

From the American Islamic Leadership Coalition (AIRC)

Statement of Purpose of the AIRC: *As American Muslim leaders, we come together to defend the U.S. Constitution, uphold religious pluralism, protect American security and cherish genuine diversity in the practice of our faith of Islam.*

Editor's note: This communique was released by the AIRC in July 2011

Background

The American Islamic Leadership Coalition (AIRC) is a group of more than 25 organizations and leaders that are representative of the overwhelming “silent majority” of Muslims in America, who, like our brethren of other faiths, span a wide gamut of religious beliefs and adhere to diverse social and cultural practices. AIRC was established in September of 2010 in Washington, D.C. Our mission is: “to defend the U.S. Constitution, uphold religious pluralism, protect American security and cherish genuine diversity in the practice of our faith.”

We acknowledge that Muslim radicalization is a ‘Muslim problem that requires a Muslim-led solution.’ The general failure of Muslims to confront radicalization head on has contributed to a rising tide of fear of Muslims in the West, which jeopardizes the prospects of a peaceful and harmonious future for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Unlike most Muslim grievance groups, which deny and evade their American and Islamic responsibilities to lead counter-radicalization and reform efforts, AIRC believes that it is our duty as Muslims, and Americans, to assist our government, our fellow citizens and our co-religionists in taking the difficult steps necessary to halt Muslim radicalization. For in the final analysis, only Muslims can counter and discredit the virulent theo-political ideologies that feed radicalization.

In the words of Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid (1940 – 2009), Indonesia’s first democratically-elected president and long-time head of the world’s largest Muslim organization, the *Nahdlatul Ulama*: we seek to “restore honor and respect to Islam, which the extremists have desecrated... People who are convinced that they know more than anyone else about Islam, and yet are full of hatred towards any of God’s creatures who do not travel the same path as they; and those who claim to be in possession of the absolute truth, and for that reason entitled to act as God’s vice-regents (caliphs) on earth and to dictate how everyone else must live—clearly, their words and behavior will not lead us into the presence of God. Their dream of an Islamic state is merely an illusion, for the true Islamic state is not to be found in the structure of any government, but rather, in hearts which are open to God and all His creatures.”

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Introduction

Our national counterterrorism strategy has, to date, consisted of little more than a

“whack-a-mole” program, which has yet to prescribe any comprehensive treatment directed at the root cause of Islamist terrorism, the theocratic, statist ideology of political Islam. For this reason, ten years after 9-11, the threat of homegrown Islamist terror has never been greater. Rather than continue to bury our collective heads in the sand, we must courageously recognize, acknowledge and act upon the fact that the vast majority of contemporary terrorism is fueled by Islamist ideology. Militancy and violence are natural outgrowths of “Islamism”—a hate-filled, supremacist and all-encompassing ideology of political Islam that mixes religion and state, and seeks to impose its “distorted interpretation of Islam” on others, through a theocratic government based on medieval concepts of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) also known as *shari’a*.

On June 28, 2011, the White House published its “National Strategy for Counterterrorism” (NSCT). AILC’s leadership team has reviewed and jointly drafted this communiqué in response to the NSCT, in order to provide policy makers, public intellectuals, the media and the general public with concrete insights from American Muslim leaders, who regard it as our human and religious duty to speak out against terrorism, and more importantly, against the ideology that underlies and animates it.

AILC members have joined together to help wage, and win, the ideological struggle (*jihad*) against Islamism from within the House of Islam. As Muslims who categorically reject the notion that there is any conflict between our faith and loyalty to our nation and its constitution, we feel a profound sense of responsibility to respond to the NSCT; to commend its merits; identify areas that cause us concern; and respectfully recommend that the U.S. government adopt certain approaches that we believe will facilitate the successful implementation of the NSCT, and help achieve its national and international peace and security objectives.

We commend the NSCT for

- Correctly identifying ideology (specifically, “a distorted interpretation of Islam”) as a key enabling factor of al-Qa’ida-style terrorism (page 3). From a counter-radicalization perspective, we believe this is the single most important concept in the document. If wisely and courageously pursued to its logical conclusion, this insight could indeed lead to “a future in which al-Qa’ida and its affiliates and adherents are defeated—and their ideology ultimately meets the same fate as its founder and leader” (page 2).
- Advocating the dissemination of a positive view of the U.S. and our values: The NSCT states that “Contrasting a positive U.S. agenda that supports the rights of free speech,

assembly, and democracy with the death and destruction offered by our terrorist adversaries helps undermine and undercut their appeal, isolating them from the very population they rely on for support” (page 5). This contrast is essential to winning the struggle with violent extremists, and the AILC is prepared to help articulate and advance these contrasting visions of society to Muslims in the U.S. and abroad.

- Taking the military fight to the enemy. The AILC applauds NSCT confirmation that it is and shall remain U.S. strategy to maintain a robust military counter-terrorism protocol in those regions of the world in which Islamist militants, both Salafists and Khomeinists, plan and execute terrorist campaigns against citizens of the U.S. and our allies.

- Working with local Muslim communities: Reporting on the NSCT, the Wall Street Journal noted, “Mr. Brennan said that this summer the administration would present a more detailed plan to work with local Muslim and Arab communities to counter violent extremism in the U.S.” If this “follow-on plan” avoids empowering groups that share al-Qa’ida’s Islamist ideology, and instead engages with genuinely pluralistic, tolerant and solutions-oriented Muslim groups and leaders, this could represent a significant step in helping to root out and prevent terrorist attacks on U.S. soil.

We are concerned that the NSCT

- Appears to reflect a largely pro forma, rather than substantive, approach to countering extremist ideology and the radicalization of Muslims in the U.S. and abroad. This reticence constitutes a potentially fatal weakness within the NSCT, and appears to perpetuate the misguided policy—pursued by both Republican and Democrat administrations—of refusing to address the ideology of religious hatred, supremacy and violence that underlies and animates Islamist terrorism. This refusal allows and encourages both Muslim and non-Muslim extremists to conflate Islam with al-Qa’ida’s ideology, without having to confront or intellectually respond to substantive challenge. This accelerates a crisis of misunderstanding and mutual recrimination that fosters the spread of anti-Western attitudes and conspiracy theories among Muslims, while fueling a growing fear of Muslims in the West.

- Does not define individual rights, or articulate a systematic strategy to promote them: The NSCT laudably states that the U.S. will work with allies “to provide mutual security and protection to citizens of all nations while also upholding individual rights” (pg. 15). Yet with the exception of free speech and assembly (mentioned above), the NSCT provides no working definition or moral defense of individual rights, whether based on universal principles or, more importantly, those of Islam itself. We believe it is self-defeating to extol the principles of individual liberty in a vacuum, as it were, without addressing the countervailing Islamist ideology that fuels our enemies, who seek to wrap themselves and their totalitarian agenda in the mantle of Islamic legitimacy. The American experiment has proven that the best legal foundation for a free society that protects all citizens from government—including the most religiously orthodox—is one based upon the principle that every individual possesses certain unalienable rights endowed by the Creator, which may not be abridged by government. This legal foundation embodied in the American Establishment Clause,² which is consistent with chapter 2, verse 256 of the Qur’an (“There is no compulsion in religion”), constitutes the Achilles

heel of the theocratic, statist ideology promoted by Islamists, including al-Qa'ida. A genuine effort to uphold individual rights must address the enormous chasm between the UN Declaration of Human Rights signed by free nations, and the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights endorsed by most Muslim-majority states. We must unapologetically articulate and defend individual rights in the broadest scope, in America and beyond. The AILC is uniquely positioned to help the Administration do so within a Muslim narrative and context.

- Fails to define al-Qa'ida's ideology, and its relationship to Islamist ideology and movements in general. Recognizing the vital role that ideology plays in al-Qa'ida propaganda, recruitment and terrorism, the NSCT employs the term "ideology" no less than 20 times within a 17-page document. To cite a prime example: "Countering this ideology... is an essential element of our strategy" (page 3). Yet nowhere does the NSCT actually define al-Qa'ida's ideology; explain its historical antecedents; discuss how, why, where and among whom it tends to metastasize; or clarify the precise nature of its relationship to Islamic theology in general, of which it is merely said to be "a distorted interpretation." Correctly understanding and identifying this ideology, in all its facets, is vital to defeating al-Qa'ida and its affiliates, which rely upon this ideology to radicalize and generate new recruits, both in the U.S. and abroad. We understand our government's trepidation and reluctance to address specifics, when it comes to a theo-political ideology that is progressively embedding itself in one of the world's great religions. But, make no mistake, there can be no successful counter-terrorism strategy that fails to identify and address Islamist ideology. Freedom-loving members of the AILC stand ready to assist public policy makers in this difficult and delicate process.

- Provides no criteria for determining with which Muslim groups the Administration will conduct its outreach programs. Our nation's long-term security depends, to a significant extent, upon American Muslims countering Islamism and its violent offshoots. Yet the report fails to mention the fact that Muslim communities are highly diverse, rather than monolithic. In seeking to discredit al-Qa'ida's ideology, it is counterproductive to engage and empower groups that share an ostensibly (or tactically) "non-violent" form of that same ideology, as partners in what should be a systematic, long-term effort to undermine and discredit their highly politicized and distorted understanding of Islam. Unfortunately, well-financed Muslim Brotherhood, *Wahh abi* and *Jamaat-e-Islami*

legacy groups—inspired by an Islamist ideology that substantially parallels that of al-Qa'ida itself—have been organizing in North America for nearly fifty years. Their members have, in many cases, acquired significant influence in American society under the guise of promoting a "moderation" that exists in word only, while actually seeking to intimidate, marginalize and otherwise silence those who hold a truly pluralistic, tolerant and spiritual understanding of Islam. The AILC was founded, in large part, to dispel this illusion, and to help unite the vast, silent majority of Muslims in the U.S. and Canada, to reclaim our religion from those who merely claim to speak in our name.

- Fails to articulate a strategy to counter Islamist ideology in general, or "cyberjihad" in particular. Nearly every terrorist plot and act on U.S. soil in the past few years was perpetrated by American Muslims who were indoctrinated here, on our own soil. The Internet is one of the primary vehicles for the transmission of ideas that threaten our security, and should be a

primary vehicle through which we respond to the propagation of extremist ideology. In 2008, many of us in the American Islamic Leadership Coalition commended the US Senate Homeland Security Committee on its comprehensive report on Violent Islamist Extremism, the Internet and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat. It is disconcerting that three years later, the White House's newest NSCT appears to ignore most of those findings and recommendations.

- Focuses narrowly upon al-Qa'ida as the enemy. While there is no disputing the fact that al-Qa'ida is and has been responsible for many terrorist attacks conducted against Americans and our allies, we must remember that this terrorist organization is loosely networked—like other Islamist terror organizations—and merely one of hundreds of militant Islamist groups, all of which emerge from their ideological progenitors, including *Wahhabism*, the Muslim Brotherhood, *Jama at-e-Islami*

, *Khomeinist Shi'ism*

and other extremist movements that seek to instrumentalize the religion of Islam in order to seize and maintain power. To address only al-Qa'ida—while ignoring the larger phenomenon of Islamist extremism in general, in both its Sunni and Shi'a variants—demonstrates a tunnel vision that will continue to prevent the development and implementation of a truly effective counterterrorism strategy, while simultaneously blinding U.S. policy makers to the potential rise of entire regimes characterized by an intense antipathy to the United States, its interests and its values, and those of humanity at large.

AILC Recommendations

- The U.S. government should clearly and publicly define the ideology of al-Qa'ida that we seek to “defeat” (page 2), and realistically acknowledge its intimate links with Islamist ideology and political movements in general. Ignorance and/or lack of honesty in this arena is no virtue. This necessarily entails discussing, and addressing, the manner in which theocratic regimes in Iran and Saudi Arabia export their Khomeinist and Wahhabi/Salafi ideologies worldwide, thereby fueling the spread of Islamist terrorism, and strengthening other Islamist groups such as the Taliban, Hamas, Hezbollah and the Muslim Brotherhood's global *da'wa* (proselytism) movement.

- The U.S. government should distinguish between the religion of Islam and Islamist ideology (“a distorted interpretation of Islam”), whose adherents seek to conflate their own political agenda with the religion of Islam itself. Reverence and respect for the religion of Islam does not and should not entail submission to the dictates of an ambitious minority of Muslims who seek to instrumentalize religion for the acquisition of worldly power.
- The U.S. government should acknowledge the diversity of American Muslims, and recognize that genuinely pluralistic, tolerant and spiritual Muslim leaders possess the theological legitimacy, authority and credibility required to counter Islamist ideology and movements from within Islam, and should be encouraged and supported in their efforts to do so.
- The U.S. government should engage non-Islamist Muslim groups to help develop and implement effective counter-radicalization programs, which affirm the principles of liberty and individual rights, within an Islamic narrative.
- This engagement should facilitate the production of compelling content (“narratives”) and their distribution, through proactive use of the internet, which is one of al-Qa’ida’s primary means of ideological indoctrination and recruitment.
- The U.S. government should support the development of robust, on-the-ground efforts to expose the brutal reality of Islamist oppression, violence and terror, and broadcast the message of Love, Mercy and Compassion—which fosters respect for human dignity and individual rights—to Muslims throughout the world, couched within the narratives of Islam, and the specific cultural and historical framework of the various linguistic regions to which these messages are disseminated.

Conclusion

The latest National Strategy for Counterterrorism should be commended for acknowledging that ideology (“a distorted understanding of Islam”) is a critical factor enabling al-Qa’ida-style terrorism. For if we truly hope to defeat al-Qa’ida and its affiliates, we must recognize that the struggle against terrorism is first and foremost ideological, rather than “kinetic,” as Ayman al-Zawahiri himself has repeatedly stated (e.g., “The majority of this war takes place in the information terrain”). We must also recognize the diversity of Muslim populations in the U.S. and abroad, and carefully select our counterterrorism partners on the basis of their principled rejection of al-Qa’ida (i.e., Islamist) ideology, rather than on the basis of tactical differences they may have with al-Qa’ida, when the ultimate objective they hope to achieve (the establishment of a theocratic state, and/or caliphate) is virtually identical. And we must develop a comprehensive, proactive strategy of our own, which demonstrates to Muslims around the world that their faith is more secure in an environment that promotes and protects the freedom of each individual.

The American Islamic Leadership Coalition was formed in order to provide a platform and an alternative voice for Muslims in North America. We offer the above thoughts to our government, and our fellow citizens, in the hope of fostering a more serious and mature national conversation about Islam, in order to resolve our current “institutional paralysis” in the face of extremism; defend our nation; and help “to restore the majesty of Islamic teachings as *rahmatan lil ‘alamin*—a blessing for all creation—which represents a vital key to building a peaceful world” (Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, writing in *The Illusion of an Islamic State*

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ENDNOTES

1. Wahid, Abdurrahman, ed. (2011). *The Illusion of an Islamic State: How an Alliance of Moderates Launched a Successful Jihad Against Radicalization and Terrorism in the World's Largest Muslim-Majority Country* (translated from *Ilusi Negara Islam: Expansi Gerakan Islam Transnasional di Indonesia*), p. 35. Jakarta: Wahid Institute, Maarif Institute and LibForAll Foundation Press.

2. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," The Constitution of the United States, Amendment I.