

Enemies Among Us: Domestic Radicalization after September 11

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There has recently been a sharp uptick in reports of Americans gravitating toward and internalizing the violent, extremist interpretations of Islam espoused by al Qaeda and other Islamic extremist groups. This spike in domestic radicalization cases has produced considerable concern within the law enforcement and intelligence communities, and within the American public at large, that the United States could see a greater incidence of homegrown Islamic terrorism.¹

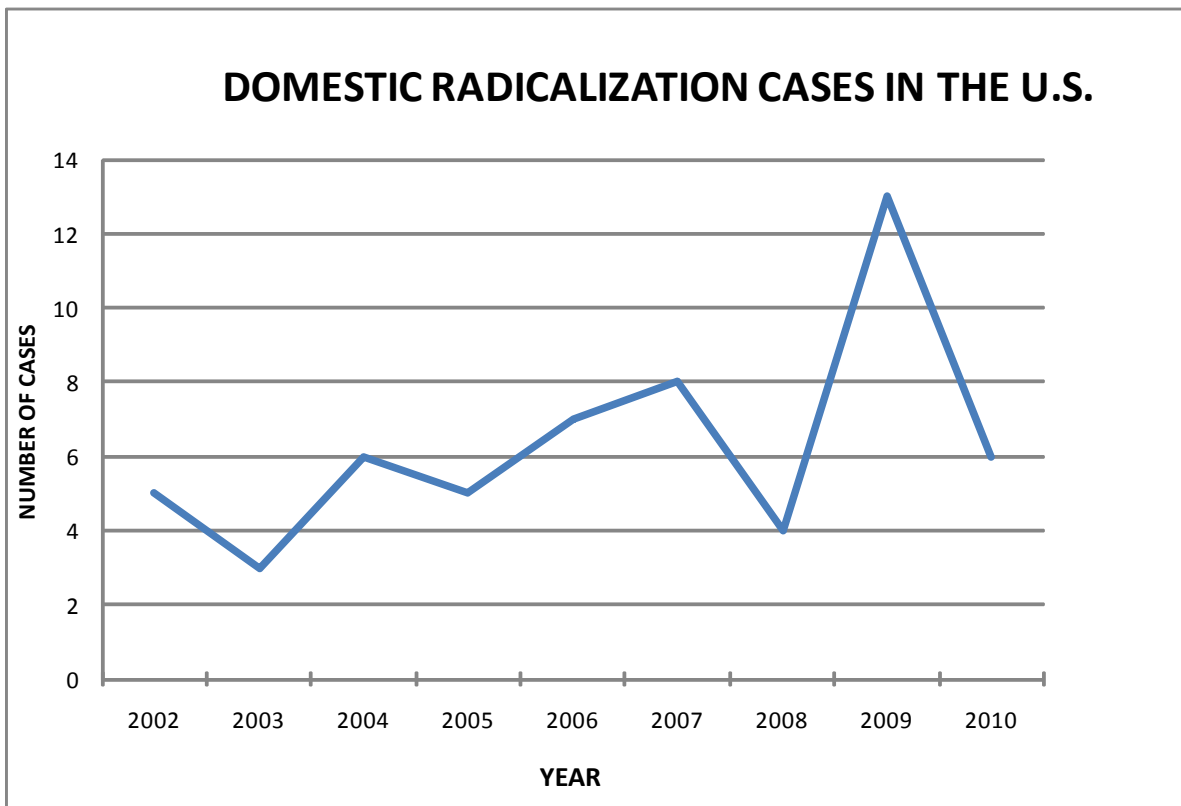
Spurred by recent cases, U.S. counterterrorism authorities have redoubled their efforts to track, arrest, and prosecute individuals within the United States thought to be planning or executing attacks on the U.S. homeland. The cases have also led to an increased focus on the mechanisms of the radicalization process—how, why, and under what circumstances individuals move from the pre-radicalization or “normal” phase into one in which they conduct terrorist attacks motivated by extremist ideology.

Despite being the subject of intense interest in law enforcement, intelligence, and policymaking circles, the domestic radicalization phenomenon in the U.S. context remains largely misunderstood. This lack of understanding does not exist for want of effort; several detailed and comprehensive reports have used modeling, small-sample case comparisons, and other methods in earnest attempts to map the path to radicalization and understand what factors underlie some radicalized individuals’ decisions to conduct terrorist attacks.²

This report began in a similar vein, examining 132 cases of domestic radicalization in the U.S. since September 11, 2001, in an effort to determine which demographic and circumstantial factors, if any, could help to explain how and why individuals are becoming radicalized in the United States. The report came to the following conclusions:

- Extremist messaging that capitalizes on feelings of disaffection and alienation has resonated with more Americans in recent years.

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Source: Brian Michael Jenkins, “Would-be Warriors: Incidents of Jihadist Terrorist Radicalization in the United States Since September 11, 2001,” (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation), 2010. The 6 cases, to date, for 2010 are drawn from media reports.

- There is no clear, identifiable demographic profile by which to determine who is most vulnerable to extremist ideology.
- There is no clear means by which to determine what combination of events, influences, or “triggers” are most likely to lead to radicalization or homegrown terrorist violence.

These findings suggest that the homegrown terrorist threat is dynamic, evolving, and increasingly difficult to pre-empt and counter. More importantly, however, they demonstrate that a shift in approach is needed to meet and surmount these evolving threats with a more nuanced, balanced, and comprehensive strategy than has been employed to date.

In keeping with that fact, the report makes the following recommendations:

- We must recognize that the threat we face is immensely complex and that there is no “silver bullet” with which to defeat domestic radicalization or homegrown terrorism.
- We must resist over-reliance on tactical approaches and focus on developing long-term strategies to address the perceptions of exclusion and alienation on which extremism feeds.
- Recognizing that we cannot anticipate or prevent every individual move toward radicalization, we must devise strategies to manage and minimize risk.

Findings

Extremist messaging that capitalizes on feelings of disaffection and alienation has resonated with more Americans in recent years.

Despite being a fairly constant feature of the domestic terrorism landscape since 2001, the number of individuals in the United States identified as having been “radicalized” has always been, and remains, relatively small.³ It is important to note, however, that there has recently been a significant increase in the number of reported U.S. radicalization cases compared to prior years; 2009 saw 13 such cases, almost as many as in the previous three years combined. Though the mechanisms driving this phenomenon are varied and complex, increases in the number and variety of cases in which Americans are internalizing extremist ideology suggest that the jihadist message is resonating more widely than ever before.

Some have identified the Internet as a major driver and accelerator of this phenomenon.⁴ Increasingly since 9/11, the Internet and other forms of modern media have become some of the most effective vehicles through which extremist groups spread their ideology. Modern media provides them with the means by which to make the jihadist message slick, appealing, and easily accessible to millions.⁵ These groups have focused not only on spreading ideology for passive consumption, they also seek to use technology as a potent force multiplier, extending their reach and destructive capability by encouraging individuals living in the United States to conduct attacks in their home communities and abroad.⁶

There is no clearly identifiable demographic profile for domestic radicals.

Despite law enforcement and intelligence officials’ best efforts to determine which individuals are most vulnerable to becoming radicalized, there is no clear, workable demographic profile that can predict who will internalize extremist ideology.

Looking at U.S. radicalization cases across a number of demographic variables, including sex, age, race, national origin, economic status, criminal background and mental health status, a few basic trends did emerge. Radicalized individuals in the majority of cases, for example, were male, Muslim U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents. A relatively small number of domestic radicals had significant criminal backgrounds or histories of psychological disorders compared to those who did not. Most of the radicals were from working or middle-class backgrounds; not many were poverty-stricken or financially destitute.

Looking beyond these basic patterns, however, it becomes quickly apparent that for the majority of variables upon which a workable homegrown terrorist profile might be based, there is a degree of variation that renders generalizations nearly impossible to make. For example, though indicted homegrown radicals’ average and median ages hovered in the late 20s and early 30s, respectively, some cases involved individuals who were well into their 40s, 50s, and in at least two cases, 60s.⁷ Similarly,

though some of the radicalized individuals were first or second generation children of immigrants from Middle Eastern countries, Somalia, or South Asia, domestic radicalization cases have also included several African- and Caucasian- Americans, and multiple individuals of East European descent.

The picture that emerges suggests that though there have been some general demographic trends with respect to individuals who have turned toward Islamic radicalism or violence, a template or profile based on demographic generalizations is difficult, if not impossible, to make.

There is no one clear or direct path to radicalization or homegrown terrorism.

From “Normal” to Radical

If it is difficult to establish a clear demographic profile for homegrown terrorists in the United States, it is even more difficult to develop a template outlining the most common path from a “normal” life to that of a committed extremist ready and willing to commit terrorist acts. As with demographic indicators, the events, circumstances and life choices thought to correlate with, presage, or accelerate the movement toward radicalization⁸ were present in a number of the cases examined. However, those factors did not array themselves in a pattern suggestive of a significant, observable trend.

In some of the cases for which data was available, family members and friends, counterterrorism authorities, or the radicalized individuals themselves cited specific triggering factors—such as personal trauma, specific political events, policies undertaken by the U.S. or its allies, conversion to Islam or travel to Islamic countries for spiritual awakening, and direct or virtual contact with extremist figures or terrorist recruiters—as having been pivotal factors motivating domestic radicals to explore extremist ideology or accelerants propelling them toward conducting attacks.

For others, however, the path to radicalization was far less clear and direct. Some of the homegrown radicals lacked direction and meaning in their lives and, seeking community and emotional fulfillment through a new religious, social, or political identity, eventually found it in radical Islam.⁹ Others were simply angry, depressed, or psychologically imbalanced and through exposure to radical Islam found a vehicle through which to purge their personal demons.¹⁰ Some were introduced to radical Islam through the Internet, others at mosques with an extremist bent,¹¹ some through friends,¹² others through recruiters.¹³ Some were radicalized in prison,¹⁴ others in their parents’ basements.¹⁵

This high variance in motivations and pathways suggests that the paths to radicalism are as numerous and varied as the cases themselves, providing little in the way of clear implications on which law enforcement or intelligence agencies can build workable profiles, templates, or models.

From Radical to Terrorist

Of the 132 known domestic radicalization cases, 25 involved plans to carry out attacks within the United States.¹⁶ In some of those cases, the paths to violence were fairly clear. Faisal Shahzad, for example, who attempted to bomb New York City's Times Square in early 2010, had been becoming progressively more radicalized in the years leading up his attempted attack. He only decided to act, however, after U.S. Predator drone strikes near his grandparents' home and the Pakistani military's storming of the Red Mosque in Pakistan convinced him that action was required to defend Pashtuns from what he perceived to be deliberate violence against Muslim civilians.¹⁷ For Najibullah Zazi, the naturalized Afghan immigrant who planned to bomb the New York City Subway system in late 2009, the radicalization process was also driven, at least in part, by anger over civilian casualties generated by U.S. Predator drone strikes in Pakistan. Sometime after Zazi's arrest, however, investigators discovered that the path from radicalization to violence was facilitated in substantial part by al Qaeda operatives who directly recruited him to conduct attacks in the United States.¹⁸

Though there were some cases in which the path to violence seemed relatively clear, there were also a number of cases on the opposite end of the spectrum; in some of the cases it was unclear what factors or events led radicalized individuals to engage in violence. In others, factors that helped to precipitate violence in other cases were present, but the move toward violence nonetheless never occurred. The Lackawanna Six case, in which six young men of Yemeni descent traveled to Afghanistan from Lackawanna, New York, to train with al Qaeda shortly before 9/11, is a pertinent example. Though the Lackawanna group was committed enough to extremist ideology to travel to Afghanistan and meet with top al Qaeda figures including Osama bin Laden, at some point during their journey they determined that their plan to conduct jihad was ill-conceived and decided to return to their suburban lives in the United States rather than joining radical groups or conducting attacks. Though it is impossible to tell what would have happened had they not been arrested shortly after their return, to date there is no evidence that the Lackawanna group, despite clearly having made the move toward radicalization, made any attempts to conduct attacks in the United States or abroad after their trip to Afghanistan.¹⁹

What these and other cases like them demonstrate is that it is very difficult to map with any degree of clarity or consistency who is most likely to take the step from radicalization to violence, and when and why an individual may do so. It also shows that the road between radicalization and violence runs two ways. Though some, like Faisal Shahzad, underwent identifiable triggering events that pushed them down the path to violence, others who have been radicalized in much the same manner never make that critical final step. Though there have been several theories and models put forward suggesting a relatively predictable stage-based pattern for radicalization and violence, and accompanying indicators to signal movement through those stages,²⁰ it remains fairly clear that the number and variety of paths toward and away from violence are as diverse as those leading toward radicalization itself.

Key Considerations for Policy

Extremism capitalizes and thrives on perceptions of alienation and exclusion.

Alienation and Radicalism: Historical Context

Clearly, it has been difficult to identify or predict what factors motivate individuals to radicalize or commit acts of violence. Some authors have noted, however, that dispossession—perception on the part of a group that it is systematically excluded, discriminated against, or disadvantaged with respect to some meaningful aspect of social, economic, or political life to which it feels entitled—has been a key driver of, and a necessary pre-condition for, movements toward radicalism in the West, particularly in Western Europe.²¹

Though the tendency has been to view radicalism in the United States as a relatively new and recent phenomenon, it is useful to consider that violent extremism born of perceived or real alienation has in fact been a recurring theme throughout modern American history. At various points during the 20th Century, from the Black Panther movement in the 1960s, to the Weather Underground in the 1970s, to right-wing militia groups of the 1990s, to radical Jewish militant organizations such as the Jewish Defense League in the late 20th and early 21st Centuries, a variety of groups throughout U.S. history have turned to extremist violence in response to what they perceived as injustices directed against them by an ostensibly hostile ruling majority.

The black activist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, best exemplified by the activities of the Black Panther Party, serve as particularly pertinent examples of this phenomenon. In the 1950s and 1960s, the successes achieved in the civil rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. raised expectations within the black American community that the racism, exclusion, and other injustices of the past would give way to African-Americans being fully incorporated into American society and an opportunity to take advantage of the “American Dream” of which black citizens had been previously denied. When some of the deprivations and injustices of the pre-civil rights era persisted even after desegregation and the introduction of significant government reforms, radicalism emerged within some sectors of the black American community, in some cases manifesting itself as targeted political violence. The Black Panther Party, channeled feelings of dispossession, anger, and exclusion into a radical, sometimes violent, political and social movement designed to end what was perceived as deliberate oppression, economic and political disenfranchisement, and racism toward black Americans by the ruling white majority.

An important point to consider when assessing the historical link between alienation and radicalization is the central role that perception plays in the alienation process. The discrimination or forced alienation that may prompt an individual or group to gravitate toward radicalism, or the existence of an identifiable in-group or out-group dynamic, can act as potent motivators *whether real or perceived*. In considering

which groups are more likely to become radicalized, when, and why, it is critical to consider that these perceptions are not necessarily limited to commonly accepted social boundaries and definitions, they are a function of the circumstances that members of the ostensibly oppressed minority perceive to exist.

A more recent historical example illustrating this phenomenon can be found in the circumstances surrounding the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, in which Timothy McVeigh bombed the federal building in that city. Though his being a white American male might ostensibly exempt him from self-identifying as part of an oppressed or marginalized minority, McVeigh's attack was based in part on his belief that the Federal Government was oppressing a small, defiant group of white American survivalists by restricting their right to bear arms. McVeigh believed that he was acting in retaliation for injustices inflicted upon members of this minority group—particularly those killed in the sieges at Waco, Texas and Ruby Ridge—who, despite their simple yearning to be left to live their lives as they saw fit, had been branded dangerous outsiders and persecuted by the United States government. McVeigh, like some members of extreme right-wing militia groups that remain in the United States, saw the violent stand-offs at Waco and Ruby Ridge as clear evidence that their fears were justified, that acceptance and co-existence were impossible, and that violent action was necessary to change a pattern of oppression that could no longer be endured.²²

The key feature to note across these different historical cases is that each of these groups shared a common dispossession narrative. They experienced feelings of “otherness” that caused group members to perceive themselves as part of an oppressed minority struggling against a society that actively marginalized and rejected them. Historically, these groups' anger and resentment has manifested itself in response to the strongly-held belief that the label of “other” or “outsider” does not exist naturally, but has instead been forced upon them by the society into which they have often attempted, unsuccessfully, to integrate.

At best, these groups have perceived the “outsider” label as an attempt to keep minority groups at arm's length to create separation and prevent full assimilation. At worst, they have perceived that labeling process as a vehicle of deliberate dehumanization and oppression that must be met with violent action. Historically, for many of the groups that perceived themselves as being marginalized and ostracized by the ruling majority, integration into the larger society became viewed over time as increasingly impossible and, ultimately, undesirable. As members of the group became increasingly alienated from the societies in which they found themselves, they begin to take the “otherness” label, perceived to be forced upon them, to heart. Instead of seeing themselves as part of mainstream society and as therefore having a stake in it, they began to view themselves as separate and distinct from that surrounding society, or in some cases, above or beyond it.

This alienation-separation phenomenon has facilitated the radicalization process in a number of different capacities:

- Alienation and a sense of “otherness” imposed by the society in which the groups lived, worked, or worshiped helped to form and strengthen in-group identity bonds that some authors have identified as having been necessary (but not sufficient) pre-conditions for radicalization.
- Alienation from mainstream society decreased these groups’ stake in and connection to it. This process made it easier for members of those groups to gravitate toward, internalize, and act upon ideology promoting violence against members of the societies to which they felt little affiliation or connection.
- Alienation reinforced rhetorical arguments made by other radical ideologues suggesting that members of the in-group were under attack. The more persistent and overt the rejection by members of the host society or the perceived ruling majority, the more plausible and compelling the extremist narrative became.

Alienation and Radicalism: The Current Context

The point that perceived exclusion and alienation have historically been at the center of the radicalization process is an important one, particularly when considering the recent trend toward increased jihadist radicalization in the United States.

As in the past, development of a persecuted in-group narrative has recently been a key element driving the move toward jihadist radicalization in the West. In examining the rise of jihadist radicalization in Western Europe, some analysts have traced recent radicalization trends to the creation and popularization of what some have termed the “fundamentalist” or “neo-umma,” an imagined global community that binds all Muslims, irrespective of nationality or culture, in an egalitarian brotherhood of shared victimization, oppression, persecution, and humiliation suffered at the hands the West.²³

The neo-umma concept has had a powerful effect on disaffected individuals and groups within some Muslim communities in Western Europe. Feeling marginalized, stigmatized, and excluded from a mainstream society viewed as perennially Islamophobic and racist, some of these individuals are rejecting their European identities and increasingly identifying with the neo-umma victimization narrative. As their connection and stake in the societies viewed as rejecting them gives way to a new global identity exclusive of citizenship or national allegiance, spilling the blood of their fellow citizens in defense of that community becomes a justifiable, and even worthy goal.²⁴

Until relatively recently, the general perception has been that America’s Muslims, unlike many in some parts of Western Europe, are well integrated into America’s pluralistic and religiously tolerant society and would not fit the profile of an alienated minority, resentful of their rejection from mainstream American life. The perception has also been that despite perhaps being disquieted or angry about U.S. foreign or domestic policies perceived as profiling, discriminating against, or targeting Muslims, America’s Muslim community remained highly assimilated and generally patriotic. It seemed that most American Muslims, despite in some cases having misgivings about particular political stances and policies, still saw themselves as having a stake in America and identified themselves as being part of it.²⁵

For the overwhelming majority of Muslims in the United States, this seems still to be true. However, recent reports of first and second generation Muslim-Americans and native-born American Muslim converts becoming radicalized or planning attacks against the United States despite appearing relatively seamlessly integrated into the American mainstream have highlighted the fact that feelings of alienation, though not necessarily widespread, may be on the rise.²⁶

Our public communications efforts do not effectively undercut drivers of frustration, exclusion and alienation and may in fact be exacerbating them.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to identify what specific factors are prompting some Americans to become alienated from mainstream society and to identify with extremist ideology grounded in the “neo-umma” victimization narrative. What the recent increase in radicalization cases may suggest, however, is that the battle of perceptions is an area in which extremist figures are gaining ground and, more importantly, one in which the United States is rapidly losing it.

Targeted efforts by radical clerics and propagandists—especially by media-savvy, Western-born extremist figures such as the al Qaeda-affiliated cleric Anwar al-Awlaki—have likely been a factor driving this phenomenon as have the proliferation of media vehicles through which extremists can spread their religious and political ideology. It is unlikely, however, that exposure alone fully accounts for the extremist message’s increasing resonance; the difficulty is not only that extremists are succeeding in promoting their message, it is that we are failing to validate and effectively promote our own.

Though the factors underlying this failure are varied and complex, two stand out as being particularly critical. First, it is becoming increasingly clear that our failure to effectively convey our narrative is due, at least in part, to the significant contradictions that are perceived to exist within the narrative itself. In many respects we are attempting to promote a message that growing domestic anti-Muslim sentiment and U.S. long-term strategic foreign policy choices may appear to actively contradict. This apparent contradiction significantly reduces the traction and resonance of our narrative in much of the Muslim world and may ultimately have the same effect on the domestic level. Second, the manner and means by which we employ our public diplomacy efforts—as policy promotion and legitimization initiatives rather than opportunities to generate meaningful strategic discussions—undercut our efforts to minimize and mitigate the alienation process that fuels radicalization at home and abroad.

Contradictions in our public diplomacy and messaging could prove a source of disillusionment and frustration, and could potentially serve as a driver of the alienation-radicalization process.

Many in the Muslim world, and in the Arab world in particular, have long held a generally unfavorable view of the United States and U.S. foreign policy.²⁷ As commentators have noted in a variety of different fora,²⁸ however, in recent years increased U.S. military and intelligence involvement the Arab and Muslim world—and perceptions that the United States callously disregards the safety of Muslims civilians injured, killed, and displaced incident to those operations—have exacerbated this problem.

Negative perceptions of those operations have substantially undermined the credibility of the U.S. narrative asserting that the United States is engaged in a targeted, discriminating, and defensive war with violent extremism rather than with ordinary Muslims or Islam itself.

American political leaders have encountered many of the same obstacles on the domestic front. U.S. policymakers have made pointed efforts to emphasize that Americans' qualms are not with ordinary Muslims, who are welcomed and respected as part of America's multi-cultural society, but with extremists who seek to use Islam to justify violence against civilians.²⁹ Despite those efforts, however, growing and increasingly overt anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States, some of which explicitly associates Islam and Muslims with negative characteristics including intolerance, extremism and violence, have caused some to question whether American society is as tolerant and accepting as publicly claimed.³⁰

This widening credibility gap has significant implications for the alienation and radicalization processes helping to drive the potential trend toward radicalism in the United States. In addition to distorting perceptions of controversial U.S. foreign policy initiatives to incite others to violence, extremist figures also capitalize on the perception that the United States engages in deliberate obfuscation through its contradictory rhetoric. Extremist figures use that perception to drive a wedge between American Muslims and the societies in which they live, claiming that though America expresses its desire to accept and include Muslims domestically and to peacefully co-exist with Muslims internationally, its deeds rarely match its words.³¹ This allows extremists to more effectively promote the neo-umma narrative, suggesting that oppression against Muslims in the U.S. and abroad are substantively indistinguishable, that both groups are being rhetorically placated while being excluded and oppressed.

In this sense our increasingly fervent attempts to promote a narrative espousing our desire to develop policies to build bridges to Muslims at home and abroad³² might in fact be fuelling the extremist message that they are trying to undercut; we expose ourselves to criticism and scapegoating by promising what our current strategic priorities and domestic attitudes make us unlikely to deliver. As our military and intelligence engagements in the Muslim world increase in number and intensity, and it becomes progressively clearer that a significant sector of the American public does in fact harbor demonstrable suspicion of and antipathy toward Muslims,³³ American Muslims could perceive the tolerance, understanding, and military restraint explicitly highlighted and promised in our counter-radicalization narrative as rhetorically high-minded, but ultimately empty. Combined with an increased identification with Muslims perceived to be suffering worldwide, this could lead to an increased sense of frustration, disillusionment, and disconnection within American Muslim communities and potentially make more Americans more susceptible to the ideology our narrative is trying to undermine.

We have largely used public diplomacy and messaging as tools for policy legitimization rather than to stimulate meaningful strategy discussion on causes of and solutions to the radicalization problem.

How we construct our counterterrorism narrative, and the degree to which it is perceived to reflect realities on the domestic and international level, are critical factors to consider when designing a strategy to combat domestic radicalization and homegrown terrorism. Equally important, however, is recognizing that narratives and public diplomacy can be used to best effect not primarily as instruments of policy legitimization, but as tools for designing strategic approaches to minimizing the drivers of alienation and radicalism in the United States.

Over the course of the past several years, it has become progressively clearer that our efforts to counteract the extremist narrative have been substantially undercut by a lack of meaningful national dialogue about the perceptions—and the realities—underlying the disaffection-radicalization phenomenon and its connection to acts of extremist violence.

In the years since 9/11, we have focused considerable effort on identifying, tracking, capturing, and prosecuting radicals, on decrying the use of Islam to justify extremist violence, on defending our own enduring strategic foreign policy initiatives in the Middle East and Muslim world. We have done little, however, to examine the extent to which our own perceptions, beliefs, words, and actions have the potential to both fuel the flames of extremist rhetoric or to choke them off and extinguish them entirely. This lack of critical reflection and discussion perpetuates the perception that public diplomacy is primarily a tool to deflect criticism and blame rather than to collect and process the many viewpoints, perspectives, and ideas that go into properly mapping critical security threats and devising comprehensive strategies to effectively address them.

Strategic Discussion and the Park 51 Project.

This need for strategic discussion has been most recently and vividly reflected in the events surrounding the Park 51 building project, which involves a plan to build a mosque and Muslim community center two blocks from the site of the 9/11 attacks in lower Manhattan. The vitriolic exchanges and debates that have taken place regarding the placement of the mosque, its supporters and opponents, and its potential effect on attitudes of Muslim and non-Muslims in the United States and abroad have vaulted the issue to the forefront of the public discourse in the U.S. and around the world. Several anti-Muslim hate crimes committed during the ensuing debate and inflammatory public statements by prominent American political figures linking the Park 51 project to Islamic extremists and Nazism³⁴ raised blood-levels the world over and brought the issue further into the spotlight.

The controversy surrounding the planned mosque building site reached a fever pitch in the days surrounding the 9/11 anniversary, the date upon which the pastor of a small church in Gainesville, Florida, planned to make good on a promise made earlier in the year to lead a national “Burn a Koran Day,” in which members of his congregation would burn copies of the Koran to “take a stand against

Islam” and to remember the victims of the 9/11 attacks.³⁵ The pastor’s refusal to cancel the Koran burning event, even under considerable public pressure, prompted the commander of U.S. military forces in Afghanistan Gen. David Petraeus, President Barack Obama, and several Muslim heads of state to publicly condemn the planned event on a variety of valid grounds including that it endangered U.S. servicemen, inflamed anti-U.S. sentiment, undermined principles of religious tolerance, and fueled al Qaeda’s anti-American narrative.³⁶ Though the Florida pastor, Terry Jones, ultimately canceled the Koran burning event after coming under pressure from these and other sources, the pastor’s statements and actions elicited intense reactions worldwide, including anti-American protests in front of the U.S. embassy in the Afghan capital that resulted in the shooting death of two Afghan civilians by Afghan security forces.³⁷

The often bitter, rancorous, and highly publicized reactions that the Park 51 Project and the discussion surrounding it have elicited in recent months have prompted some to suggest that these intense, emotional debates are likely to have an overall negative effect on counter radicalization efforts and progress in U.S. counterterrorism in general. In the official sphere, much of this discourse has focused on how specific provocative acts might affect perceptions, attitudes, and actions at home and in Muslim countries where the U.S. has a significant military or intelligence presence and endanger U.S. troops and interests in those areas. Others in the public arena have focused on the potential for backlash domestically, suggesting that the reactions and statements that have come out of the Park 51 and Koran burning discussions have the potential to alienate Muslims not only internationally, but also in the United States. Some of these commentators have suggested that by directly exposing and publicizing Islamophobic sentiment within the United States, fallout from the Park 51 debate could fuel the alienation process further and undermine efforts to counter extremism far into the future.³⁸

These concerns are important to consider. It is critical to note, however, that more than simply inspiring anger and inflammatory demonstrations, public exchanges surrounding the Park 51 Project have also done much to stimulate important debate and discussion regarding Americans’ view of Muslims, Muslims’ perception of their place in American society, and the intersection between terrorism, religion, public attitudes, and politics in the post-9/11 era.³⁹ Though events have exposed tensions that could exacerbate divisions in the short run, it is important to recognize that discussing these issues should not be primarily viewed as a source of the problem, but as a starting point for a viable long-term solution.

The tendency may be to cast recent controversies surrounding the Park 51 project as brief, uncomfortable aberrations to be quickly stifled or purposefully forgotten for the sake of inter-communal harmony, political reconciliation, or a return to what is perceived to be the “normal” state of affairs. This sort of willful disavowal will not, however, solve the domestic radicalization problem or even begin the process of constructively addressing it. Devising a truly comprehensive strategy to undercut the drivers of radicalization over the long term requires not that debate and self-examination recede into the background, but that we build and develop these processes to take discussion of causes and solutions to the radicalization challenge much further.

Recommendations

We must acknowledge that the threat we face is immensely complex and that there is no “silver bullet” with which to defeat domestic radicalization or homegrown terrorism.

One of the most important things to consider when assessing the recent increase in domestic radicalization cases is that there is much about this issue that we do not understand. Like the individuals involved in the wide array of cases that have come to light since 9/11, the internal mechanisms and drivers of the radicalization process are intricate and inherently complex. Though there is often a tendency to reduce important strategic issues to relatively simplistic terms or to use them to advocate particular policies ostensibly designed to resolve these issues in a single decisive stroke, the reality is that there is likely no “silver bullet” to the domestic radicalization challenge. Approaching this and other emerging security challenges without remaining cognizant of that fact would likely prove both analytically irresponsible and strategically counterproductive.

Though speculative conclusions about the sources of the radicalization problem and solutions to address it continue to proliferate, there have been some official acknowledgements from law enforcement and intelligence authorities that the domestic radicalization threat is complex and multifaceted, and that there are no easy answers.⁴⁰ This is heartening as it suggests that a measured and realistic approach to assessing the U.S. radicalization phenomenon is understood in some sectors to be a critical part of developing a framework for addressing it. It is important that we continue to take this responsible approach; we must continually re-assess our assumptions about what we “know” and resist pressures to prematurely propose policy solutions to a complicated phenomenon that we are only beginning to understand.

We must resist over-reliance on tactical approaches and focus on developing long-term strategies to address the perceptions of exclusion and alienation on which extremism feeds.

A wide range of individuals across a number of different demographics have proven susceptible to extremist ideologies, and those individuals’ paths to radicalization are often complex, circuitous, and varied. Accordingly, approaches that emphasize the use of profiles or templates to determine which individuals are most likely to conduct attacks is an approach that will likely prove increasingly limited in value.

Our current efforts, heavily focused on enhancing law enforcement agencies’ ability to identify, track, arrest, and prosecute radicalized individuals planning to conduct or incite attacks in the U.S. or abroad, are obviously critically important to keeping America safe. It is important to recognize, however, that these efforts reflect a largely tactical approach to domestic counterterrorism and cannot substitute for a comprehensive strategy for understanding and countering the radicalization threat.

Developing a strategic focus requires moving beyond the tactical—beyond the level of templates, profiles, informants, and arrests—to look for ways not only to understand who is internalizing the jihadist message and under what circumstances they are likely to act on it, but also how to reduce that message’s resonance and impact over the long term.

Recognizing that we cannot anticipate or prevent every individual move toward radicalization, we must devise strategies to manage and minimize risk.

The move toward radicalization is a process that is difficult if not impossible to observe, anticipate, pre-empt or predict. We must therefore acknowledge that despite ardent and necessary efforts by law enforcement and intelligence authorities to track radicalization trends and to thwart homegrown terrorist attacks, stopping each individual move toward radicalization is an unrealistic and ultimately unattainable goal. In light of this consideration, U.S. strategies to counter the threat posed by domestic radicalization and homegrown terrorism should not hinge on successfully stopping every individual instance of radicalization, but on trying to minimize and manage risk at the macro level.

This process will require frankly considering how and to what extent the deep-seated perceptions and attitudes—among Muslims and non-Muslims alike—can help to fuel the alienation cycle that has helped to make a small but increasing number of Americans more susceptible to extremist ideology. This type of discussion is critical not only to understanding how the alienation and radicalization processes take root in the United States, but also to exploring how the alienation process, once identified and understood, can be effectively reversed.

Though identifying sources of alienation is a critical part of minimizing and managing the risk of radicalization and terrorist violence, it is important to note that developing strategies to address the domestic radicalization threat cannot and should not become an exercise in perpetual self-blame or require sacrificing our vital strategic goals to avoid feeding into violent extremist narratives. The risk management process should instead involve engaging in consistent, clear-eyed realization that our actions and choices are not undertaken in a vacuum: they can be critical factors helping to contribute to the root-level drivers of domestic radicalization or helping to provide a bulwark against them.

Developing a workable risk management strategy must therefore be predicated on a thoughtful and measured assessment of the strategic costs and benefits in our policy choices, recognizing that while it is impossible to prevent all Americans from internalizing extremist ideology, a critical and strategic-minded approach will be vital to minimizing the domestic radicalization threat in the long term. Greater understanding can give us the clarity of vision to effectively mobilize national resources, both tangible and intangible, to proactively focus and channel our collective desire to reduce violent extremism to a state of marginal irrelevance, and to help to ensure America’s security in the years ahead.

Endnotes

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