

## HSPI Commentary Series

### RADICALIZATION: MADE IN THE USA?

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Matthew Levitt

When officials announced the successful prevention of a plot in New York to bomb synagogues and down airplanes with rocket-propelled grenades, many reacted with shock at the prospect of locally radicalized violent extremists plotting attacks here at home. Indeed, policymakers, long focused on the radicalization problem facing our European allies, were slow to realize that domestic radicalization and terrorist recruitment is a problem here in the United States as well. While short of the acute radicalization and recruitment crisis facing many European countries, recent events from Minneapolis to Atlanta suggest the United States is not immune from similar phenomena on our side of the Atlantic.

Overall, Muslim-American communities have had a relatively positive integration experience—particularly in comparison to Europe. This is often attributed to the United States’ inclusive, immigrant-friendly environment, stringent and well-enforced anti-discrimination policies, and—most of all—the strong belief in an equal opportunity to climb the socio-economic ladder and achieve financial prosperity. In the United States communities are integrated into society without having to sacrifice their distinct cultural identities.

But recent months have seen troubling developments on this front. In October 2008, a Somali youth apparently radicalized and recruited in the Minneapolis area, participated in what the FBI believes is the first instance of an American suicide bomber anywhere. In Minneapolis, the FBI reports, “there has been an active and deliberate attempt to recruit individuals—all of who are young men, some only in their late teens—to travel to Somalia to fight or train on behalf of al-Shabaab.”<sup>1</sup> None of these recruits are believed to have been tasked to return home and conduct attacks in the U.S., but the FBI remains concerned about such a possibility. Lashkar-e-Taibah, the group behind the Mumbai attacks, maintains

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Mudd, Statement before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, March 11, 2009. <http://www.fbi.gov/congress/congress09/mudd031109.htm>

“facilitation, procurement, fundraising, and recruitment activities worldwide, including in the United States.”<sup>2</sup>

The U.S. has uncovered terrorist cells living and operating in the U.S. apparently planning to conduct attacks here. Just last month the leader of one such cell, dubbed the Jam’iyyat Ul-Islam Is-Saheeh, was sentenced to 16 years in federal prison for plotting to attack Jewish and Israeli synagogues in California in 2005. The cell, comprised of Muslim converts who met in prison, highlighted the problem of radicalization in U.S. prisons. In 2007, a potential plot was disrupted in which Atlanta college students had surveilled possible targets in Washington, DC. According to the FBI, these students were connected virtually to a global network run by British webmaster Younis Tsouli, who facilitated Internet communication with prospective cells in Sweden, Bosnia, and Canada, among other locations. Indeed, one reason the U.S. is not immune to extremist radicalization is the transnational reach of extremist media outlets, violent propaganda on Internet, and virtual connectivity to extremists overseas.

Clearly, while the scope of the radicalization challenge in the U.S. is significantly smaller than that facing many European countries, the U.S. cannot afford to ignore the radicalization of American youth on the home front. Taking steps now to ensure that the broadly positive situation here does not deteriorate further is critical.

First, the U.S. should not reinvent the wheel. America should pay close attention to existing counterradicalization programs in Europe, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. In particular, U.S. officials should take a page from their British colleagues, and ensure that all relevant government agencies are engaged on these issues and fully understand the U.S. strategy. At the very least, the U.S. should focus on ensuring that its agencies avoid mistakes that will poison community relations and possibly heighten the radicalization threat. Most importantly, U.S. government outreach should be as broad as possible—not allowing one group or organization to monopolize representation of these tremendously diverse communities.

The U.S. should work with local communities to develop means of engagement at the local level beyond just those provided to date by law enforcement to deal with radicalization in these communities. The City of Amsterdam’s “Information House” is a good model. In the U.S., law enforcement agencies have long reached out to Muslim and Arab communities. But these communities must see the government for more than its law enforcement arms. It is therefore critical that that engagement is broadened to include service providing entities, such as the Department of Health and Human Services.

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<sup>2</sup> James W. McJunkin, Statement Before the House Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Transportation Security and Infrastructure Protection, March 11, 2009.  
<http://www.fbi.gov/congress/congress09/mcj031109.htm>



The vast majority of the Muslim American population is well integrated and rejects violent ideologies. Unfortunately, the U.S. government has not always effectively empowered these communities to provide an alternative to the extremist narrative. It should empower and leverage mainstream Muslim voices in this effort, making perfectly clear that it does not consider Islam itself a danger, but only the distorted version of Islam perpetrated by radical extremists. And it should proactively focus on ensuring that the radical extremists' global narrative does not resonate with individuals' day-to-day lives by addressing local grievances, not only global ones. We dare not wait to confront this radical ideology until the FBI informs that a second American has carried out a suicide bombing, possibly here at home.

*Dr. Matthew Levitt is a senior fellow at HSPI and The Washington Institute and directs the Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. He was a co-convenor and co-drafter, together with Washington Institute senior fellows J. Scott Carpenter and Michael Jacobson, of the blue-ribbon, bi-partisan task force report [Rewriting the Narrative: An Integrated Strategy for Counterradicalization](#).*

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