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**MEMORANDUM FOR THE BOARDS OF DIRECTORS OF THE PUBLIC
BROADCASTING SERVICE AND WETA**

FROM: Frank Gaffney, Martyn Burke and Alex Alexiev

Re: Response to the PBS/WETA Critiques of "Islam vs. Islamists"

The ABG Films documentary "Islam vs Islamists: Voices from the Muslim Center" has been critiqued on three separate occasions by producers retained by PBS/WETA to produce the "America at a Crossroads" series. (See the attachments.) These critiques took the form of "Notes" sent by Leo Eaton, Crossroads Series Producer on November 5, 2006 and December 22, 2006 to the film's Director and Co-Executive Producer Martyn Burke, and in a letter dated February 12, 2007 to the film's Co-Executive Producer Frank Gaffney from Jeff Bieber, Executive Producer at WETA.

The last of these essentially summarizes Mr. Eaton's first two critiques without adding anything new. For the purpose of this response to PBS/WETA, we will therefore concentrate on the more detailed Notes. Each of these missives makes plain that while they were signed by an individual, they reflect the views of both PBS and WETA.

The Notes convey an unmistakable impression – one that should be discernable even to those lacking a detailed knowledge of the topic – that, far from being constructive criticism, the PBS/WETA criticism of our film amounts to a hatchet-job based on a serious, perhaps willful, misinterpretation of both the message and the method of this film. The Notes also reflect a demonstrable lack of critical understanding and even basic knowledge of the subject matter of the film: radical Islam and its assault on moderate Muslims.

It is, moreover, difficult to escape the conclusion that the source of the unhappiness of the Notes' author and the institutions he represents is not ABG's ostensible inability to deliver compellingly the film's message, but the message itself. Indeed, the critique represents a wholesale and ill-concealed rejection not so much of the documentary itself, as of its subject and content. The PBS/WETA commentary amount to little more than an ideological diatribe, one that could have easily been written by an Islamist or a fellow-traveler, rather than an informed, collegial and professional effort to contribute to the successful completion of a serious film on a hugely important subject.

The seriously deficient source and substance of such criticism stand in stark contrast to the quality team that is responsible for and stands behind "Islam vs. Islamists." The film's director/producer, Martyn Burke, has a breadth of knowledge and experience in the subject of Islam going back nearly twenty years (including directing an award-winning documentary on the war in Afghanistan). Other members of the team have published widely on the subject, been asked to provide expert testimony before congressional hearings, appeared at numerous scholarly conferences and as authorities in the national media.

Not least, our regional co-producers in North America and Europe include several of the most highly respected journalists in the world, individuals who work for world-class media organizations and who have been properly recognized internationally for their reporting on Islamism. For example, one was a Pulitzer Prize finalist last year for reporting on Islamic activities in Europe and another was profiled in the *New York Times* for the excellence of her work.

The Tone of the Notes

Before delving into the substance of the PBS/WETA critique of our film, a few observations about its tone are in order, as the latter is indicative of the bias driving the former.

Simply put, the entire PBS/WETA commentary, from beginning to end, is loaded with deprecatory and insulting phrasing and replete with outright accusations of a lack of objectivity on our part, without identifying convincingly even a single instance of our alleged bias. Thus, we are told on virtually every page that our story-telling engages in "dramatic hyperbole," "shoddy journalism," "subjective and claustrophobic terms," "menacing music," "sweeping generalizations," etc.

If these epithets were not enough, we are accused of advancing an "incendiary thesis," one that is "quite inflammatory," "alarmist and overreaching," "over-simplified," and that "failed the most basic Journalism 101 test," to name just a few. What is more, we are told time and again that we "need more objective testimony" and "more objective context" without pointing out – let alone *documenting* – actual cases of biased reporting. Instead, we are condemned with generalized accusations of "editorializing" and "point of view (POV)" film-making.

The Content of the Critique

With respect to the actual PBS/WETA criticism of ABG's handling of the conflict between moderate, mainstream Muslims and their radical, Islamist co-religionists in Muslim communities across the West, let us start with the numerous examples of gross and baseless mischaracterizations of the film that do not comport with its storyline.

For example, the film is accused of trying to make the audience feel "fear of all Muslim organizations that aren't liberal and Western," trying to "demonize Islam" and "constantly reinforcing the mantra be afraid of all these people" (meaning the Muslims).

None of these assertions is even remotely accurate. Far from demonizing Islam, the film's main objective is to show the audience to what extent the Islamic faith itself is being threatened by extremists that use a deliberately warped interpretation of the religion to impose their hate-filled agenda on mainstream believers. The documentary does not "advocate" so-called "liberal and Western" Muslim organizations. It simply contrasts the views and statements of moderate Muslims with those of the Islamists.

An indication of the ignorance of the author of the PBS/WETA critique is the fact that one group of moderates featured in the film, Sheikh Hisham Kabbani's Sufis, are part of an Islamic tradition nearly as old as Islam itself – one that is decidedly non-Western. Similarly, Dr. Zuhdi Jasser's efforts to organize fellow-Muslims in Arizona to defend their faith from those that would falsify its teachings is neither uniquely Western nor especially liberal. Rather, it reflects the heartfelt reaction of people who feel that their religion is being hijacked – a reaction in evidence to varying degrees throughout the Muslim world. Indeed, to the extent that the film showcases a "Western" Muslim organization at all, it is the extremist Hizb ut-Tahrir that is headquartered in the United Kingdom, where it has found a congenial base for its subversive activities in the West.

If one were to try to find a logical explanation for these completely unwarranted and intemperate attacks on the conceptual and cinematographic integrity of "Islam vs. Islamists," perhaps the first place to look is at the numerous instances in the Notes where the author demonstrates, at best, a limited grasp and, at worst, a willful distortion of the reality of Islamism. (As has been pointed out in correspondence from ABG Films to WETA President Sharon Percy Rockefeller, the latter may be explained by the influence Mr. Eaton has acknowledged is exercised over him by his father, Hassan (Charles) Le Gai Eaton, (a.k.a. Hassan Abdul Hakeem) who is a Muslim convert held in high regard in Islamist circles in Britain.) Either way, the sweeping condemnations of the content of our film served up by Leo Eaton on behalf of PBS and WETA *discredit the critics*, not the film.

Uninformed about the Facts

By way of illustration, consider a paragraph on page 2 of the November 5 Notes. It starts with what is intended to be a bold statement of fact: "Today's battle for the soul of Islam is all about history." The reality is exactly the opposite. The fact is that the battle for the soul of Islam is about the *present* and *future* of a fourth of humanity. That is why the subject of Islamism – a relatively contemporary political ideology – is of such paramount import, and why this film which explores it was selected over hundreds of others in what once was a rigorous competition managed by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Elsewhere, we are taken to task for positing that there is a downward progression from fundamentalism to extremism to terrorism, a proposition described by Mr. Eaton as "an incendiary thesis." Indeed, throughout the PBS/WETA critique, the author seems to argue against the reality of such a continuum, as when he complains that we are lumping the terrorist Abu Qatada, the extremist imam Abu Laban and the "ordinary conservative imam" Aly Hindi together as "bad guys."

In fact, "Islam vs. Islamists" shows what the Notes claim is but an "ordinary conservative imam" as a man who has accused the Canadian authorities of being the real terrorists. He denounces a palpably moderate Muslim as an "extremist." And he insists that the most barbaric of capital punishments for marital infidelity are mandatory. Such thinking is used by the Islamists also to justify suicide bombings, beheadings of "apostates" and other acts of terrorism.

The Notes simply refuse to recognize a basic truth: Islamist terrorism is a symptom of the deeper malaise called Islamism, the murderous ideology that inspires it. If we use the author's logic, we would have to judge the likes of Hitler and Stalin as lesser criminals than their SS and NKVD henchmen, since the latter did the mass killing. Thus, the former would have qualified merely as "extremists" or perhaps "conservatives," rather than what they were: the precursors for today's ideologically-driven "terrorists." The enlightenment philosopher Dennis Diderot once remarked that it is but a small step from fanaticism to barbarism. Islamism is a perfect example of Diderot's insight, an insight that has obviously escaped PBS/WETA.

Another glaring example of the fundamental misperception of the nature of Islamist extremism on the part of PBS/WETA as expressed in the critique is the stated belief that with respect to Islam "moderation and extremism clearly depend on where you're standing." No, they do not! There are objective criteria that distinguish the two and arguing to the contrary is really tantamount to saying that there is no difference between perpetrators and victims: It is all a matter of opinion. This is exactly what the apologists for terrorism against innocent people and the terrorists themselves have been arguing for years.

There are many other examples of the distorted understanding of radical Islam exhibited in the Notes, but pointing out two more should suffice. The first deals with the "blood money" episode in the film, the second with *shari'a*.

"Blood Money": Leo Eaton contends that "blood money" is a tribal tradition – and implies that it is a positive one at that, since "it's a way of stopping bloodshed, not encouraging it." Actually, though undoubtedly of pre-Islamic, tribal origin, "blood money" is Quran-sanctioned and it is as a Quranic injunction that it is practiced in Muslim countries today and not as an "archaic tribal practice."

More importantly, and the real reason why this episode was included in the film, is that it demonstrates a momentous phenomenon: the efforts radical Islamists are making, sometimes successfully, to impose reactionary *shari'a* norms in the Muslim

communities in the West – in total contravention of the democratic system of justice and to the detriment of both the Muslims themselves and society at large. The author of the Notes seems not to want this important insight to be imparted to the PBS audience.

Shari'a: The second point has to do with the religious "legal code" known as *shari'a*. The Notes contend that, for most Muslims and non-Muslims alike, "*shari'a* law comes from the Quran." Mr. Eaton could have added that, without exception, all Islamists believe it to be a God-ordained, divine law and panacea for all societal problems.

In fact, as one of the moderate Muslims featured in the film correctly points out, it is none of the above. The word *shari'a* is mentioned in the Quran only once – and not at all in the sense of a system of justice, but in its original Arabic meaning of "path to the source or well." There are a few specific punishments for transgressions enumerated in the Quran and some instructions on matters of inheritance. *Shari'a* as a code of law (to the extent that it is one at all), however, did not appear until nearly two centuries after the death of Muhammad. It is thus both post-Quranic and *man-made*.

A Question of Bias

The transparent bias exhibited in Leo Eaton's critique of "Islam vs. Islamists" in favor of the Islamist interpretation on the question of *shari'a* colors much of the PBS/WETA interpretation of our film's message. For instance, he insists that to be worthy of airing by PBS, our film is obliged to provide "objective clarity" on whether *shari'a* can co-exist within Western societies side-by-side with our democratic judicial system. This is a truly preposterous question given the basic tenets of *shari'a* that both extremists and moderates would agree include the following:

- A Muslim cannot be condemned to death for the murder of an infidel.
- A Muslim man can have four wives, a woman only one husband
- A Muslim man can marry non-Muslims, Muslim women may not.
- A woman needs four male witnesses to prove rape or adultery and could be stoned to death for adultery if she fails to find them.
- A Muslim virgin cannot marry without permission by a male guardian
- Muslims who leave Islam automatically get the death penalty. If not available for killing, their marriages are annulled and they are denied inheritance.
- Women inherit half of what a man does and their testimony is worth half of that of a man in business transactions.
- Judges in an Islamic state could only be Muslims. A non-Muslim judge can only adjudicate for infidels.
- Adoption is prohibited by *shari'a*.
- A man can divorce his wife instantaneously; women must pay the husband to have the marriage dissolved, provided he agrees.
- A man can "marry" a woman for a fixed time (even a few hours).
- A Muslim man is allowed to beat his wife.

It is difficult to believe that any objective person would even question whether this kind of "law" is compatible with basic Western norms. Yet, PBS and WETA have allowed an individual whose objectivity is itself clearly questionable to speak for them on this and related matters.

Other Illuminating Demands for Changes

There are myriad other examples of ignorance or willful disregard for the evidence presented in our documentary dressed up as simple editorial adjustments, too many to enumerate fully here. A few further, illustrative examples warrant mention, however:

We are told we must alter our film to explain why "conservative imams describe [our] selected 'moderates' as extremists on the other [i.e., liberal] side" and why we call the radical Islamist organization Hizb-ut-Tahrir "extremist." Further, we are advised that we must explain what a Sufi is, since, "conservative Islam (especially Sunnis) consider Sufism to be heretical."

Anybody who has actually *seen* our film will find these questions to be, to put it charitably, naïve, if not actually ignorant. More to the point, they betray a sympathy for the Islamist viewpoint.

As our storyline makes abundantly clear, what Leo Eaton labels "conservative imams" are in fact zealous Islamists. What they all have in common – as the film explains time and again – is their unconcealed scorn for Muslims who do not share their zealotry. Whether the purportedly "conservative imams" depict their moderate co-religionists as atheists, apostates, *munafiqin* (hypocrites) or "extremists," they betray attitudes that are the very definition of extremism.

Furthermore, the film's narrative makes abundantly clear the extremist nature of Hizb-ut-Tahrir in both the statements of its leaders and the fact that the group is banned in many countries as a terrorist organization. Questioning that is tantamount to a complete disregard of the evidence presented.

Similarly, the documentary quite directly and unequivocally points out that the Sufis featured in the film practice a peaceful and moderate version of Islam of which the Wahhabis and other Islamists strongly disapprove. The only reason anybody would want a longer discourse on Sufism itself, which is peripheral to the main subject, would be if one really believed Sufism to be heretical.

Conclusion

In short, the PBS/WETA critique of our film as presented in Leo Eaton's Notes is, itself, a "point of view." Were this point of view – which amounts to an apologia for Islamist extremism – to succeed in preventing the airing by PBS of "Islam vs. Islamists," the American viewing public would be seriously disserved, \$675,000 in taxpayer money

possibly wasted and the Islamists' advantaged in their quest to suppress and dominate moderate Muslims.

No one should be under any illusion. The decision to exclude "Islam vs. Islamists" from the initial Crossroads broadcasts – and the threat not to air it later on unless the substantive and structural changes demanded by Messrs. Eaton and Bieber are accommodated – cannot be justified on the grounds that this film fails to meet PBS technical or editorial standards. It assuredly does.

Neither are these positions warranted by dint of an unreasonable refusal by ABG Films to incorporate constructive suggestions for improvements made by CPB, PBS or WETA. Actually, we did so repeatedly.

Rather, this documentary has been the subject of an ideological vendetta on the part of individuals responsible for this series at PBS and WETA who have, from the first, worked to prevent it from being aired by PBS. It is an indictment of the PBS and WETA Crossroads management team, rather than this film, that the former have gone to such disingenuous and even dishonest lengths to ensure that "Islam vs. Islamists" content and message are suppressed.

We at ABG Films call on every member of the Boards of Directors of the Public Broadcasting Service and WETA to view "Islam vs. Islamists: Voices from the Muslim Center," to judge for themselves the critiques discussed above and to assess whether they are willing to stand behind such appalling behavior on the part of their respective organizations – let alone to defend that behavior as consistent with the public interest at this moment of America at a crossroads.

Attachments:

November 5, 2006 Notes from Leo Eaton
December 22, 2006 Notes from Leo Eaton
February 12, 2006 Memorandum from Jeff Bieber