

WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

Confronting the Ideology of Islamist Extremism

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Yesterday, the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee released the findings of its investigation of the Fort Hood shooting. The report is especially critical of the military and FBI's failure to share actionable intelligence and to develop policies to counter violent Islamist extremism.¹ Earlier this week Colleen LaRose, better known as "Jihad Jane," pleaded guilty to all counts of an indictment charging her with conspiracy to provide material support to terrorists, conspiracy to kill in a foreign country, making false statements and attempted identity theft.² The United States has experienced a spate of recent homegrown terrorism cases such as this, including recent plots targeting a military recruiting station in Maryland and a Christmas tree lighting celebration in Oregon. Such plots are stark reminders of the potent threat posed by homegrown radicalization. The aggregate picture is disturbing. A recent Congressional Research Service report identified 43 homegrown jihadi plots since 9/11 – with just over half occurring since May 2009.³

And yet, while many of our allies recognize the need to contest the violent Islamist narrative used to radicalize at-risk youth and justify acts of terrorism, Washington remains hesitant to acknowledge its significance and rhetorically engage the ideology at the heart of the threat. Attempting to address the symptoms of the violent Islamist ideology without confronting the cause is tantamount to relying on tactics rather strategy – which is not a recipe for long term success.

Case in point, Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad described himself as a "Mujahid, a Muslim-soldier,"⁴ yet senior U.S. officials maintain that terms like "jihadists" or "Islamists" are not relevant descriptions of the enemy we face today.⁵ And so, beyond a broad strategic agreement that we must combat extremism, there are significant differences between how the U.S. and its allies – most starkly its Muslim-majority allies – combat violent extremism (CVE).

Even the Saudis, not known for their religious moderation, have highlighted this distinction. Speaking at a graduation ceremony at Nayef Arab University of Security Sciences in Riyadh, just a day after President Obama and King Abdullah met this past June, the university's namesake made a public call for international cooperation against terrorism. Prince Nayef, the Saudi second deputy prime minister and minister of interior, stressed the need for intelligence, information sharing, and coordinated counterterrorism operations to preempt attacks. However, he did limit his analysis to specific tactics. Lamenting that so many Saudis have joined terrorist groups, Prince Nayef "called on Islamic scholars to correct perceptions of terror and terrorism that have been developed by a section of Muslims."⁶

¹ "A Ticking Time Bomb: Counterterrorism Lessons from the U.S. Government's Failure to Prevent the Fort Hood Attack," A Special Report by Joseph I. Lieberman, Chairman, Susan M. Collins, Ranking Member, U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, Washington, DC 20510, February 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/fthoodsenatereport.html?hpid=topnews>

² Not all "homegrown" jihadi cases are created equal however. Indeed the Jihad Jane case stands in contrast to others that evidence concerning ties to al-Qaeda's Senior Leadership (example: the case of Najibullah Zazi, the aspiring New York City subway bomber) or ties to Tehrik-i-Taliban (example: the case of Faisal Shahzad, the Times Square bomber).

³ Bjelopera and Randol, December 2010. "American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat".

⁴ "Times Square bomber pleads guilty," Reuters, June 21, 2010, http://news.yahoo.com/s/nm/20100621/ts_nm/us_timesquare

⁵ "Remarks by Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism John Brennan at CSIS," May 26, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-assistant-president-homeland-security-and-counterterrorism-john-brennan-csi>

⁶ "Prince Naif urges global action against terrorism," *Arab News*, July 2, 2010

For Muslim-majority American allies, from Saudi Arabia to Indonesia, programs that challenge extremist interpretations of Islam employed for radical and violent aims are seen as central components of successful counterterrorism strategies. These allies actively seek to reclaim their faith from religiously-inspired extremists who are targeting not only the West but, also fellow Muslims. In so doing, they see no contradiction between defending their faith and targeting violent Islamism.

Ironically, the U.S. government is less comfortable embracing this approach. While the administration's National Security Strategy recognizes the threat of homegrown extremism, it remains focused on "efforts to prevent and deter attacks [at home] by identifying and interdicting threats, denying hostile actors the ability to operate within our borders, protecting the nation's critical infrastructure and key resources, and securing cyberspace." Lacking is a full-throated recognition of the degree to which ideology fuels violent extremism, especially as international borders become less relevant due to the internet and other technologies.

The fact is that addressing specific outbreaks of violent extremism will not prevent its virulent spread unless the underlying extremist ideology is exposed, unpacked, dissected and combated. Although al-Qaeda's leadership has to an extent been weakened and its global reach attenuated, the underlying ideology continues to spread and gain traction among vulnerable populations. Some argue, rather convincingly, that al-Qaeda has harmed itself more than it has the West by killing more Muslims than non-Muslims, targeting mosques, and offering no realistic alternative to the Western models of governance it rejects. Regardless, al-Qaeda's ideology is thriving and other, arguably smarter, adversaries continue to exploit the group's ideological package by tapping into growing unrest and parasitically manipulating local grievances. This phenomenon is further amplified by a ballooning youth bulge in Muslim-majority countries.

The administration's global engagement and public diplomacy approach may be effective in significant ways, but it has done demonstrably little to impact the spread and appeal of radical Islamist extremism. More sanguine feelings toward the United States have not translated in any real way into empowering mainstream voices at the forefront of the struggle with radical extremism. The decision to prioritize global grievances, such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, rather than working with Arab governments and their citizens to accelerate political and economic reforms that help to resolve local grievances, has eroded the confidence of potential U.S. partners in the region. Deemphasizing reform has convinced democracy activists in the region that the Obama administration is not serious about advancing human rights and democracy. The administration's slow-to-gel posture in response to events currently unfolding in Egypt only serves to reinforce the point.

A narrowly defined, traditional counterterrorism approach, coupled with a broad engagement policy, even if aggressively implemented, can only achieve so much. Such an approach hampers efforts to intervene early in the radicalization process, either domestically or abroad, to prevent individuals or sub-communities from becoming violent. After a person becomes violent, they have entered the domain of law enforcement or military action. This reactive policy combination does little to empower those in the trenches seeking to defend their communities from extremist subversion. In short, kinetic responses are important but not sufficient.

The primary challenge for the administration is complementing the new National Security Strategy by focusing on radical jihadi extremism and articulating a counterradicalization policy which confronts the problem through a whole of government approach, augmented by non-governmental and societal efforts. Government agencies currently involved in various aspects of the CVE mission do not note systemic failures so much as the complete lack of a system at all. Absent clear interagency directives instructing how to distribute resources and coordinate aspects of the mission, individual and broader agency efforts are improvised. As a result, an inconsistent and haphazard approach to dealing with the force underlying today's terrorist threat is all but guaranteed.

No standardized explanation or common trigger can account for every case of radicalization. Yet, it is clear that better integration of immigrant communities and a greater sense of social cohesion are essential to redressing local grievances, and can lower the susceptibility of these communities to radicalization. At the same time, it is necessary to challenge and defeat the extremist ideology being peddled by radicalizers: our ultimate adversary is not the individual bomber, but the radical ideology that propels him to carry out an act of terrorism.

Consider the fallout from the nearly successful Christmas Day bombing, which has focused almost exclusively on the wrong questions. While it is important to learn how the bomber and the bomb got on the plane, it would be far more instructive if we understood why Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab – a young, wealthy, Western-educated Nigerian – abandoned wealth, education, and opportunity to wage violent jihad. Or, what prompted Major Nidal Hassan, an Army doctor, to communicate and connect with known extremists, including Anwar al-Awlaki and ultimately commit an act of terrorism by massacring his fellow soldiers at Fort Hood? Or what triggered Faisal Shazad, a recently naturalized U.S. citizen who worked as a financial analyst in Bridgeport Connecticut, to attempt to cause mass casualties in a car bomb attack in Times Square last year?

The reasons the extremist narrative finds fertile soil in diverse Muslim communities across the globe are as varied as the societies themselves. Some respond to a radicalizer's message because they feel excluded from their societies, trapped in poverty or hopelessness by authoritarian regimes. Others living in liberal democratic Western nations, though well-off and well-educated, struggle with issues of belonging and identity; for them, the Islamist message resonates deeply. Radicalizers enjoy great success by connecting a recruit's local grievance to a radical global narrative that combines Islamist extremism with "clash of civilizations" rhetoric, pitting the monolithic West against the monolithic Muslim *ummah*. In nearly all cases, radicalizers suggest a person's identity can be – indeed must be – reduced solely to being "Muslim." And what it means to be Muslim, of course, is defined by the radicalizer. This has profound policy and programmatic implications, since emphasizing other aspects of a potential recruit's identity or constructing alternative narratives is critical to short-circuiting the radicalization process.

While avowedly violent Islamist groups present the most immediate threat, the ideology presented by ostensibly non-violent Islamist groups can also be problematic. A recently publicized September 2009 report from Canada's Integrated Threat Assessment Centre warns that some non-violent Islamist extremists seek to create self-segregated communities in order to fully implant an Islamist worldview

within their communities. The report, entitled “Islamist Extremists and the Promotion of a Parallel Society” notes that the threat is not limited to inherently violent Islamist narratives. “Even if the use of violence is not outwardly expressed, the creation of isolated communities can spawn groups that are exclusivist and potentially open to messages in which violence is advocated,” the report concludes.⁷ As noted in the April 2008 paper marking the launch of the Quilliam Foundation, an anti-extremism think tank founded by former members of the radical Islamist group, Hizb ut Tahrir, “there remains a core of Wahhabite-Islamist activists and groups who continue to advocate separatist, confrontational ideas that, followed to their logical conclusion, lead to violence. At the very least, the rhetoric of radicals provides the mood music to which suicide bombers dance.”⁸

In the United States, the threat of communal radicalization can be seen most acutely in Somali-American communities from Minneapolis to San Diego. Between 2007 and 2009, an estimated 20 young men left Minnesota to join al-Shabab, an al-Qaeda affiliated militia vying for control of Somalia. On November 16 a 24-year-old San Diego resident was charged with providing material support to al-Shabab; three others had previously been charged on November 2.⁹ Two American Al-Shabab recruits, Omar Hammami and Jihad Mostafa, have taken on increasing operational and leadership roles within the organization. Hammami in particular has become increasingly popular thanks to rap-themed recruitment videos urging young men to participate in jihad in Somalia. Recently the threat has extended beyond simple support for al-Shabab; in November the FBI arrested 19-year old Mohamed Osman Mohamud, a U.S. citizen of Somali origin who attempted to set off a car bomb at a Christmas tree lighting ceremony in Portland, Oregon.

While the Somali diaspora may be of specific and unique concern, a troubling trend also exists among Americans and other Westerners travelling overseas to support jihad or receive explosives and other terrorist training to plot attacks in the West. Though the precise scale of the foreign fighter problem is not well defined, the evidence suggests that a significant number of Western volunteers are drawn to hotbeds of jihadi conflict zones such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Caucasus, Somalia and Yemen.¹⁰

Unfortunately, despite the sharp rise in terrorist plots and cases of homegrown radicalization, specific policies and programs aimed squarely at countering the radical narrative remain few and far between. The Obama administration’s efforts to close Guantanamo, eliminate the use of enhanced interrogation techniques, and change the tone of U.S. engagement with Muslim communities worldwide have met with a generally positive response abroad. However, such efforts do little to address the proximate threat of violent extremism. Even the targeted killings of al-Qaeda leaders may, in the long run, only increase the threat by inspiring new recruits hungry for revenge.

⁷ Stewart Bell, “Islamist groups seek ‘parallel society’ in Canada: report,” *National Post*, November 13, 2010, <http://www.nationalpost.com/news/Islamist+groups+seek+parallel+society+Canada+report/3827175/story.html>.

⁸ Quilliam Foundation, “Pulling Together to Defeat Terror,” April 2008, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/images/stories/pdfs/pulling-together-to-defeat-terror.pdf>

⁹ Tony Perry, “Three San Diego residents charged with aiding Somali terror group,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 2010, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2010/11/three-residents-of-san-diego-charged-with-aiding-somali-terror-group.html>

¹⁰ Cilluffo, Cozzens and Ranstorp. “Foreign Fighters: Trends, Trajectories and Conflict Zones,” p. 9. HSPI/SNDC Report, September 2010, http://www.gwumc.edu/hspi/policy/report_foreignfighters501.pdf

The United States cannot simply kill its way out the problem; it must find ways to take on the extremist ideology directly. To date, however, official policy as articulated in the National Security Strategy limits U.S. efforts at “combating violent extremism.” But, combating violent extremism through community engagement and tactical counterterrorism efforts, though necessary, is not sufficient for creating an acceptable end-state in which Islamist ideologies and their associated violence are taboo within Muslim-majority nations. Even as law enforcement, military, and intelligence successes against al Qaeda grow, the ideological component, unless actively confronted, will continue to metastasize.

Elements of a cohesive national strategy could incorporate a range of approaches that have proven effective in other contexts. The power of negative imagery, as in a political campaign, could be harnessed to hurt our adversaries and further chip away at their appeal and credibility in the eyes of their peers, followers, and sympathizers. A sustained and systematic strategic communications effort aimed at exposing the hypocrisy of Islamists’ words versus their deeds could also knock them off balance, as could embarrassing their leadership by bringing to light their seamy connections to criminal enterprises and drug trafficking organizations. Brokering infighting within and between al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and the broader jihadi orbit in which they reside, will damage violent Islamists’ capability to propagate their message and organize operations both at home and abroad. But none of this will happen unless the will to do so is mustered—and it must be recognized both in official U.S. government circles as well as in American Muslim communities that the threat of radicalization is real. Locally administered programs are especially significant, as many of the solutions reside outside the US government and will require communities policing themselves. Unfortunately, some still have their heads stuck in the sand on this count.

Counterradicalization is an essential complement to counterterrorism. The latter we do relatively well, the former we barely do at all. The result: a group of middle class Muslim-Americans from Northern Virginia videotape a militant message, leave for jihad at the urging of a Taliban recruiter, and are arrested in the home of a known militant in Pakistan. “We are not terrorists,” one of them says as he enters a Pakistani courtroom. “We are jihadists, and jihad is not terrorism.”

All elements of national power should be used to counter this narrative and its myriad implications to debunk the notion that Muslims have a religious duty to commit acts of terror. There are no guarantees that if the United States had been fully engaged in this effort for the past ten years these same boys would not have boarded that flight. And while the Senate report concluded that the Fort Hood shooting “should have been prevented,” there are no guarantees that better policies within the military and FBI would have necessarily thwarted that attack either. However, unless we accelerate and expand our efforts, we can be assured that others will follow in their footsteps.