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COMMITTEE ON
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June 10, 2010

The Honorable John Brennan
Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and
Counterterrorism and Deputy National Security Advisor
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. Brennan:

Thank you for your response dated April 22, 2010, to my letter of April 9, 2010, in which I expressed my strong concern that the Administration was considering dropping the term "violent Islamist extremism" in favor of the more nebulous phrase "violent extremism" in the 2010 *National Security Strategy*. As you know, the previous *National Security Strategy* issued in 2006 identified "the struggle against militant Islamic radicalism" as "the great ideological conflict of the early years of the 21st century," while simultaneously emphasizing that this is "a battle of ideas... not a battle of religions," and that the "transnational terrorists confronting us today exploit the proud religion of Islam to serve a violent political vision." I am deeply disappointed that the *National Security Strategy* issued last week by the Obama Administration officially abandoned this explicit and accurate terminology.

Nothing in your letter of April 22, 2010 or in the 2010 *National Security Strategy* convinces me that there is a compelling or even sensible reason for the Administration's refusal to use terms such as "violent Islamist extremism," "radical Islamist," or any phrase containing a word that conveys the painful reality that the enemy we are fighting in this war is a politicized, extremist exploitation of the Islamic religion. I call it "Islamism," to define our enemy as a political ideology, very different from the religion Islam, which is certainly not our enemy.

I am struck that at no point in your letter or in the 2010 *National Security Strategy* is there any attempt to explain or defend the Administration's use of the term "violent extremism," despite its repeated use in the *National Security Strategy*, as well as previous strategy documents released during the last year by the Administration, such as the Department of Homeland

Security's *Quadrennial Homeland Security Review Report* and the Department of Defense's *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*. In your letter, you state that the Administration has sought to be "precise and accurate" in its public statements about the threats posed to our country by terrorist organizations, but I cannot see how this position can be squared with its repeated reliance on so imprecise and inaccurate a term as "violent extremism." Indeed, this vague euphemism would seem to do precisely what you warn against: far more than "Islamist extremism," it "lumps [together] a diverse set of organizations [and individuals] – with different motivations, goals, capabilities, and justifications." There are obviously many forms of "violent extremism" with which we are not at war. Using the term "violent extremism" provides no specificity and thus no guidance for what strategy and capabilities are necessary to counter this threat; indeed, the strategy and capabilities necessary to counter "violent Islamist extremism" would differ substantially from those needed to counter the many other forms of "violent extremism" that exist around the world, such as, for example, the threat posed by neo-Nazis or other white supremacists.

I take seriously your argument that one way to describe the enemy in this war is through specific reference to al-Qa'ida – namely, as reflected in various Administration documents, describing our foe as "al-Qa'ida, al-Qa'ida-associated groups, and al-Qa'ida inspired terrorists," "al-Qa'ida and its terrorist affiliates," or "al-Qa'ida and its allies." Though using these terms is better than the totally misleading words "violent extremism," this approach also suffers from a number of serious shortcomings – foremost that it implies that this war is essentially about destroying an organization, al-Qa'ida, rather than defeating a broader political ideology that motivates both individuals and groups to commit terrorist acts in the name of a religion.

1. Terrorists Threaten The United States Due To Their Violent Islamist Extremist Ideology, Not Their Connections To Al-Qa'ida.

Though al-Qa'ida was our original enemy in this war, it is not our only enemy. The nature of the terrorist threat goes well beyond what may be directed, controlled, inspired by, or associated with al-Qa'ida. As we have seen in the recent attempted terrorist attack in Times Square, which Attorney General Holder has attributed to the Pakistani Taliban, the changing shape of the terrorist threat to our homeland cannot be solely captured through the al-Qa'ida lens or described as exclusively driven by al-Qa'ida. The fact is that our concern about the Pakistani Taliban as a threat to U.S. interests in South Asia – and as a terrorist threat to our homeland – would not recede even if al-Qa'ida were itself completely eliminated.

Ambassador-at-Large for Counterterrorism Daniel Benjamin recently warned about the growing danger posed by another Pakistan-based Islamist extremist group, Lashkar-e-Taiba, which allegedly recruited a U.S. citizen from Chicago, David Headley, to assist in planning the group's savage attack on hotels and other civilian targets in Mumbai, India, in which U.S. citizens were killed. As Ambassador Benjamin said in a speech in December of last year, "As the example of David Headley indicates, al-Qa'ida is not the only group with global ambitions that we have to worry about."

The Administration's description of our enemy as either "violent extremism" or "al-Qa'ida and its affiliates" also does not fully account for two other types of individual terrorists: (1) those who self-radicalize to violent Islamist extremism independently from al-Qa'ida and then commit violent acts, and (2) advocates of violent Islamist extremism who have no connections to al-Qa'ida but prepare the groundwork for individuals to become radicalized.

2. The War Will End Only By Discrediting Violent Islamist Extremism, Not Just By Destroying Al-Qa'ida As An Organization.

A rhetorical focus on al-Qa'ida could also lead our counterterrorism effort to focus narrowly on this organization and prioritize efforts to dismantle it over engaging and winning the larger ideological struggle within the Muslim world. Kinetic efforts against al-Qa'ida are critical to our counterterrorism efforts, but we cannot be led to believe – nor do I think that the Administration in reality believes – that decapitating al-Qa'ida and dismantling its infrastructure will end this war.

Using the terms "al-Qa'ida, al-Qa'ida-associated groups, and al-Qa'ida inspired terrorists," "al-Qa'ida and its terrorist affiliates," or "al-Qa'ida and its allies" risks giving our government an excuse not to confront difficult and sensitive long-term policy questions about how we fight this ideological war against Islamist extremists and terrorists, including:

- Why is the violent Islamist extremist narrative appealing, and how does it take advantage of regional, local, and personal grievances to win adherents?
- What is the "counter narrative" against the narrative of violent Islamist extremism?
- How can we better engage our Muslim neighbors and allies and Islamic religious leaders in this counter-narrative?
- What is our government's role and what practical steps should it take in the ideological debate concerning Islam and in preventing grievances from fueling violent Islamist extremism?
- What role can and should the Muslim-American community play?
- Should the government formulate engagement strategies for Muslim-American communities at risk, and if so, how do we identify such communities and then ensure that all parts of the government work seamlessly together?
- How should we deal with individuals who are inciting violence by espousing Islamist extremism?

We cannot answer these questions satisfactorily until we are clear about the nature of the war we are in and the enemy we are fighting.

3. This War Requires That We Not Flinch From Asserting Our Values And That We Encourage and Empower The Vast Majority Of Muslims To Reject Violent Islamist Extremism.

Finally, I disagree with your argument that use of the term violent Islamist extremism would be counterproductive by validating the notion that the West is at war with Islam and that

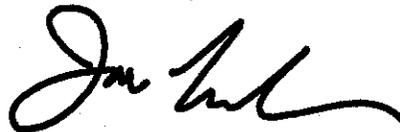
al-Qa'ida leaders are religious figures. Muslims across the world are clearly not ignorant of the violent Islamist extremist ideology that animates this shared threat to their countries and ours. I do not believe that papering-over the ideological underpinnings of that threat somehow changes the fundamental clash of ideas that is taking place within the Muslim world. On the contrary, I am concerned that it may seem disrespectful to Muslims worldwide to suggest that they are incapable of understanding and making these distinctions. Using pseudonyms and euphemisms actually may cause us to appear as if we do not understand the threat and, at worst, that we believe our values of freedom, tolerance, and democracy are so precarious that they will not survive a direct ideological clash with Islamist extremism, or that Muslims are not interested in democracy – all of which are clearly and factually untrue.

There is no question that the ideological conflict with violent Islamist extremism can only be won when the vast majority of Muslims around the world, who already reject extremism and terrorism, ostracize and extirpate the ideology that inspires and motivates that violence and extremism. The emergence of religious edicts (*fatwas*) against violent Islamist extremism since 9/11 has been heartening, as has the groundswell of popular revulsion against Islamist extremists in the handful of places where they have gained a foothold. We have seen that in the rejection of al-Qa'ida by Iraqis in Anbar province, in the Afghan people's opposition to the Taliban, and in elections in Pakistan where Islamist extremist candidates do very badly. Characterizing the war we are in as being either with a nebulous extremism or a particular organization – rather than involving an ideological hijacking of the religion of Islam for totalitarian purposes – may also send a message to moderate Muslims that they can remain on the sidelines while governments use conventional means to fight that organization. We need to encourage the moderate Muslim majority to raise their voices and to expose violent Islamist extremists for what they are: defilers of their religion and murderers of many thousands of Muslims, as well as people of other faiths around the world.

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Let me close by saying that I completely agree that it is imperative for the United States to make clear that we are most definitely not at war with Islam, as our enemies claim. However, just as definitely, it is imperative that we recognize that a group of self-identified Muslims has declared war on us and every follower of Islam who does not share their fanaticism and that they are doing so on the basis of a political ideology that they justify and explain through explicit distortion of their religion. I continue to believe, respectfully, that it is imperative for the Obama Administration to acknowledge this reality, and that its failure to do so is a mistake with adverse consequences for our national and homeland security.

Sincerely,



Joseph I. Lieberman
Chairman