group because it aspires to create a rigid Islamic theocracy, critics of the museum’s film correctly claim that laypeople visiting the museum will hear the term “Islamist terrorism” and erroneously associate terrorism with Islam. Many Muslims are not “Islamist” at all – they are perfectly satisfied living under the democratically enacted laws where they live. Other Muslims are Islamists, but do not condone the use of violence to bring about laws more sensitive to Islam. These subtle distinctions show that the term “Islamist terrorism” is fraught with difficulty and should not be used.

The same is true for the term “jihad,” a holy Islamic concept with a dual meaning. First, “jihad” is the “struggle” to live a moral life consistent with the principles of Islam. The Qur’an also refers to a secondary (and lesser) duty of “jihad” to defend territory occupied by Muslims against foreign invaders. So, while it is true that the Qur’an provides that violence is justified under limited circumstances (like a “just war”), it unambiguously prohibits the killing of innocents – especially women and children – and labels such violence as sins of the highest order.

Al-Qaeda and other radicals have intentionally hijacked the concept of “jihad” as a matter of propaganda to enlist the power of religion for their cause. Westerners who label terrorist violence as “jihad” fall into bin Laden’s trap, unwittingly ratifying his effort to wrap an immoral campaign of violence in the cloak of religious legitimacy. Casual use of this ancient religious concept by journalists, museum curators or, for that matter, President Obama (who used the term “jihad” twice in a speech last year) is sloppy and inexcusable. Doing so causes deep pain to hundreds of millions of Muslims who feel aggrieved when the religion they love is linked unfairly to unthinkable acts of violence.

Our ultimate goal should be to make clear this conflict is a battle between civilized people of all faiths and the terrorists – not between Muslims and the West. So, when I talk about al Qaeda and terrorist violence, I say: *“The 9/11 attacks were immoral acts of violence perpetrated by a group of extremist Muslims who follow a radical interpretation of Islam that is rejected by the vast majority of the world’s Muslim population.”* Terrorists are not “jihadists,” but “al Qaeda-inspired violent extremists.”

The creators of the museum ought to understand these sensitivities and honor them. They have handled a myriad of other sensitive challenges in developing this remarkable landmark, which I look forward to visiting. Changing a couple of words in a short video ought to be a simple fix, and go a long way toward fulfilling the museum’s aspiration to be a place of “healing and hope.”

David Schanzer is a professor at the Duke Sanford School of Public Policy and the director of the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security. He is also affiliated faculty with the Duke Islamic Studies Center. Last Fall he taught a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) on “9/11 and Its Aftermath”.