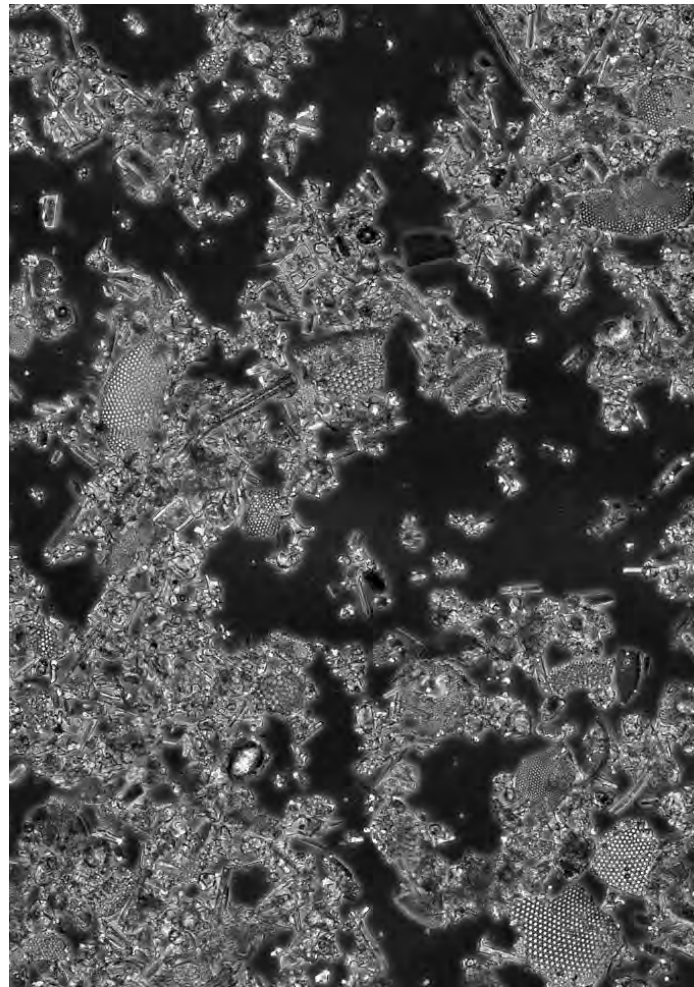# Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs): The Strategic Importance of Defining the Enemy

DECEMBER 11

STRATEGIC MULTILAYER ASSESSMENT
Authored by: Mr. Vern Liebl
Series Editor: Sarah Canna, NSI Inc.

Global Competition & Conflict

Mr. Vern Liebl, Center for Advanced Operational Culture

Learning, Marine Corps University

Vernie Liebl is an analyst and subject matter expert currently sitting as the Middle East Desk Officer in the Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL), part of Marine Corps University. Mr. Liebl retired from the Marine Corps, has a background in intelligence, specifically focused on the Middle East and South Asia, and spent extensive periods deployed, having four combat tours to the Middle East under his belt. In addition to providing operational training support to Marines and sailors deploying to the Middle East, he publishes extensively on topics as varied as the Caliphate to Vichy France in World War Two. Currently employed by Professional Solutions, he also provides support to MARSOC and to the Joint Staff on topics concerning Afghanistan, Yemen, and Syria.

Prior to joining CAOCL, Mr. Liebl worked with the Joint Improvised Explosives Device Defeat Organization as a Cultural SME and, before that, with Booz Allen Hamilton as a Strategic Islamic Narrative Analyst. Mr. Liebl has a bachelor's degree in political science from University of Oregon, a master's degree in Islamic history from the University of Utah, and a second master's degree in national security and strategic studies from the Naval War College (where he graduated with "Highest Distinction" and focused on Islamic Economics).

Mr. Liebl is married to Dr. Shireen (née) Burki, a Pushtun, and has been to Afghanistan and Pakistan several times. He has also spent time in Iraq, Yemen, Djibouti, Qatar, and elsewhere in the Middle East.

Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs): The Strategic Importance of Defining the Enemy

Mr. Vern Liebl, Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning, Marine Corps University

In this paper, as part of SMA's Invited Perspectives series, Mr. Vern Liebl indicates that 'violent extremist organization' (VEO) may not be an accurate term for describing modern terrorist entities. To illustrate this point, Mr. Liebl first provides a brief history of how the term 'VEO' entered US defense, intelligence, and law enforcement officials' lexicon and became commonly used. He then defines what the term 'VEO' means and questions whether it still appropriately applies to the organizations that have been labelled as such (namely Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, and the Islamic State). To conclude, Mr. Liebl questions whose viewpoints are taken into consideration when declaring an entity a 'VEO' and whether this practice is valid or "mere propaganda by those who may sympathize with it." He also argues that the definitions of terms such as 'VEO' and 'countering violent extremism' (CVE) should have a statutory basis and cautions US government officials that assigning labels based on fear and political expediency is unacceptable and could potentially be dangerous.

What is a VEO?

What does the term 'VEO' mean, and how did it come about for use as the basis of countering violent extremism (CVE)? VEO, or Violent Extremist Organization(s), is a commonly employed term used to describe adversarial or unfriendly non-state entities that impact or influence U.S. policy and provides a basis of operational common terminology for U.S. governmental (primarily defense, intelligence and security but also foreign policy and legislative) interagency communication. That it is used as such means that it should have a clear and consistent definition not only as a descriptor term but to precisely communicate guidance as well as mission execution. That it has been extensively used, primarily as an operational term but also as a strategic and even fiscal term means it should possess an internal logic. This further leads one to question that if the term VEO does not possess and internal logic than what assumptions and/or frameworks it has been supporting or describing are possibly incorrect or inadequate? Is it an appropriate term, is it even accurate or is it a 'catch-all phrase' which was borrowed capriciously as a desperate expedient to demonstrate 'multicultural sensitivity'?

The coordinated attack against the United States on 11 September 2001 by 17 Arab Muslim men who forcibly hijacked four planes and then dove them into three buildings was and remains a defining moment in American history. Yet it led to a self-inflicted confusion on what to call the attackers. As the United States projected forces, first into Afghanistan and subsequently into Iraq and elsewhere, the US government sought to prevent offending its Muslim allies by seeking to describe 'Foreign Terrorist Organizations' (a legal statutory definition) in a manner that was innocuous, in order to hopefully not incite Muslim (initially foreign and then quickly domestic) hostility. This means that the driving force for the naming of US adversaries, specifically non-state actor groups (and individuals), is (and was) political expediency and malleability vice accuracy via statutory definition.

On 14 September 2001 the "Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Terrorists" was passed in a joint resolution (S.J.Res. 23[i]) by the United States Congress, authorizing the use of United States Armed Forces against those responsible for the attacks on 11 September 2001 and any "associated forces." The authorization granted then President George Bush the authority to use all "necessary and appropriate force" against those whom he determined "planned, authorized, committed or aided" the September 11th attacks or who harbored said persons or groups. Note that in this resolution the only identifying term as to the enemy was "terrorists" as those responsible for the attacks, with "associated forces" as an all-inclusive 'and others.'

History (Lineage of the Term VEO)

So, who was, and presumably still is, the 'enemy'? From 2002 to early 2005, there were extensive meetings and discussions[ii] on this. Several different terms were tried out with various public responses, but frequent energetic and hostile responses from some Muslim/Islamic organizations in America (the Council on American-Islamic Relations [CAIR][iii] and the Islamic Society of North America [ISNA][iv] as two major examples), Muslim countries and/or Islamic organizations outside the United States quickly led to the dropping of those terms.[v] The identified terrorists were all Muslims, and subsequent military counter-terrorist operations were conducted and/or focused in Muslim countries (arguably, Iraq had a small non-Muslim minority). Yet there was a desire by the US government in Washington, DC to show that most Muslims were not terrorists. Initial 'normal' usage in intelligence and military organizations was to employ the term Islamic terrorists. This was deemed unsatisfactory as it was rapidly pointed out by aggrieved entities that to 'label all Muslims terrorists' was both unfair and inaccurate. The term "radical Islamists" was quickly substituted. However, for the vast majority of Americans that used that term, there was no understanding why 'those' Muslims were radicals and how were they different from non-terrorist, vast majority of Muslims.

As that term began to draw argument and dispute, other terms were floated, each of which quickly became controversial. Islamic fanatics, Islamofascists, Islamic Fundamentalists, Salafi-Jihadists and even Islamic Revivalists, were all tried out (see endnote 5 for a complete list). For many, equating Islam with Fascism was a difficult exercise in which essentially calling Muslims Nazis was grossly unacceptable to most Americans.[vi] When speaking of Islamic fanatics, it was easy to counter with references to Christian

fanatics, Jewish zealots, and Tamil nationalist suicide bombers. To use Islamic fundamentalism, one had to draw on Protestant fundamentalism to stretch the point (the term 'fundamentalist' is specifically and originally associated with Protestantism and to assign that label to any other faith implies familiarity with all aspects of Protestantism), a point on which most Americans had no clue as they were (and are) not knowledgeable on Islam. Using Salafi-Jihadism also sounded like it might be appropriate but what was a Salafi? A generic (and also inaccurate) term was settled on to describe the conflict(s), i.e. the "Global War on Terrorism (GWOT)," but it still did not answer the question as to what to call the enemy and who they/it were/is.[vii]

Despite the confusion regarding what term to use to describe the enemy (if there was an enemy, as the use of the word implies someone or something that is hostile to 'us,' but it is usually used to describe a foreign state), the US Department of State forged ahead and declared Al Qaeda (AQ) as a 'Foreign Terrorist Organization' (FTO). The use of 'FTO' was based on a statutory definition provided by the US Code[viii] and allowed the US Department of State to economically sanction the foreign entities denoted as FTOs. However, the term 'FTO' was not used as a foundation for developing either military strategy or governmental policy.

Additionally, two executive orders (EOs) had prior to 9/11 been promulgated, based upon Section 219 of the Immigration Nationality Act (INA),[ix] which also provided the statutory basis for identifying FTOs. The first was EO 12947,[x] which created the term 'Specially Designated Terrorist' (SDT), which was a self-limiting term. The second was EO 13224,[xi] which created the more expansive term 'Specially Designated Global Terrorists' (SDGT) but, as with the earlier SDT term, it was cumbersome and was not well known outside of the US Departments of Treasury and State. Neither term entered into common usage.

In 2005, the term "violent extremist organization" (VEO[xii]) was found and introduced by the Dutch as a term that soon became all-encompassing in referring to Islamic-based terrorist organizations. Curiously, the Dutch, who had been using the term "radical Islam" since the beginning of 2002, instituted the term "violent extremist organization" following the murder of Theo Van Gogh (killed November 2004) in December 2004. The Dutch borrowed the term from the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), who had used the term VEO since the mid-1970s to describe the Aryan Brotherhood and other Neo-Nazi entities in the US (in other words, what could be considered racist right-wing organizations who were violent or had violent tendencies).[xiii] From the Dutch perspective, the term VEO enabled them to separate Islamic terrorist entities from the religion of Islam, thereby hopefully easing the fears and/or hostility of the significant Dutch Muslim population.[xiv]

The United Kingdom adopted the term in 2006, and it began to show up in other European countries as well. It was not adopted in the US, but it began to creep into open source reporting. However, in looking at the FBI Strategic Plan 2004-2009[xv] or the '2006 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism'[xvi] the term VEO and its offspring "countering violent extremism" (CVE), do not appear. The extensive participation of US combat forces in both Iraq and Afghanistan led the United States to focus operationally and specifically on Al Qaeda in the former and Taliban in the latter. Combatting both of these organizations was folded into the GWOT, within which there did not appear to be an actual overarching strategic plan

to fight Islamic terrorism However, the term did partially show up in the 2006 National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism. as the term 'violent extremism' was mentioned several times. [xvii]

This changed with the change of US presidential administrations in 2008. It looked as if the new administration was seeking a way to disassociate Islam from Islamic terrorist entities and noting the European adoption of VEO, the new administration began to use the term. It focused first on inserting it into the US State Department's lexicon, then federal law enforcement agencies. The first major document was the "Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism," released in 2009 by the US Agency for International Development (USAID). [xviii] The use of the term 'VEO' by President Obama's administration enjoined all executive and government agencies to follow suit. While the term 'VEO' was not used, the term "violent extremism" figured prominently in the 2010 National Security Strategy (interestingly, this document described Al Qaeda as the epicenter of violent extremism and placed it in Afghanistan and Pakistan). [xix] In August 2011, the White House released "Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States," [xx] the first national strategy to prevent violent extremism domestically. [xxi] The underlying premise of the approach to countering violent extremism in the United States was that local communities provide the solution to violent extremism. It was at this time that the term VEO was used to establish policies on countering violent extremism (CVE). Moreover, by now the term VEO was so widespread that the Strategic Multilayer Assessment's (SMA) 5th Annual Conference on 29-30 November 2011 extensively discussed VEO. In 2012, RAND published a very influential document, "Influencing Violent Extremist Organizations and Their Supporters without Adverse Side Effects," which was the basis for operational and strategic planning and saw to the further displacement of terrorism identifier terminology by VEO.

In February 2015, President Obama hosted a three-day summit focused on countering violent extremism. This was a topic that he had pushed forward in a September 2014 United Nations General Assembly speech where he called on member nations to address violent extremism in their respective regions, and the 2015 summit, attended by ministers from over 70 countries, was held in response to this speech. While discussing violent extremism, the transition towards CVE was prominent. This White House summit was quickly followed by an April 2015 report from the Defense Science Board (DSB) on the "Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism Outside of the United States." [xxii]

Almost simultaneously, the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) adopted [xxiii] the 'Doha Declaration' in which the term VEO was used, reinforcing the globalist usage. Not only did the United States begin to use the term VEO by 2015 (and increasingly substitute CVE) but European countries soon adopted it as well, and its use went as far afield as Australia.

However, by 2015 the seemingly sudden emergence of the Islamic State (IS) and its implacable advances within Iraq and Syria, as well as increasing sympathy among Muslims globally, pushed the term VEO into the background. The declaration of a 'caliphate' (however legitimate or not) came to the fore. Concurrently, as the Islamic State's terrible ferocity and open willingness to kill countless fellow Muslims (who the Islamic State had declared *takfir*, or unbelievers/*kafirs*) Al Qaeda, long the focus of the VEO and CVE terms, became an eclipsed threat. It was easy then to label this apparent global threat using

the brand identity of the new threat—the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. However, within the United States, this brought about the domestic political fight of whether to call them ISIL or ISIS, and the use of either term purportedly indicated one's political allegiance.[xxiv]

By 2017, the worst of the Islamic State's activities seemed to have passed, and invigorated responses from within the region and internationally slowly grinding the Islamic State's physical existence ever smaller (and finally to an end in March 2019). However, the Islamic State threat transformed into an aspiring global threat, similar to the Al Qaeda threat the United States and the world had faced from 1996 to 2014. Also, Al Qaeda, enlarged and itself reinvigorated (and also receiving Islamic State fighters fleeing destruction), returned as a primary threat. Within US governmental and commercial publications, the term VEO and especially CVE began to reappear, especially since a new political administration had come to office in 2017.

In January 2017, Executive Order 13769, titled "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States" (colloquially known as the "Muslim travel ban"), was issued. Almost immediately, public discussion erupted concerning CVE, and to a lesser degree, VEO.[xxv] The new administration absorbed some of the terminology and began to use it, reinjecting it once again into military, intelligence, and governmental lexicons. For example, the terms 'CVE,' and to a lesser degree, 'VEO' appear in the September 2017, document, entitled "*Defeating Terrorists, Not Terrorism: Assessing U.S. Counterterrorism Policy from 9/11 to ISIS*" sponsored by the Bipartisan Policy Center, a think tank in Washington, DC.[xxvi] Similarly, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Science and Technology Directorate also sponsored a paper, entitled "*Countering Violent Extremism (CVE)—Developing a Research Roadmap*" in October 2017.[xxvii]

The term 'violent extremism' (minus the 'organization' ending) increasingly became used to preface elucidation of 'CVE,' and 'CVE' became known as an 'in vogue' term and as a way to describe but comfortably secularizing individuals and groups who were engaging in what those described viewed as a religious war, or jihad. In "The Globalisation of Countering Violent Extremism," the authors Arun Kundnani and Ben Hayes provided a review of how the term CVE was derived from the term 'violent extremism,'[xxviii] as well as the 'internationalization' of the term. Interestingly, in January 2018, the National Defense Strategy of the United States of America was released, and neither VEO nor CVE were used; however, the term 'violent extremism' was used, introducing and apparently cementing the usage of the term 'VE'.[xxix]

So, it seemed that the term VEO might have been superseded by other in vogue terms; however, in October 2018, two events occurred which seemed to be opposite of one another. First, the "National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America" was released from the White House and there was no mention of either VEO or CVE.[xxx] The term 'violent extremism' was noted three times, each as a reason for actions. Then, juxtaposing this was the 16 October 2018 conference hosted by the US Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff, General Dunford, which brought together the chiefs of defense for 82 nations.[xxxi] This conference was titled 'Counter Violent Extremist Organizations.' Within this conference, the terms 'violent extremist organizations' and 'violent extremists' were used extensively.

It should then be noted that subsequent to this conference, at least from anecdotal evidence, the VEO term appeared to enjoy a resurgence in usage up to the present. However, there also appeared to be some problems in naming, as a significant figure within the US think tank community, Seth Jones (currently at CSIS, formerly at RAND), published two documents in November 2018—the first resurrected the term 'Salafi-jihadist' while the second appeared to argue that there is a rising tide of far-right extremism within the United States, and that the law enforcement (the FBI, primarily) seems to be pulling back towards the original usage of the term 'VEO' (Jones, 2018).[xxxii]

Case Studies (Testing the Term's Integrity)

This brings this review relatively up to date. However, what is often not considered is what exactly a VEO is and whether it still appropriately describes what it once did. Clearly, the word 'violent' means exactly that: violent. The term 'extremist'/'extremism' is a much more elusive word. If one cherry-picks from the plethora of synonyms of 'violent'[xxxiii] and 'extremist'/'extremism',[xxxiv] a VEO can become many different things. For example, a bloodthirsty, bigoted organization or a callous activist organization can induce a wide variance of exactly what a described organization is. Consider an 'aggressive partisan organization'? Is it a political party during an election or is it a door-to-door grass roots organization working to stop the building of a bypass? Is it a criminal or even terrorist organization with motivations unknown? The term 'VEO' may be a comfortable proxy word used in order to avoid intimating that some current terrorist attacks may be driven by religion, specifically Islam, but the term itself is inaccurate and, at best, a shirking of responsible analysis.

Do the terms 'VEO' and 'CVE' actually apply to the organizations that US defense, intelligence, and law enforcement officials have labelled as such? The FBI has provided a reference web site, depicted in a format appealing to curious teenagers, entitled "What Are Known Violent Extremist Groups?" (VEG).[xxxv] This site gives a brief, simplified overview of what a violent extremist group is and then provides a list, with brief explanations of each. It first describes Al Qaeda, Al Shabaab, Hezbollah, and ISIS/ISIL, then moves on with equal weight to Kahane Chai and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), then moves to what is described as 'domestic extremist ideologies' (note: not terror groups), such as sovereign citizen groups, animal rights/environmentalist extremists, anarchists, abortion extremists (non-differentiate as to pro- or anti-), and militia extremist (undifferentiated).

Taking this further, is it accurate to use the label 'VEO' when referring to Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and/or Hezbollah?[xxxvi] First, it is evident that each group can be violent, with the Islamic State sometimes in the extreme. However, if we look at how each employs violence, Hezbollah rarely participates in indiscriminate violence anymore. Granted, early in the 1980s and into the 1990s, it extensively used terroristic acts. But as it has established itself as a recognized political player in Lebanon, Hezbollah has assumed large social welfare functions, it has become a state-within-a-state in southern Lebanon, and its use of terroristic violence has been minimized. Its military arm has become increasingly professionalized, it has engaged in semi-conventional and conventional warfare, it has mastered increasingly complex weapons systems, and it is viewed by many in the region (with the noted exception of Israel, for domestic political reasons) as a professional fighting force. Therefore, it can be loosely

stated that Hezbollah, which is acknowledged as a parastatal entity, now often employs violence in a way similar to that of a state.

Further, is Hezbollah an extremist organization advocating a global rise in Shia Islam (to quote the FBI Teen website)? Hezbollah originally coalesced from a disparate group of Shia self-defense organizations during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) who disagreed with the then leading Lebanese Shia group. The main difference was in its reaction to the 1982 Israeli invasion; Amal saw this as an opportunity to work with Israel in alliance with Maronite Christian groups within Lebanon. The new Shia group initially called themselves 'Islamic Amal' and quickly sought Iranian assistance. They professed to be anti-Israeli, anti-US, and anti-South Lebanon Army (SLA). Currently based in Shia enclaves in the Bekaa Valley, Beirut, and parts of southern Lebanon, they have become the significant power within the Lebanese government and have a global (largely criminal) presence. Hezbollah claims believes it exists for the purpose of Lebanese Shia survival and is a proxy for Iranian national security interests (in return for extensive financial and material aid). Hezbollah is part of the regional Iranian security system, which is based on self-determination and sovereignty under *Velayat-e-Fiqah*, and it is not anti-Sunni but wishes to exist within a Shia-dominated Muslim imamate. They perceive themselves as 'defenders of Islam,' which, arguably, for 1.5 billion people on this planet is not an extremist position. As well, for most young Lebanese Shia men, a tour of service with Hezbollah is a community expectation, making it not extremist; yet for most Muslims (who are Sunni), they would consider it extremist because Hezbollah desires a Shia-dominated Muslim world. So, depending upon one's viewpoint, is it extremist or not?

Al Qaeda, from a US and European (in essence, a non-Muslim) perspective, is the prototypical VEO. It is violent and expresses itself via terroristic actions. It arose from perceived *fitna* [xxxvii] among Muslims in the 1980s and 1990s. First established as an organization during the Afghanistan 'jihad' against the Soviets and their Afghan proxies, it was called the Maktab al-Khidmat,[xxxviii] until it fused with the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (led by Ayman al-Zawahiri) in 1989. In 1996, Al Qaeda published the "*Declaration of Jihad Against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holiest Sites*,"[xxxix] which led to an intensification of attacks by AQ, sponsored by AQ, or blamed on AQ, as well as responding counter measures by those attacked or threatened with attack. Suffering extensive losses, AQ has managed several times to rebuild itself to the point that, currently, it has multiple self-declared emirates (Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula [AQAP], Hayat Tahrir al-Shem, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb [AQIM], the Taliban, and several lesser entities with much more restricted territorial scope). AQ has a global presence and is anti-IS with a pro-Muslim Brothers stance, but it is not anti-Shia. What AQ wants is a global neo-Muwahhidun[xl] caliphate strictly espousing the *Tawhid*. Yet while AQ states, "If you are not with us, you are against us," it is also, paradoxically, a pan-Islamic ecumenical movement that believes all Muslims not currently following their lead (as the vanguard Islamic organization) are redeemable.[xli]

Such pan-ecumenicalism sets AQ squarely at odds with not only IS but with the 1,400-year tradition of Islamic theology in reference to the *Tawhid* and avoidance of *fitna*. So, from the perspective of the non-Muslim world, they remain extremists but could actually be considered not extremist; but from the perspective of 'fundamentalist' Muslims, they definitely are extremists,[xlii] as they are not trying to revive

Islam but to reform it (by, in essence, tolerating and accepting heretics and apostates), which is *bida* [xliii] and *shirk*.[xliv] So, from a pious Muslim perspective, AQ is a VEO, although its lesser level of violence, focus on removing abusive secular rulers (and denouncing the same in popular anti-colonial historical themes), and much larger focus on providing concurrent social welfare support systems (as compared to IS's penchant for highly publicized violence) makes it relatively popular and acceptable to many Muslims world-wide.

The Islamic State is clearly and extraordinarily violent, although the lack of comprehensive statistics due to partial state collapse (in both Iraq and Syria, as well as state withdrawal from IS-occupied areas) prevents an accurate accounting of deaths. Although limited in time and scope, due to the regional and international military reaction, it is probable that if IS had remained in physical occupation of significant territory and populations, high genocidal death tolls would have been likely.[xlv] IS is a partial derivative of AQ, having originally been started by Abu Musa al-Zarqawi (born Ahmad Fadeel al-Nazal al-Khalayleh), a Jordanian. Through a series of failures and name changes, the Islamic State ultimately established itself in June 2014, declaring itself a caliphate and deserving of the loyalty of all Muslims world-wide. To not declare loyalty to the IS caliphate was essentially, in the view of the IS, to declare one's opposition to Islam and thus apostatize from Islam. From 2014 to March 2019, IS was a physical territory as well as an ideology; however, since the destruction of the physical state, it has transformed into a potent presence in the cyber realm, retaining numerous followers, gaining adherents, and slowly rebuilding in the Middle East in order to re-establish a physical presence.

IS, or more pertinently to its adherents, the *ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah*, is several things. It considers itself as an eschatological vanguard seeking to fight against *al-Dajjal* (the Anti-Christ) and bring about the end times when a much winnowed (and purified) Islamic *umma*[xlvi] attains the global caliphate. It is ideologically driven by the *Tawhid* (oneness of God), uses declaration of *takfir* to eliminate false Muslims and hypocrites, and espouses the doctrine of *al-Wala' wa-l-Bara* (literally 'loyalty and disavowal').[xlvii] The end goal is a global Neo-Muwahhidunist global caliphate, as is the goal of AQ but with a brutally accelerated timeline.

From an Muslim/Islamic perspective, the IS is brutal and violent, but it is not extremist in that it is following the *al-Wala' wa-l-Bara* doctrine established by Muhammad before his death, it adheres rigorously to the *Tawhid*, and it is focused on reviving 'originalist' Islam (thus the adoption of the name 'Abu Bakr' by the IS caliph, which for all Muslims harkens back to the *Ridda* [Apostasy] Wars in which a post-Muhammad Islam was disintegrating, Arab tribes were falling away or pursuing their own tribal 'prophets,' and the first caliph, Abu Bakr, brought them back to the fold of the faithful or had them killed[xlviii]). Thus, strictly speaking, the Islamic State is not an extremist organization/movement; it is a revivalist movement in accord with previous movements trying to rid Islam of *bida* and accretions, getting back to what is viewed as original Islam. What muddies this definition is the injection of elements from the works of Ibn Taymīyah (1263-1328),[xlix] who has had a tremendous influence in the modern rise of Salafism, anti-Shi'ism, and revivalism, as well as on modern Muslim thinkers such as Abul A'la

Maududi, Sayyid Qutb, Hassan al-Banna, Abdullah Azzam, and even Osama bin Laden. So, the Islamic State is violent but, depending on perspective, is either extremist or not.

Conclusion

The point is: whose viewpoints are used in declaring an entity a VEO, and if it is so declared, is it viewed as valid or mere propaganda by those who may sympathize with it? This is especially true if the declaring agency/country is non-Muslim and the targeted entity is composed of Muslims. Declaring an entity as a VEO should first be based on actual reality, not just from a fear of 'giving insult' to Muslims at large. There is no such fear if the terrorist entity is Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, pagan, atheist, or nationalist; the same should hold for those comprised of Muslims in whole or in part. For the US government, such definitions, especially if used for law enforcement, intelligence, and/or military purposes, should have a statutory basis. Assigning labels based on fear and political expediency is inappropriate and potentially dangerous.

This leads one to consider several questions in regard to the use of the term VEO (and its corollary, CVE). What is the political goal of the United States in employing the term VEO? It should be presumed that if a society employs certain terms that those terms have definitions that are based on an internal logic both domestically and foreign, as well as politically, militarily, security and intelligence-wise. This internal logic seems to be missing from employment of VEO. Seeing the drift in the use of VEO as a term, what are the common bonds of the ascribed groups which form the "foundation" of the VEO spectrum? Is the term accurate in regard to each group, and would those groups consider themselves as VEOs? The employment of the term VEO has not always been helpful and as a politically derived term it has necessarily complicate policy and guidelines. Words mean things, thus accuracy in terminology is critical; better to employ the term Muslim extremists, Christian extremists, animal rights extremists, whatever a group being examined and combatted is, vice the 'vanilla' and inaccurate term – VEO.

References

Al-Tabari, M. (1998, January 1). The history of al-Tabari vol. 39: Biographies of the prophet's companions and their successors: al-Tabari's supplement to his history. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Bin Ali, M. (2012, August). The Islamic doctrine of Al-Wala' wal Bara' (Loyalty and Disavowal) in Modern Salafism [PhD Thesis]. Retrieved from https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10871/9181/AliM.pdf

Bin Ladin, U. (2013, October). Declaration of jihad against the Americans occupying the land of the two holiest sites [Translation]. Retrieved from https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2013/10/Declaration-of-Jihad-against-the-Americans-Occupying-the-Land-of-the-Two-Holiest-Sites-Translation.pdf

Bipartisan Policy Center. (2017, September). Defeating Terrorists, Not Terrorism: Assessing U.S. Counterterrorism Policy from 9/11 to ISIS. Retrieved from https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BPC-National-Security-Defeating-Terrorist-Not-Terrorism.pdf

Bukav, D. (2014, February 23). Islam and the other: The al-Wala' wal-Bara' doctrine. Retrieved from https://acdemocracy.org/islam-and-the-other-the-al-wala-wal-bara-doctrine/

Denoeux, G., & Carter, L. (2009, February). Guide to the drivers of violent extremism. Arlington, VA: United States Agency for International Development.

Garamone, J. (2018, October 16). Dunford asks defense chiefs to guard against complacency. Retrieved from https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/News/Article/Article/1663536/dunford-asks-defense-chiefs-to-guard-against-complacency/

Janis, I. L. (1972). *Victims of groupthink: A psychological study of foreign policy decisions and fiascoes*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co.

Jones, S. G. (2018, November 7). The rise of far-right extremism in the United States. Retrieved from https://www.csis.org/analysis/rise-far-right-extremism-united-states

Jones, S. G., Vallee, C., Newlee, D., Harrington, N., Sharb, C. & Byrne, H. (2018, November).

The evolution of the Salafi-jihadist threat. Retrieved from https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/181221_EvolvingTerroristThreat.pdf

Kundnuni, A., & Hayes, B. (2018, February). The globalisation of countering violent extremism policies, pp 4-5. Amsterdam, NL: Transnational Institute.

Liebl, V. (2019, July). Cognitive dimension – Violent extremist organizations: Al Qaeda, Islamic State, and Hezbollah [PowerPoint slides]. Center for Advanced Operational Culture/Marine Corps University.

Palazzi, A. (2002, June 2). Wahhabism, the Saudi Arabia-based puritanical heresy at the base of Islamism. Retrieved from http://www.eretzyisroel.org/~jkatz/wahhabism.html

Pandith, F. (2017, February 14). Farah Pandith speaks about countering violent extremism in the wake of Trump Administration travel ban. Retrieved from https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/farah-pandith-speaks-about-countering-violent-extremism-wake-trump-administration

RTI International. (2017, October). Countering violent extremism (CVE)- Developing a research roadmap. Report prepared for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate. Retrieved from https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/861_OPSR_TP_CVE-Developing-Research-Roadmap_Oct2017.pdf

Trump, D. J. (2018, October). National strategy for counterterrorism of the United States of America. Retrieved from https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NSCT.pdf

United States Department of Defense. (2018, January). Summary of the 2018 national defense strategy of the United States of America. Retrieved from https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf

United States Federal Bureau of Investigation. FBI teen website. Retrieved from https://www.fbi.gov/cve508/teen-website

United States Government Accountability Office. (2004, August). FBI strategic plan 2004-2009. Washington, DC.

United States Government Accountability Office. (2006, February 1). National military strategic plan for the war on terrorism. Washington, DC.

United States Government Accountability Office. (2006, September). U.S. national strategy for combating terrorism. Washington, DC.

United States Government Accountability Office. (2010, May). 2010 National security strategy. Washington, DC.

United States Government Accountability Office. (2011, August). Empowering local partners to prevent violent extremism in the United States. Washington, DC.

---

[i] S.J.Res.23 — 107th Congress (2001-2002) Authorization for Use of Military Force - Authorizes the President to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations, or persons. States that this Act is intended to constitute specific statutory authorization within the meaning of the War Powers Resolution.

[ii] The author observed and occasionally participated in several such meetings while deployed in Iraq, sitting in on video-teleconferences held by then CENTCOM Commander General John Abizaid as well as several visiting CODELS. It was also extensively debated within the Defense Intelligence Agency, where the author worked when not deployed.

[iii] Council on American-Islamic Relations – CAIR.

[iv] Islamic Society of North America – ISNA.

[v] The terms used were, and this is not all-inclusive, names such as Islamists, Islamic fundamentalists, Islamofascists, Islamic fanatics, Jihadists, Wahhabi extremists, Islamic extremists, Islamic terrorists, Islamic radicals, Radical Islamists, Militant Islamists, Salafi extremists, Salafi jihadis, Puritanical Islamists, Qutbists, Takfiri terrorists, Takfiris or Khwarijites/Khwarij (some early politically correct terms by academics were Islamic revivalists or Islamic activists).

[vi] Although the first noted use of that term was in 1933 when Muhammad Iqbal was castigated for advocating the creation of an Islamic state in then British India.

[vii] One label bandied about was Radical Theist Groups but that has deep links with Satanism so was immediately discarded, nobody wanted to link Islam with Satanism for obvious reasons.

[viii] 18 U.S. Code CHAPTER 113B — TERRORISM § 2331. Definitions; As used in this chapter—
(1) the term "international terrorism" means activities that—
(A) involve violent acts or acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State, or that would be a criminal violation if committed within the jurisdiction of the United States or of any State;
(B) appear to be intended—

(i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population;

(ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or

(iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and

(C) occur primarily outside the territorial jurisdiction of the United States, or transcend national boundaries in terms of the means by which they are accomplished, the persons they appear intended to intimidate or coerce, or the locale in which their perpetrators operate or seek asylum;........

 (4) the term "act of war" means any act occurring in the course of—

(A) declared war;

(B) armed conflict, whether or not war has been declared, between two or more nations; or

(C) armed conflict between military forces of any origin;

(5) the term "domestic terrorism" means activities that—

(A) involve acts dangerous to human life that are a violation of the criminal laws of the United States or of any State;

(B) appear to be intended—

(i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population;

(ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or

(iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping; and

(C) occur primarily within the territorial jurisdiction of the United States; and

(6) the term "military force" does not include any person that—

(A) has been designated as a—

(i) foreign terrorist organization by the Secretary of State under section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act (8 U.S.C. 1189); or

(ii) specially designated global terrorist (as such term is defined in section 594.310 of title 31, Code of Federal Regulations) by the Secretary of State or the Secretary of the Treasury; or

(B) has been determined by the court to not be a "military force".

[ix] Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, Section 219 Designation of Foreign Terrorist Organizations.

[x] EO 12947: Prohibiting Transactions with Terrorists Who Threaten to Disrupt the Middle East Peace Process, signed by President Clinton and placed in the Federal Register (January 25, 1995), v.60 no.16, p.5079.

[xi] Executive Order 13224 of September 23, 2001. Blocking Property and Prohibiting Transactions with Persons Who Commit, Threaten To Commit, or Support Terrorism, signed by President Bush and placed in the Federal Register (September 25, 2001) Vol. 66, No. 186

[xii] Not to be mistaken with the Department of Veterans Administration office – Veterans Experience Office.

[xiii] The FBI appropriated the term 'violent extremists' from a book written by Irving L. Janis; see "Victims of Groupthink, a psychological study of foreign policy decisions and fiascoes," Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1972, 277 pages.

[xiv] See – Kundnuni, Arun & Ben Hayes, "The Globalisation of Countering Violent Extremism policies," Transnational Institute, Feb 2018, Amsterdam, NL, pp 4-5.

[xv] FBI Strategic Plan 2004-2009, USGAO, Aug 2004, Wash DC, 132 pages.

[xvi] U.S. National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, USGAO, Sep 2006, Wash DC, 29 pages.

[xvii] The document focused on "...aiming to help mainstream Muslims to reject violent extremism." No mention of organizations as VEOs. "National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism," USGAO, 1 Feb 2006, Wash DC, 40 pages.

[xviii] Denoeux, Guilain & Lynn Carter, "Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism," Management Systems International for USAID, Feb 2009, Arlington, VA, 108 pages.

[xix] National Security Strategy, USGAO, May 2010, Wash DC, 60 pages.

[xx] "Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States," USGAO, Aug 2011, Wash DC, 12 pages.

[xxi] It should be noted that there is no statutory FTO equivalent for identifying U.S. domestic terrorist organizations.

[xxii] This report was based on a July 12014 initial report but was updated through the White House summit in early 2015. The report, from the DSB, was from a task force formed under the cognizance of the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (OUSD) – Acquisition, Technology and Logistics.

[xxiii] The Thirteenth Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, Doha, 12-19 April 2015.

[xxiv] The Caliphate used the term Islamic State post-June 2014, however from 2013 until June 2014 the organization had rebranded itself as the, in English, Islamic State of Iraq and al-Shem, which translates into accepted usage in three different variants. First, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), second, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and finally, the Islamic State of Iraq and Damascus (ISID). In regional colloquial Arabic usage, the terms Levant, Syria and less frequently, Damascus, were interchangeable; Syria was the Levant and the Levant was Syria, Damascus could stand in in

for either. In respect to the Islamic State entity, locals across Syria and Iraq referred to them as Daesh, a term viewed as a pejorative by the Islamic State (usually punished by numerous lashes, the cutting out of the victim's tongue or by death). However, the Obama administration preferred the usage of ISIL while the more generally used term was ISIS, which was given even wider acceptance when the Trump administration began using it. ISIS or ISIL, while its uses became a U.S. domestic issue, matters little as it is an interchangeable acronym which in June 2014 was superseded by the correct term "IS", for Islamic State (or more properly, al-Dawlat al-Islamiyah).

xxv For example: 'Farah Pandith speaks about countering violent extremism in the wake of Trump Administration travel ban', 14 Feb 2017, https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/farah-pandith-speaks-about-countering-violent-extremism-wake-trump-administration.

xxvi https://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BPC-National-Security-Task-Force-on-Terrorism-and-Ideology.pdf

xxvii The publication was prepared by RTI International, Research Triangle Park, NC. https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/861_OPSR_TP_CVE-Development-Research-Roadmap_Oct2017.pdf. Although using the term violent extremism there is no mention within the documents 71 pages of a definition.

xxviii The review is in chapter 2 of the 48-page document, largely funded by the European Union, published in early 2018. In the introduction there is some interesting word play: 'provides a critical account of the emergence of CVE policies and analyses their subsequent institutionalization within three international bodies: the European Union, the United Nations, and the Global Counterterrorism Forum.

Today, the terms 'radicalization', 'extremism' and 'violent extremism' are bandied about with such frequency and abandon that they have become synonymous with terrorism itself, despite their quite different meanings, and the lack of clarity as to how these concepts relate to one another.

Under the CVE banner, policy-makers at national and international levels have carried out engagement and outreach; capacity building and development aid; education and training; messaging and public relations campaigns; surveillance partnerships between policing and non-policing agencies; and targeted ideological interventions on individuals. CVE policies have significantly widened the range of methods used by governments for countering terrorism and shifted their target from terrorist organization to religious ideology and identity.' It is a very neat judo-like trick to 'de-religious-ize' context by saying it is being done in order to focus precisely on religious ideology and identity. To read the entire document, see: Arun Kundnani & Ben Hayes, 'The Globalisation of Countering Violent Extremism,' February 2018, Transnational Institute, Amsterdam, NE. https://www.tni.org/en/publication/the-globalisation-of-countering-violent-extremism-policies?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIy8KquMuv5AIVCo7ICh3z3QZMEAAYASAAEgIN3PD_BwE

xxix See https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf

xxx See https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NSCT.pdf

xxxi See https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/News/Article/Article/1663536/dunford-asks-defense-chiefs-to-guard-against-complacency/

xxxii See 'The Evolution of the Salafi-Jihadist Threat' November 2018, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/181221_EvolvingTerroristThreat.pdf and 'The Rise of Far-Right Extremism in the United State', 7 November 2018, https://www.csis.org/analysis/rise-far-right-extremism-united-states

xxxiii Those would be words like - brutal, vicious, savage, aggressive, threatening, terrorizing, fierce, wild, bloodthirsty, ferocious, berserk, frenzied, out of control, barbarous, barbaric, cutthroat, homicidal, murderous, maniacal, rabid, inhuman, heartless, callous, ruthless, merciless, pitiless or cruel.

xxxiv Those would be - fanatic, radical, zealot, fundamentalist, hardliner, dogmatist, bigot, diehard, militant, activist, sectarian, chauvinist, partisan, maniacal.

xxxv See https://www.fbi.gov/cve508/teen-website

xxxvi Much of the following information on Hezbollah, Al Qaeda and Islamic State comes from the following: Vernie Liebl, 'Cognitive Dimension – Violent Extremist Organizations: Al Qaeda, Islamic State and Hezbollah', PowerPoint presentation, Center for Advanced Operational Culture/Marine Corps University, July 2019, no URL.

xxxvii The word "fitna" in Islam, also spelled "fitnah" or "fitnat," is derived from an Arabic verb that means to "seduce, tempt, or lure" in order to separate the good from the bad. The term itself has various meanings, mostly referring to a feeling of disorder or unrest. It can be used to describe the difficulties faced during personal trials. The term can also be used to describe the oppression of the powerful against the weak (rebellion against a ruler, for example), or to describe individuals or communities giving in to the "whispers" of Satan and falling into sin. Fitna can also mean attractiveness or captivation, but for this instance in the creation of Al Qaeda, it means civil strife, sedition or distress. A word with important historical implications, it is widely used in modern Arabic.

xxxviii Fully, Maktab Khadamāt al-Mujāhidīn al-'Arab (MAK), in English the Afghan Services Bureau, was founded in 1984 by Abdullah Azzam, Wa'el Hamza Julaidan and Osama bin Laden.

xxxix See https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2013/10/Declaration-of-Jihad-against-the-Americans-Occupying-the-Land-of-the-Two-Holiest-Sites-Translation.pdf

xl Muwahhidun (literally in Arabic 'People of the Unity [Tawhid]', or 'The Unitarians'), a reform movement that began in the eighteenth century to revive Orthodox Sunnism, stressing the Sunna, or the ways of the Prophet Muhammad; the movement was started by a religious scholar from Najd, Muhammad ibn Abd alWahhab (1703–1792). It is not the first violent austere fundamentalist movement in Islam, those would be the Khwariji (657 – 13th century, secessionist takfiris), Ahl-e Hadith (Sunni movement 800s), Almoravids (1040–1147, Sunni Berbers), Almohads (1121–1269, Sunni Berbers) nor is it the last; Deobandi (current, South Asia Sunni movement), Sanussi (current, austere Sufi), Ahl-e Hadith (current, South Asia Sunni movement).

xli This includes not only Imamiyya Shia but, not all inclusive as examples, all the variants; Zaydi Shia, Ismaili Shia, Alawi, Druze, Ibadi and the entire spectrum of Sufi Sunnis or Shias.

xlii See as a beginning explanation: 'Wahhabism, the Saudi Arabia-based puritanical heresy at the base of Islamism', by Sheikh Abdul Hadi Palazzi, June 02, 2002, http://www.eretzyisroel.org/~jkatz/wahhabism.html

xliii Bida (bidah) refers to innovation in religious matters. Linguistically the term means 'innovation, novelty, heretical doctrine, heresy'. Introducing and acting upon a bid'a in religious matters is a sin and considered one of the enormities in Islam that is obligatory to immediately desist and repent from.

xliv Shirk is the sin of practicing idolatry or polytheism, i.e., the deification or worship of anyone or anything besides God,). Literally, it means ascribing or the establishment of partners placed beside God. It is the vice that is opposed to the virtue of Tawhid.

xlv Still, that said, it is unlikely that the Islamic State and supporters would have been able to equal the death tolls inflicted during the 1932-35 Holodomor (5-7 million Ukrainians, 1941-1945 Holocaust (6 million Jews), the 1941-45 GeneralOst Plan (7-5 million Slavs [including at least 3 million Poles]), the 1971 East Pakistan Massacres (1.5-2 million Bengalis), the 1975-79 Cambodian Genocide (3 million Cambodians) or the 1994 Rwandan Genocide (1 million Tutsis). It is possible that with time, IS could have equaled the 1915-22 Armenian Genocide (1.8 million in an eight-year span) or very easily the 150,000 to 200,000 Kurds exterminated by the Saddam regime from 1986 to 1989.

xlvi Umma (Ummah) is an Arabic word meaning "community". It is distinguished from Sha'b which means a nation with common ancestry or geography. Thus, it can be said to be a supra-national community with a common history.

xlvii For understanding the ideological centrality of this doctrine, see 'Islam and the Other: The al-Wala' wal-Bara' Doctrine,' David Bukay, February 23rd, 2014, American Center for Democracy, https://acdemocracy.org/islam-and-the-other-the-al-wala-wal-bara-doctrine/; or 'The Islamic Doctrine of Al-Wala' wal Bara' (Loyalty and Disavowal) in Modern Salafism', Mohamed Bin Ali, PhD Thesis, August 2012, University of Exeter, UK, https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/bitstream/handle/10871/9181/AliM.pdf

xlviii See 'The History of al-Tabari Vol. 39: Biographies of the Prophet's Companions and Their Successors: al-Tabari's Supplement to His History', Muhammad ibn Yarir al- Tabari, SUNY Press, Jan 1, 1998.

xlix Ibn Taymiyyah believed that Islam was contaminated by inauthentic local cultures and traditions. He suggested that the political instability (fitna) and external threats at the time (the Mongols) were simply a result of the fact that Muslims had deviated from the 'true path'. Therefore, he believed that Islam should be saved from what he considered to be man-made innovations. In this light, he desired a return to the authentic sources of Islam. He believed in a strict adherence to both the Koran and the Sunnah, and that the ijmā', or community consensus, had no value in itself. He opposed almost all types of intercessions and symbolism in worship and accordingly considered saints and shrine visitations as sacrilegious; he believed they contradicted the oneness of truth and the finality of Mohamed's message. He therefore did not hesitate to call these practices – which were popular in various Muslim societies at the time – heretical. In short, he was against an amalgamation of culture and Islam. Ibn Taymiyyah believed that the best role models for Islamic life were the first three generations of Islam (salaf). Therefore, Muslims should refer only to the understanding of the salaf when interpreting scriptural sources. He also believed that the first three generations created the 'ideal' Muslim society. Hence in order to refrain from corruption, one must closely follow their examples at any time. Any deviation from their practice was viewed as bid'ah, or innovation.