Beyond Diversity and Tolerance: 
Reassessing Islam and Islamism in the United States Military
By: Mark Silinsky, Civilian, EURASIA FAO

The US military has set national standards for promoting diversity and tolerance. Proclaiming an end to archaic and counter-productive racial practices, President Harry Truman desegregated the armed forces with the stroke of a pen after the Second World War. Changing deeply held opinions on race and religion in the services was more difficult, but not insurmountable. The military provided a sphere of US life in which people of all ethnicities, religions, and national origin could better themselves, prepare for their future, and prove their patriotism, upon pledging their allegiance to US and swearing to uphold the Constitution. The US military became more ethnically diverse and servicemen became more tolerant of this diversity. However, there is a new dynamic in the armed forces for which many officers and enlisted personnel have proven unprepared and ill equipped. This is the threat of militant Islam, or Islamism.

Estimates of the Muslim population within the US armed forces range from 1,850 to 3,000.

An Army psychiatrist at Fort Hood shoots indiscriminately on his fellow soldiers while yelling in Arabic that God is the greatest. Earlier, an Army non-commissioned officer is sentenced to death for the premeditated murder of two of his comrades and the intentional wounding of 14 others in Kuwait. Elsewhere, a middle-class convert to Islam from Washington State offers to sell secrets of US armed vehicles to give al Qaeda the tactical edge in killing US soldiers. Calmly, methodically, and very intelligently an Egyptian-born, commando-trained sergeant in the US Army indoctrinates US Army personnel and supplies al Qaeda with Army-related information and secrets. On desolate beaches in New Jersey, he trains fellow Muslims to kill Americans. A US Army chaplain engages in highly suspect activity with al Qaeda inmates at Guantanamo prison. Are these discrete events, or are they threaded together by a subversive ideology and homicidal hatred for the United States and those charged to protect its citizens?

This paper will argue three principles: First, Islam must be seen by security and counterintelligence operators in the armed forces in a different light than other religious, namely Christianity and Judaism. Second, the threat of Islamism in the US Armed Forces is widely misunderstood. Third, the armed forces and the DoD must establish a robust and unfettered capability to identify and neutralize hostile Islamic elements.

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Diversity in the US armed forces has its benefits. Earlier racial restrictions limited the pool of potential war fighters and the armed forces would be weaker without non-whites, but skin color says nothing of personal beliefs, political affiliation, or loyalty. Similarly, the inclusion of women into military brought talent, improving the status of a wide-array of non-combat—intelligence, logistics, medicine, engineering, aviation ... and increasingly combat fields. But women have no exclusive political, religious, or social belief systems distinct from those of their male counterparts.

Major Nidal Malik Hassan
Religion is different from race or ethnicity because it, by definition, is an expansive belief system. A person’s race, ethnicity, and gender say very little about their values. This cannot be said about religion. Islam is certainly a religion, but it is more. Its theological base, which centers on an extended dialogue between Mohammad, an ambitious fifth century warlord whom Muslims consider a prophet, and the angel Gabriel, who passed divine revelations, may be no more or less grounded in history or myth than Judaism or Christianity. And much of Islam’s sacred literature is innocuous and has no bearing on US national security. But Islam differs from the other two Abrahamic faiths because its metaphysical theistic beliefs are inseparable from the religion’s political and legal requirements.

For this reason, while it is accurate to define Islam as a religion, it is incomplete to define it as only a religion. It is a religion, a political body, and legal code, which mandates a certain life style. These political and legal requirements have profound and enduring implications for security in the US military. If Jesus said, “Render onto God what is God’s and unto Caesar what is Caesar’s,” Muhammad did not agree. His approach towards living as a Muslim contained no similar separation of the mosque and the state. Because Islam is as political as it is religious it offers a unique set of challenges to the military for several reasons.

First, many Islamic political and legal requirements conflict with democratic principles. Western norms that guide US law, customs, and values bear little resemblance to those of Islam. The biography of Mohammad, the most revered man in Islam, is equally problematic. If Muslims serving in US military uniforms believe that Mohammad was the perfect man, then it is worth noting that much of Mohammad’s personal narrative celebrates mass murder, looting, laying waste to enemy villages, taking slaves, raping women, killing and ordering the death of those who criticized him … not to mention pedophilia. For all of Mohammad’s battlefield acumen and dynamic political leadership, few American non-Muslims would welcome his legacy as a player in American politics.

Second, many Muslims believe that the Koran is the direct, undiluted, word of God that cannot be modified or abrogated. This is not unique among religions, but it presents a basic problem for Muslim service members. Islam is a political system that sets Muslims in perpetual and unavoidable conflict with non-Muslims until judgment day. Many passages in the Koran demand war against non-Muslims, that non-believers be converted or subjugated to second-class status, and that non-Muslims not be taken as friends. There is no broad consensus among American Muslims that these passages are archaic and irrelevant relics of the past.

The third challenge is the command for ruthless violence. Much of Islam is predicated on violence, celebrates violence, and demands violence against non-Muslims. Verses in the holy Islamic text drip with the blood of beheadings, amputations, eye gouging, and mutilation. Myriad passages celebrate Caligula-like torture and sexual slavery. If Islam is a religion of peace it is also one of war. Although apologists for Islam in the US Armed forces declare that this violence is un-Islamic, the perpetrators themselves commit the violence in the name of Islam; recite Islamic verses to justify the violence; are often supported materially, financially, rhetorically, and spiritually by significant numbers of the Islamic global community. When they have killed American soldiers they killed in the name of their God.
Fourth, the Koranic use of the word “tolerance,” as applied towards Jews, Christians, homosexuals, and women has a distinct meaning from its common use in contemporary US society. Islam tolerates other religions as long as they accept an inferior status — the status of dhimmi, pay financial tribute to Muslims, and agree to ritualistic humiliations. Women are valued primarily for their reproductive abilities, particularly their bearing and raising sons, and for maintaining the honor of the family. Homosexuals are not tolerated at all. In many places, the Koran does not teach tolerance towards Jews or Christians. In fact, there are passages that deny the Judaism of Abraham and the divinity of Jesus.

**Definition:** A “dhimmi” is a non-Muslim who lives under Sharia (Islamic law) as a second-class citizen.

“Fight those who do not believe in Allah...nor follow the religion of truth, out of those who have been given the Book, until they pay the Jizah (tax) in acknowledgment of superiority and they are in a state of subjection.” (Quran 9:29)

The fifth Islamist challenge allows for lying, or Takiya, in pursuit of Islamic causes. There is no blanket permission to lie in Islam, but a Muslim is given great license in dissimulating to protect himself and the Muslim community. There is much evidence of Takiya in US society, which has implications for the armed services.

A common takiya tactic is disingenuously creating a victim status for Muslims in US society and in the armed forces. Islamists are skilled at shifting scrutiny from the perpetrators of threatening comments, anti-US rhetoric, and anti-Semitism and onto those who protest these hate-filled statements. Islamists insist that there is a generalized misunderstanding of Islam’s true, peaceful nature and that criticisms of Islamism are manifestations of institutionalized “Islamophobia.” Through this lens, the victimizers become the victims, a status sometimes supported by mainstream civil rights organizations. Many civil libertarians view Muslims in the US as they do underrepresented and disenfranchised minority groups where the discrimination is based on racial or ethnic rather than political differences.

**Islamism in the Armed Forces is Not Understood**

Certainly, Islamism presents unique challenges to the armed forces that need to be confronted. But, before offering ways to grapple with these dangers, it is helpful to examine four dominant myths in the US armed forces, which need to be debunked. They are: violence has nothing to do with Islam; the killers and would-be killers are mentally ill; violence is driven by anti-Islamic harassment; and that the armed forces must accept, as inevitable, an accommodation with angry Islam.

The first central misunderstanding is that high-profile violence is un-Islamic. This argument holds that violence committed by Muslims, in the name of Islam, to promote the interests of Islam, has nothing to do with Islam. In fact, in at least several cases, violence had everything to do with Islam. Muslims, of course, are not the only servicemen who commit violence nor is there sufficient evidence to indicate that the aggregate level of violence committed by Muslims is any greater or less than that committed by Christians or Jews. This is a common refrain by Islamic leaders who tend to blame a multitude of causes, such as depression, alienation, anxiety resulting from taunts by anti-Islamic servicemen, but neglect to include the calls to arms by leading Islamic clerics and political leaders.

For servicemen of all religions, there are bar fights, brawls over women, violent outbursts prompted by arduous training and the nerve-shattering fatigue associated with combat. The fog of war sometimes clouds judgment and wears down self-restraint. Further, it is true that there have been only several incidents of Islamist-inspired murder or accessory to murder in the ranks. But the murders committed by Sergeant Hassan Akbar and Major Hassan and the conspiracy to help murder US troops, Sergeant Ali Mohammad, Specialist Ryan Anderson were born of Islamist rage at America and its services. In his own words, MAJ Hassan was a “soldier of Allah” and not a soldier of the USA.

The second misunderstanding is that the killers are insane or extremely unbalanced. Ibrahim
Hooper of CAIR asked a television commentator, in reference to the Hassan murders, “Why can’t these Muslims just be crazy?” They can be, just as Jews and Christians can be and sometimes are crazy. However, there is no evidence that the high-profile Army killers or would be killers - Akbar, Hassan, Anderson - were mentally ill. Nor has history demonstrated that evil men who commit their crimes in the name of ideology are necessarily insane. Were the Muslims who committed and tried to commit violent crimes against fellow Americans driven to do so by irresistible impulses, uncontrollable voices, or ghostly apparitions seen only by them? In fact, those who knew these homicidal soldiers spoke of their devotion to Islam and conviction that the US is at war with Islam.

The third misunderstanding of Islam is that its killers in the US armed forces have been driven to violence because of anti-Muslim persecution. The victimizers are victims. In fact, there is no evidence that those who violently turned against US servicemen were targeted extensively for anti-Muslim harassment. Islamic outreach and public relations organizations such as CAIR and MPAC have cast Muslims in the role of victims of an intolerant, ignorant, and mean-spirited American society. In fact, FBI statistics do not support claims that Muslims have been disproportionately targeted in hate crimes.

The fourth misunderstanding is fatalism. There is nothing the armed forces can do about Islamism and so it must be accommodated. This unnecessary fatalism surrenders the integrity, security, and future of the US Armed forces to a hostile ideology without a fight. It also surrenders the dignity of the armed forces.

Reasons Why the Threat of Islamism in the US Armed Forces is Widely Misunderstood

If the threat of Islamism is so profound, why isn’t it well known and when it is recognized, why is it often misunderstood? There are five reasons that help explain this. They are disagreement, confusion, deception, fear, delusion.

First, there is disagreement over the threat of Islamism in the armed forces. Reasonable citizens can observe the same facts and circumstances, and draw different conclusions. Many university professors, civil rights activists, theologians, journalists, and DoD analysts read the same data as this author, but do not agree that political Islam, which encourages or requires violence, is the primary causal agent of these killings and betrayals.

The second reason for misunderstanding the threat of Islamism in the armed forces is the skull-crashing confusion about Islam, diversity, and civil rights. It is difficult for servicemen not to be confused when they are encouraged to believe that Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance and yet see evidence of daily Islamic violence and a broad-based, seething hatred of the West. This confusion, even among the most educated and intelligent servicemen, helps to explain why Major Hassan’s often-repeated expressions of anger against the United States went largely unreported. Observers of his behavior, even fellow physicians, did not know what to make of it.

The third reason is deception. Some leaders in US Muslim organizations adopted a janus-faced pattern telling civilians and servicemen that theirs is a peaceful religion while rallying US Muslims to Jihad. For example, a leading expert on US Islamism, Steven Emerson, exposed Edina Lekovic, of the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), as praising the greatness of Osama bin Laden to fellow Muslim students at UCLA and later claiming “Nobody has fought—working harder to fight terrorism and extremism than the Muslim American community. We work with all levels of law enforcement, we work with our communities.” Another example comes from Mahdi Bray of the Muslim American Society who condemns the Islamic violence surrounding the cartoon controversy in public but later exhorts Muslims to enter Jihad and attack Jews. There are many other examples.

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“When we hear someone refer to the great mujahid Osama bin Laden as a 'terrorist', we should defend our brother and refer to him as a freedom fighter...”

Quote from Al-Talib, the Muslim News magazine at UCLA (July 1999 edition) when Lekovic was a managing editor
A fourth factor is fear. Some of those who understand the Islamist threat in the Armed Forces are afraid to voice their opinions. To some extent, this reflects a generalized fear in Western society. It is difficult to predict what comment, satire, novel, or cartoon will set Islamic passions aflame. An Indian-British novelist is sentenced to death by one of the world’s most influential Islamic clerics for satirizing the life of Mohammad. Cartoonists living in European countries hide in fear of their lives. Dutch parliamentarians require constant protection for fear of having their throats cut. An artist is slaughtered in the streets of Amsterdam like a sacrificial animal. And Europe has taken note. Some statesmen, artists, and intellectuals have stood and fought, most keep silent. Many of the Continent have reluctantly, but nonetheless firmly, embraced a new “Vichy Syndrome.”

The fear of Islamic anger haunts America, too. It exists in editorial offices of leading newspapers, universities, and government offices. In the armed forces there is an ambient fear— the concern of making an inappropriate statement, asking the wrong question, writing a potentially misunderstood article — which lowers readiness in the ranks. At work in the armed forces is a quiet Jihad, which is not the stuff of guns and bombs. Persistent and patient, Islamic leaders have built connections in the armed forces. Some of these connections are completely legitimate and are similar to those built by Christian and Jewish leaders. Others are duplicitous; designed to promote Islamism. In fact, one of the most influential Islamic leaders, the individual most responsible for giving Islam equal representation in the Armed Forces Chaplaincy, was sentenced to many years in prison for his role in financing Islamic terrorism. Robert Spencer is a leading authority on, what he refers to as, the stealth Jihad, and he has written a book of that title.

The fifth and final factor generating a misunderstanding of Islamism in the US armed forces is self-delusion. Confronting the enormity of the Islamist threat in the services, the nation, and the world, tries the intellects and the souls of Christians and Jews who simply want to live in peace with Muslims. Faith McDonnell of the Institute of Religion and Democracy notes that “many churches are obsessed with making themselves likeable to Islamists…such churches opt for sessions of feel-good dialogue with the local mosque, gushing about how much Christianity and Islam have in common, and never challenging Muslims to serious debate on those so-called commonalities.” Jews, particularly those of the left of the political spectrum, sometimes prefer accommodation to confrontation.

**Theodore Dalrymple is credited with coining the term “Vichy Syndrome” describing continental resignation to the progressive Islamization of Europe.**

**Tactical Steps to Mitigate the Islamist Threat in the Armed Forces**

What should be done about the Islamist threat in the armed forces? The armed forces and the Department of Defense must establish a robust and unfettered capability to identify and neutralize hostile Islamic elements. This effort must consist of five components. They are screening and vetting, recognizing, warning, monitoring, and firing Islamists.

The print media blackout cartoons of Mohammed, and Ivy League universities ban their inclusion in books. Critics of Islam, such as Daniel Pipes, require armed escorts while speaking at universities; public, particularly international, transportation is reinvented to prevent mass murder, a popular conservative talk show host, Michael Graham, is pressured off the air for criticizing Islamism.
The first component is screening and vetting candidates for the US Armed forces. There is no right to serve in this country's services. In some circumstances, men are required to serve if drafted. It is a privilege to serve, and this privilege can be revoked at the discretion of security officials.

Because the political and religious elements of Islam cannot be separated, the mosque, social organization, and other elements of a Muslim's participation in civil society must be scrutinized. It is vital for security officials to understand which Islamic organizations promote ideologies hostile towards the US. For example, military recruiters on high schools or university campuses should understand any connections that the Muslim Students Association has or had with radical organizations. Further, the literature and the rhetoric associated with the organization should be examined in the context of national security. If a candidate for the armed forces is a member of a campus or local organization that articulates a generalized contempt for American society, American religions, other than Islam; American foreign policy; and American leaders, he may not be an asset in the military services.

The second component is recognizing the traits of an Islamist. Daniel Pipes has coined the term "sudden Jihad syndrome" to refer to a mosaic of warning signs that a Muslim has become dangerously, and often very quickly, radicalized. Service men should understand some of the warning signs by asking five questions:

1. Does he demonstrate a generalized and high-level of anger at US society, domestic or foreign policy, or at US participation in wars in which the US is engaged? Is the intensity of the anger and the frequency with which it is expressed significantly greater than shown by other servicemen.

2. Does he suggest his primary loyalty is with another country/society other than the US? Does he view himself as Muslim before he is an American?

3. Does he express satisfaction or pleasure when US forces are killed or defeated by Muslims? Does he show inappropriate rage at criticism of Islam?

4. Does he read or suggest that other service members read violent Islamic literature that promotes world Islamic conquest or the subjugation of Christians and Jews? As an example, the anti-Semitic forgery The Protocols of the Elders of Zion sells briskly in a number of Islamic book stores in the US.

5. Is he associated with Islamist organizations?

Prompting servicemen to ask these questions requires improving the way security information is delivered to the forces. A first step would be to develop an annual, hard-hitting briefing to give servicemen a framework to understand Islamism. This should be done on a DoD level and should be required annually.

The third and fourth components, warning and monitoring, are inseparable. If a serviceman is concerned about an Islamist in the ranks, he should know whom to contact in the chain of command and he should follow-up with his concerns. This requires monitoring the behavior of the possible Islamists but it also requires that service officials act adequately on the information.

The fifth and final component is cashiering, or firing, the Islamist. If a serviceman's behavior is consistent with any of the five questions about Islamist behavior he needs to be investigated. Sometimes he needs to be fired.

Develop a Master Strategy against Islamism in the Armed Forces

Beyond these immediate, tactical steps, the armed forces must adopt a comprehensive strategy to combat Islamism. They must change the way they look at Islam, particularly its violent political component - Islamism.

First, the prism through which US armed forces view Islam must shift. Islam is treated as a religion indistinguishable from other religions. But Islam brings with it Islamism, which threatens the values of the US armed forces and the safety of its men and women. The political component of Islam should be stressed in security awareness briefings. Soldiers, airmen, sailors, and Marines must understand the political and legal basics of Islam and Islamism.

Second, the services must act decisively on this new perspective. Muslim chaplains, Muslim outreach speakers and university professors and contractors who influence servicemen on Islamic issues must be given increased scrutiny. Annual officer evaluations must be revisited to ensure those officers who suspect and report incidents or concerns of Islamism are not penalized for doing so.

The top related authors on this topic include Bruce Bawer, Christopher Caldwell, Walter Bernard Lewis, Steven Emerson, Daniel Pipes, Melanie Phillips and Robert Spencer
Finally, the armed forces must continue to recognize that there are many Muslims who have fought the trend of radicalization in American Islam. The armed forces must partner with Muslim activists who love America and are eager to defend it, rather than with pseudo-patriots who use takiya to infest its ranks. Dr. M. Zhudi Jasser of the American Forum for Islam and Democracy and Dr. Ali Ayami, executive director of the Washington, DC-based, Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Saudi Arabia are two of the best sources of information on democratic, humanistic-oriented Islam. They are sources that have not been sufficiently tapped.

Leaders in the US armed forces- men and women of good will and good intentions- have promoted diversity and tolerance in the ranks. Sometimes diversity brings varied technical and intellectual skills that boost military capabilities. But is it militarily beneficial or ethically virtuous to promote diversity when it corrodes morale in the armed forces; injects religious bigotry, particularly anti-Semitism; denigrates the status of women; alienates and threatens homosexuals; and increases the threat of subversion? Jews and Christians who promote a hostile political ideology have no place preaching their messages to servicemen. Should the US armed forces use a different standard for today's Muslims?

For example, language capabilities boost US counterinsurgency capabilities and serve as powerful tools for military planners and their civilian counterparts. These skills should not be trivialized. Many of the conflicts the US is currently engaged, and is likely become engaged, are deep in the Islamic world- Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Pakistan, Yemen and elsewhere.

Tolerance is another fashionable word in American society and its armed forces. Why should the armed forces tolerate any literature or speech, whether in the Koran or the Talmud or the New Testament, whether spoken in a mosque, or a church, or a synagogue that promotes violence, anti-western supremacy, and primary allegiance to a religion rather than to the US.

The great novelist and humanist Thomas Mann said, “Tolerance becomes a crime when applied to evil,” and Supreme Court justice Robert Jackson said, “The Constitution is not a suicide pact.” Men and women wearing the uniforms of their country’s services have pledged to defend this Constitution, and their country has an obligation to protect them.

Many have commented on the tragedy of Fort Hood. But they are wrong. Fort Hood was not a tragedy; it was an atrocity. The tragedy contained in this atrocity was that there were ample warning signs that were not understood in the ranks. It would be a continuing tragedy if this threat continues to incubate unchallenged. And this tragedy will, undoubtedly, lead to more atrocities.

About the Author:  Mark Silinsky is a 26-year veteran of the defense intelligence community. He has served as a senior analyst in US Army intelligence; an Army civilian Eurasian FAO (Russian); an Africa analyst for the Defense Intelligence Agency; on the Joint Staff J5; and as a research fellow at the National Defense Intelligence College as part of the Exceptional Analyst Program. He graduated, Phi Beta Kappa, from the University of Southern California; received an Masters of Philosophy in International Relations from Oxford University under the supervision of Sir Michael Howard and earned a masters degree in International development from Tulane University, where he currently is a Ph.D candidate. He graduated from the Naval War College (intermediate level) and the National Defense University (senior level) where he earned the prize for the outstanding thesis. He is also a 2008 graduate of the Afghanistan Counterinsurgency Academy, located near Kabul, Afghanistan.

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