“The real ‘war on terrorism’ can only be won if the religious, political and intellectual leaders of Islamic countries and communities actively confront and fight . . . Islamist extremism.”

Islamic Militancy Can Be Defeated Only by Muslims, Not by Western Governments

Anthony H. Cordesman

In the following viewpoint, Anthony H. Cordesman asserts that Islamic militancy is primarily an ideological and regional threat, rather than a global political or economic threat. As such, he argues, it can only be defeated by Muslim citizens themselves at the local religious level, rather than by Western governments, whose efforts have historically been self-defeating. Cordesman holds the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS). He is a national security analyst for ABC News and former National Security Assistant to Senator John McCain.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to Cordesman, why are Western efforts to democratize the Middle East more self-defeating than using military force in that region?
2. Why does Cordesman recommend that counterterrorism efforts have a national, rather than regional, focus?
3. Why is the “long war” a dangerous term, according to Cordesman?

The latest events [2006 civil war] in Somalia are yet another warning that the United States, its Western allies and Islamic nations need to change their strategies to win the “war on terrorism.” The basic lessons have been the same in Iraq, Afghanistan and throughout the Islamic world. The present mix of Western action and Islamic inaction cannot possibly win.

Part of the problem is conceptual. The United States and most Western nations may be “politically correct” when they call the current struggle a “long war” or “global war on terrorism,” but the reality is very different. Most terrorism is a minor and largely national threat. The real threat is Islamic extremism, specifically neo-Salafi Sunni Islamist extremism. The violent transnational movements that support these beliefs, symbolized by al-Qaeda, are the only serious global threat that uses terrorism. Isolated terrorist movements do need to be defeated, but Irish, Spanish, secular Palestinian, Sri Lankan, Japanese and other such groups are peripheral threats at most.

Recognizing this fact, and focusing on it, is critical to any hope of winning the real “war on terrorism.” The struggle is religious and ideological, not military or driven by secular values. It is a struggle for the future of Islam, and it is not generic, global or focused on political or economic systems.

As such, the real war on terrorism can only be won within Islam and at a religious and ideological level. This does not mean that improving every aspect of counterterrorism at the