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## To defeat Al Qaeda, US must build trust of moderate Muslims

**BYLINE:** By Daniel Yankelovich

I have spent my professional life studying social and political movements and the role public opinion plays in them. I was pleased, then, to see that in its recently released report, the 9/11 commission makes the point that America's enemy is not just "terrorism," some generic evil, nor is it just a "stateless network of terrorists called al Qaeda." Instead, the commission stresses that the US confronts today a radical ideological movement in the Islamic and Arab world.

Unfortunately, too few leaders, policymakers, and media outlets have paid much attention to this section of the 9/11 commission report. Nearly all the focus has been on the short-term goal of "fixing" the nation's intelligence systems.

Long-term success in the fight against terror, however, depends far more on a broader strategy to counter this radical political movement that is the source from which Al Qaeda constantly replenishes itself. America's primary focus must be on the goal of stopping new terrorist recruitment. Nothing will contribute more to the nation's safety than this - not more concrete barriers around the Capitol, not more air marshals on airplanes, or bomb-sniffing dogs in train stations.

The 9/11 commission is right. Al Qaeda is the militant tip of a religious political movement that is spreading throughout the Muslim world, particularly in nations allied to the US, such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Moreover, this movement is gathering public support. Like most successful

movements, it is built like a stool on three legs: committed militants, moderates who may disagree with the tactics of the militants but feel they have a legitimate grievance, and a convenient scapegoat - in this case, the US.

Nearly all national attention has focused on the first leg of the stool - hunting down the committed militants. But long-term success on this point will depend largely on what is done about the other two legs.

When it comes to winning over Muslim moderates who now sympathize with the militants, the US starts with a huge disadvantage - a rising tide of mistrust of its policies and intentions. According to a Gallup Poll of nine Muslim countries, only about 1 out of 10 Muslims believes that Americans respect Islamic values, and even fewer - 7 percent - feel that the West understands Muslim customs and culture. The majority of Muslims polled by the Pew Global Attitudes Project also believes that the US is a military threat to them. Other surveys show that the Iraq war has exacerbated Muslim resentment.

Unfortunately, America's non-Muslim allies have also come to mistrust it. Majorities in most Western European countries polled by EOS Gallup Europe now consider the US a threat to world peace.

I have rarely seen a change in public opinion as great in such a short amount of time as the one from 2002 to 2003 in Europe that came as a direct result of the war in Iraq.

Rightly or wrongly, much of the

world has come to see American military initiatives as lacking legitimacy. The US can no longer count on its traditional allies to help dispel the poisonous anti-Americanism in the Muslim world.

The US must also find ways to stop being a scapegoat for all the ills of the Muslim world. Many Americans assume that the nation's enemies hate them for who they are rather than for what they do. This may be true for Al Qaeda jihadists, but the vast majority of Muslims are more concerned with tangible policies. The militants have grossly distorted American policies in order to make the US a scapegoat. This is a relatively recent phenomenon, however, and the US should be able to reverse it with the right policies and actions.

Somehow or other the US must communicate a vital truth to the moderate majority of Muslims, namely, that killing Americans will destroy their efforts to build just and prosperous societies, while friendship and cooperation with the US will vastly improve their life chances.

If the moderate majority of Muslims decide to isolate the militants in favor of cooperation with the US, mop-up military operations to destroy Al Qaeda will be feasible - and relatively straightforward. But if the US plays into Al Qaeda's hands and continues to alienate the moderate majority, the burden will be overwhelming.

How must US strategy and focus change? I am not suggesting that efforts to improve intelligence or homeland security be abandoned. However, the US needs a more

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enlightened approach to divide the moderates from the jihadists and to remove America as scapegoat.

Above all, a new vision of America must be presented to the world, especially the Muslim world - not through a slick PR campaign, but by positioning American foreign policy on the side of justice for the Muslim world.

This serves both a long-term and a more immediate goal. The long-term goal is to demonstrate to moderate Muslims that the US is on the side of justice, not injustice. The immediate goal is to slow or stop the recruitment of new terrorists.

We all need to start thinking differently if America is to build a constructive new relationship with the Muslim world - a world comprising 57 nations and 1.3 billion people whom we don't understand, and who don't understand us.

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