



MAJOR NIDAL HASAN AND THE FT. HOOD TRAGEDY: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S. ARMED FORCES

By Clint Watts

Clint Watts is a Principal Consultant with PA Consulting Group providing customized research, consulting and training solutions to military, law enforcement and homeland security clients. Prior to joining PA Consulting, Clint served as a U.S. Army Officer, FBI Special Agent and Executive Officer of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. The views expressed in this article reflect solely the opinions of the author and do not represent the views of any government, corporation or organization.

INTRODUCTION

Major Nidal Hasan's killing of his fellow soldiers at Ft. Hood, Texas undermines the common trust binding America's all-volunteer, multi-ethnic military force. Hasan's violence forces all service personnel to take an introspective look at their organization and persistently assess the possibility of extremists in their ranks. After Hasan's attack, many questioned the U.S. military's ability to recruit, train and retain Muslim military members without exposing service members to violent extremism. Unfortunately, Hasan's violence against fellow soldiers and fellow Americans is not unique. Recent history offers repeated examples of current or former military members conducting violent attacks in support of many different extremist causes. To ensure the integrity and safety of the all-volunteer force, the U.S. military needs a structured approach to assessing and mitigating the threat of lone-wolf extremists in the ranks.

THE RADICALIZATION OF NIDAL HASAN

Major Nidal Hasan's radicalization progressed through several stages. Immediately following his high school graduation in 1988, Hasan enlisted in the U.S. Army serving for eight years and simultaneously completed his undergraduate degree from Virginia Tech. In 1995, Hasan transitioned to Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences to pursue a medical degree. Through 2001, Hasan appeared to be on track for a successful military career.

Three major forces likely triggered Hasan's turn to extremism. First, Hasan's mother died in May 2001. Her death greatly affected Hasan pushing him toward a more devout period in his life. Allegedly, Hasan began desperately pursuing marriage to a beautiful and ideologically devout woman. However, no woman measured up to Hasan's standards and likewise no potential spouse displayed interest in his highly conservative worldview.¹

Second, Hasan, grieving from his mother's death, gravitated to the conservative brand of Islam preached at the Dar al-Hijrah in Falls Church, Virginia; a mosque known for its attendance by two of the 9/11 hijackers. During 2001-2002, Anwar al-Awlaki also preached at Dar al-Hijrah issuing a now infamous sermon in November, 2001 equating the U.S. Global War on Terrorism with a larger global war by the U.S. against all Muslims. Hasan's ideological following of Awlaki later manifested itself in repeated emails to the cleric requesting attack guidance and religious rulings on what would become his 2009 Ft. Hood shooting.²

Third, Hasan's work in the psychiatry field challenged him psychologically. Hasan specialized in behavioral health and his duties required the counselling of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Nader Hasan said his cousin Major Nidal Hasan "was mortified of the idea of having to deploy... he had people telling him on a daily basis the horrors they saw over there [in Iraq and Afghanistan]."³ Hasan's fear of deployment, lackluster performance, death of his parents, and introduction

¹ Interview with Berger, J.M. (2011), *Jihad Joe: Americans Who Go to War in the Name of Islam*, New York: Potomac Books.

² Ibid.

³ Ali, Wajahat. (2009, November 6). Fort Hood has enough victims already. *The Guardian*, retrieved from:

to extremist ideology during a particularly vulnerable period pushed him down a familiar radicalization path.

INDICATORS OF HASAN'S RADICALIZATION DURING MILITARY SERVICE

In 2003, Hasan began a psychiatric residency at Walter Reed hospital where classmates and supervisors quickly spotted Hasan's extremist views. During his first year, officers identified Hasan "openly questioning whether he could engage in combat against other Muslims,"⁴ prompting one of his supervisors to recommend Hasan's departure from military service. However, military process impediments combined with a general aversion to losing a medical education investment likely resulted in Hasan being retained and pushed onward in the military.

Hasan's radicalization had accelerated by his third year at Walter Reed. His residency required a presentation commonly referred to as "Ground Rounds." Rather than produce an academically rigorous and medically focused presentation consistent with his psychiatric residency, Hasan initiated a discussion entitled "The Koranic World View as it relates to Muslims in the U.S. Military."⁵ This presentation overtly questioned U.S. justifications for combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and advocated that the Department of Defense "allow Muslim soldiers the option of being released as conscientious objectors to increase troop morale and decrease adverse events."⁶ Hasan's extremist views during this presentation appalled classmates, sending off clear warning signs.⁷ However, supervisors moved Hasan through the residency certification process despite his extremist briefs and inferior performance.

Hasan's frustrations in the medical program and continued radicalization led to him seek ideological approval from Anwar al-Awlaki; a known al Qaeda terrorist. Beginning in December 2008, Hasan sent eighteen emails seeking religious justification for "when jihad is appropriate, and whether it is permissible if there are innocents killed in a suicide attack."⁸ In one email communication with Awlaki, Hasan identified significantly with the Hasan Akbar 101st Airborne operations center attack of 2003, suggesting that Akbar's actions were a model for Hasan's upcoming plot.⁹ Additionally, Hassan donated "\$20,000 to \$30,000 a year to Islamic charities."¹⁰ While his email trail slipped through the FBI-DoD investigative divide, Hasan planned and executed his Ft. Hood attack less than 30 days prior to his deployment to Afghanistan.

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: OTHER LONE-WOLF EXTREMISTS WITH U.S. MILITARY EXPERIENCE

Major Hasan represents only one of many U.S. military service members conducting extremist attacks on Americans. Comparative analysis of Nidal Hasan with Timothy McVeigh, Eric Rudolph and Hasan Karim Akbar suggests a common pattern of circumstances, emotional triggers and warning signs indicative of extremism in the ranks.

Timothy McVeigh- Oklahoma City Bombing-1995

Social isolation, professional frustration and anti-government ideology spurred Timothy McVeigh's radicalization. Friends and neighbors from McVeigh's childhood describe him as a loner stemming from his parent's divorce and his father's long work hours. Routinely bullied by other kids he "began to show psychological signs of paranoia and delusion at the age of fourteen when he delved deeper into his fantasy work, imagining himself in constant peril."¹¹ McVeigh found a real connection with his grandfather who introduced him to shooting and firearms. Despite being intelligent, McVeigh struggled to maintain employment and spent his money and time buying weapons, reading survivalist magazines and investigating government conspiracies.¹² McVeigh's father hoped the military's structured environment combined with McVeigh's personal interests would provide a long-run career for his son.

McVeigh joined the military in 1988 and met two other recruits, Terry Nichols and Michael Fortier, who shared his anti-

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2009/nov/06/fort-hood-shootings-hasan-muslim>

⁴ Lieberman, Joseph I. and Collins, Susan M. (February 2011) *A Ticking Time Bomb: Counterterrorism Lessons from the U.S. Government's Failure to Prevent the Fort Hood Attack*. U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. Washington, DC, p. 28

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ (2009) *Hasan on Islam*. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/gallery/2009/11/10/GA2009111000920.html?sid=ST2009110903704>

⁷ Priest, Dana (2009, November 10). Ft. Hood suspect warned of threats within the ranks. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/story/2009/11/09/ST2009110903704.html>.

⁸ Ross, Brian and Rhonda Schwartz (2009, November 19) Major Hasan's E-Mail: 'I Can't Wait to Join You' in Afterlife. *ABC News*. Retrieved at: <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/major-hasans-mail-wait-join-afterlife/story?id=9130339>

⁹ Interview with J.M. Berger (2011) *Jihad Joe*.

¹⁰ Ross and Schwartz (2009, November 19) Major Hasan's E-Mail: 'I Can't Wait to Join You' in Afterlife.

¹¹ Springer, Nathan (2009 December) *Patterns of Radicalization: Identifying the Markers and Warning Signs of Domestic Lone Wolf Terrorists In Our Midst*. Monterey, CA: Naval Post Graduate School. p. 16.

¹² Springer, Nathan (2009 December) p. 17

government ideology. These three men reinforced each other's extremist beliefs which focused largely on the removal of second amendment rights. McVeigh excelled in the Army but spent his free time alone reading survivalist magazines and anti-government publications like the Turner Diaries.¹³ McVeigh deployed to the First Gulf War and performed well. However, McVeigh later regretted his service and felt he was "bullying" Iraq. He returned to Ft. Riley and received the opportunity to attend the Special Forces Assessment and Selection (SFAS) course. Unprepared physically, McVeigh failed to finish SFAS. Frustrated with his military time, McVeigh left the service only to find few job opportunities.¹⁴

Eric Rudolph- Olympic Park/Abortion Clinic Bomber- 1996-1997

Eric Rudolph led federal investigators on one of the largest manhunts in American history after detonating four bombs killing four people and wounding more than a hundred.¹⁵ As a child, Rudolph's mother immersed him in a fringe ideological movement known as the Christian Identity which professed anti-government and racial extremism.¹⁶ Family friends and high school classmates described Rudolph as a loner, openly disparaging other races and writing a high school essay denying the Jewish holocaust. An emotional trigger igniting Rudolph's radicalization was his father's death from cancer in 1981 which Rudolph attributed to the FDA's failure to approve a new medicine. After his father's death, Rudolph moved with his mother to Joplin, Missouri where he attended the Church of Israel led by Dan Gayman. Gayman indoctrinated Rudolph in extremist Christian Identity ideology whose core tenet was, "the anthropological supremacy of the white race."¹⁷

Eric Rudolph joined the military in 1987 wanting to be "part of an elite military unit, like the Rangers or the Special Forces."¹⁸ Rudolph spoke openly to fellow soldiers about his racist views, praising Adolf Hitler, disparaging Jewish people, and complaining about African American drill sergeants.¹⁹ Rudolph did not associate much with other soldiers and "instead he would hang back in his room and get high, reading military manuals and (a) book called 'The Little Black Book of Explosives'."²⁰ Rudolph's persistent drug use and poor performance led to his discharge after only 18 months of service, establishing a second emotional trigger that likely contributed to his radicalization.²¹

Hasan Karim Akbar - 101st Airborne Operations Center Attack- 2003

Hasan Karim Akbar (a.k.a Mark Fidel Kools) attacked his fellow 101st Airborne Division soldiers in Kuwait as the unit prepared for the 2003 invasion of Iraq killing two and wounding many others. The son of two converts to the Nation of Islam, Akbar grew up in the Watts and South Central districts of Los Angeles living much of his life adjacent to the Bilal Islamic Center.²² Akbar struggled as a child allegedly suffering trauma during his teens as a result of witnessing his sister being sexually assaulted by his step-father (a step-father later convicted for the illegal possession of weapons). Akbar attended University of California- Davis, spending nine years pursuing a degree. While attending college, Akbar enrolled in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps but failed to receive a commission, leaving college deeply in debt and enlisting in the Army.

Akbar struggled in the Army and was removed from his squad leader position and relegated to lower level tasks. Fellow soldiers noted Akbar "was rarely in the company of others and was seen talking to himself."²³ Akbar's personal diary advocated violence against Caucasians, the military and the government stating "my life will not be complete unless America is destroyed."²⁴ Just one month prior to his attack, Akbar expressed his violent intent writing, "I will have to decide to kill my Muslim brothers fighting for Saddam Hussein or my battle buddies... I may not have killed any Muslims, but being in the Army is the same thing. I may have to make a choice very soon on who to kill."²⁵ Akbar's extremist motivations likely arose from psychological trauma, perceived and/or actual racial discrimination, frustration over professional performance, financial troubles and exposure to Islamic extremist ideology.

¹³ Springer, Nathan (2009 December) p. 19.

¹⁴ Michel, Lou and Dan Herbeck (2001) *American Terrorist: Timothy McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing*. New York: HarperCollins. p. 118.

¹⁵ Springer, Nathan (2009 December) p. 63

¹⁶ Springer, Nathan (2009 December) p. 67

¹⁷ Ross, Michael E. (2003 June 6) Eric Rudolph's rage was a long time brewing. *MSNBC*. Retrieved at:

http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/7398701/ns/us_news-crime_and_courts/eric-rudolphs-rage-was-long-time-brewing/.

¹⁸ Vollers, Maryanne (2009 October 13) *Lone Wolf*. New York: Harper Collins. p.106.

¹⁹ Springer, Nathan (2009 December) p.59

²⁰ Schuster, Henry (2005 April 5) High Times. *CNN.com*. Retrieved from

<http://edition.cnn.com/2005/LAW/02/25/schuster.excerpt.01/index.html>.

²¹ Springer, Nathan (2009 December) p.60

²² Gruen, Madeleine (2010 January) *Backgrounder: Sgt. Hasan Akbar*. The NEFA Foundation.

²³ Gruen (2010 January).

²⁴ Gruen (2010 January).

²⁵ Gruen (2010 January).

RADICALIZATION AS A BROADER PROCESS

Hasan's radicalization path mirrors the route taken by other lone-wolf extremists with military experience such as McVeigh, Rudolph and Akbar. Chris Heffelfinger, author of *Radical Islam in America*, describes a general construct outlining four stages useful for tracing the radicalization of Hasan, McVeigh, Rudolph and Akbar. In the first phase (Introduction), individuals encounter the extremist ideology and its literature. Stage two (Immersion) sees the individual immersed in extremist thinking resulting in the solidification of an extremist mind set. In stage three (Frustration), individuals begin expressing dissatisfaction with the perceived inaction of other members of the faith. Finally, some individuals move to stage four (Resolve) where they commit to undertake violent action on behalf of the extremist ideology.²⁶

Each of these phases portends a set of general indicators signifying an extremist's march towards violence. Additionally, progression through the radicalization stages often correlates with significant emotional triggers in the person's life. Common radicalization triggers fit broadly into the categories of family, financial, psychological and professional. As seen with Hasan, McVeigh, Rudolph and Akbar, extremists often travel their radicalization path following one or more of these emotional triggers.

ASSESSING AND MITIGATING THE RISKS OF EXTREMISM IN THE U.S. ARMED FORCES

Preventing extremist violence by current and former military members requires a comprehensive approach addressing all phases of a serviceman's recruitment, training, service, and reintegration back into society. The U.S. military could pursue several programs and policies to prevent future Hasan-type extremism.

Recommendation: Conduct comprehensive research on extremism in the ranks

Immediately following Major Hasan's Ft. Hood attack, many pundits narrowly focused on Hasan's religion as the causal link to violence. However, recent history on extremist attacks by current and former military members suggests Hasan's actions characterize a broader pattern of extremist behavior. Before instituting any program to detect and mitigate violent extremism in the ranks, the military must initiate comprehensive research to accurately map the process and indicators of extremist radicalization across all ideologies. The research should encompass cases of extremist violence to include Hasan, McVeigh, Rudolph, Akbar and many other servicemen advocating violence against Americans. Only through comparative research gleaned from comprehensive data, rather than anecdotal case studies, can the U.S. military develop actionable and accurate warning signs for its leaders to assess extremism in the ranks.

Recommendation: Establish an extremist radicalization model for assessing service members

Holistic research of extremists in the military will create a radicalization model leaders can utilize to identify vulnerable servicemen. An overall radicalization framework helps leaders correlate disparate pieces of information into a broader context indicative of extremism. Building from previous research by Heffelfinger and others, the model provides military leaders a structured method to track information, warning signs and triggers of service member extremism. Empowered via a web portal, military leaders should be able to reference the radicalization model for indicators of extremist activity as well as regulations and procedures for mitigating extremism. For example, should the model contain a phase 'Resolve to Commit Violence,' leaders would be able to view indicators and case studies relevant to this phase in the radicalization process.

Recommendation: Construct reference materials for assessing extremism

A well-researched radicalization model will generate indicators and warning lists providing leaders a tool for identifying extremists in their organizations. Focusing on extremist behaviors rather than demographic stereotypes will provide military leaders tangible measures to assess and mitigate extremism. Any indicator or warning list should include adequate caveats reminding leaders that no single indicator necessarily confirms extremist behavior. Rather it's the combination and correlation of multiple indicators that routinely coincides with lone-wolf extremism. Below is a short example (not comprehensive) demonstrating how Heffelfinger's "Introduction-Immersion-Frustration-Resolve" model could be used to categorize indicators.²⁷

²⁶ Heffelfinger, Chris (2011) *Radical Islam in America*. New York: Potomac Books.

²⁷ Note, the indicators illustrated in this section are the opinions of the author and the author alone. These opinions do not represent the U.S. government or any other public or private entity. The indicators discussed in this section come from the author's 1) research for this paper, 2) research in counterterrorism conducted over the past several years as a consultant to federal, state and local law enforcement and the intelligence community, 3) programs conducted through the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 4) service as a Special Agent on an FBI JTTF, and 5) service as an Infantry Officer in the U.S. Army.

Introduction- (Initial contact with the extremist ideology)

- **Joining extremist ideology.**
- **Establishing new friendships with other servicemen connected to extremist groups.**
- **Accessing extremist literature, videos, audio broadcasts, websites and social media.**

Immersion- (Immersion in the thinking and mindset of the extremist ideology)

- **Altering physical appearance to conform to extremist practices. Could be seen in changes in dress, tattooing, hair styles, and other ideological markings.**
- **Participation in charitable or other fundraising activities supporting the extremist ideology.**
- **Aggressively recruiting servicemen to the ideological cause.**
- **Citation of extremist views in conversations with other service members to demonstrate mastery of one's new ideology.**
- **Display of inspirational extremist figures or symbols.**

Frustration- (Frustration over inaction of other members of the ideology)

- **Denunciation of other members of the ideology for not being sufficiently adherent or "true" to the ideology.**
- **Seeking the approval of ideological leaders or peers for the use of violence.**
- **Increased self-isolation from other servicemen both on and off duty.**
- **Concerns from friends and family members over service member's rhetoric and isolation.**
- **Declining military performance impacted by commitments to other extremist activities.**
- **Attending extremist gatherings far from the service member's duty station.**

Resolve- (Resolve to commit violence on behalf of the extremist ideology)

- **Weapons purchases and training outside the normal course of military duty.**
- **Theft of ammunition, explosives and other materials needed for a violent attack.**
- **Openly advocating violence against other military members or American citizens.**
- **Acquisition and reading of operational military manuals unrelated to the service member's duties**
- **Reading of bomb-making or other attack planning literature and websites.**
- **Giving away of all possessions to friends, neighbors and other service members.**
- **Planning for death by creating wills and final statements.**
- **Seeking attack approval and guidance from extremist leaders.**
- **Attendance at an ideological, militant training camp or foreign travel inconsistent with service member's family, friends and pattern of life.**
- **Attack planning and rehearsal.**

- Outright defiance of the chain of command and violent threats to other service members.

The above list identifies some common indicators of extremist behavior. However, this list remains incomplete and the military must aggressively research past extremists in the ranks to generate a more comprehensive indicator list.

Recommendation: Identify common emotional triggers leading to radicalization

Radicalization is a path often pursued by those suffering significant emotional events. Military leaders responsible for assessing and mitigating extremism might benefit from a representative list of emotional triggers known to accelerate service member radicalization. These triggers might be explored and categorized to account for different disruptions to an extremist psyche:

- Family- Death of a family member or divorce may leave the service member searching for a coping ideology.
- Professional- Failure to achieve professional goals or adapt to military lifestyle may result in the individual being particularly vulnerable to extremist recruitment.
- Financial- Extremist ideologies often provide comfort to those suffering financial struggles.
- Psychological- Witnessing or participating in a traumatic event may trigger distress leading to the pursuit of extremist ideologies.

The above triggers when combined with other extremist indicators can help military leaders identify the causes and steps in service member radicalization. Additionally, populating the service member's radicalization pathway with triggers, indicators and warnings helps the leader identify legal, administrative and medical options for disrupting potential violence.

Recommendation: Maintain a database of extremist propaganda

Military commanders need a database cataloging violent extremist propaganda and training manuals. Throughout each of the cases discussed in this paper, fellow service members and leaders witnessed extremists in the ranks accessing extremist propaganda. Hasan accessed al Qaeda websites. McVeigh and Rudolph were seen reading *The Turner Diaries*. Each extremist ideology hosts its own extremist propaganda justifying violence. Military leaders do not have sufficient time to learn and recognize each extremist ideology and its publications. Developing and maintaining a database of known extremist propaganda, literature and websites that advocate violence against U.S. citizens and the U.S. government would provide military leaders a resource for quickly identifying and understanding extremist activity in their organizations.

Recommendation: Develop resources for mitigating all extremist ideologies

Recent historical analysis shows lone wolf military member extremist violence manifests itself in many different extremist ideologies. Solely focusing on Islamic extremism within military ranks is short-sighted. Timothy McVeigh, a non-Muslim, executed the Oklahoma City Bombing; the largest terrorist attack committed by a former or current U.S. military member. Military member violence manifests from racial, religious, and anti-government ideologies. Holistically identifying, assessing and mitigating all forms of extremism in the military will better protect service members and citizens while maintaining the diversity of the U.S. Armed Forces.

Recommendation: Extremism prevention training across the military

Personnel at all levels will benefit from training to identify extremist behavior. This training would familiarize military personnel with the radicalization framework, indicators and emotional triggers synonymous with extremism as well as explain reporting procedures for those service members witnessing extremist behavior. This training might mirror suicide prevention training and could even be taught concurrently with this annual training requirement.

CONCLUSION: LESSONS LEARNED FOR MILITARY LEADERS FROM MAJOR HASAN'S RADICALIZATION

In hindsight, Hasan's superiors had the legal latitude and command authority to remove Hasan from the service. However, their insufficient documentation of Hasan's poor performance and extremist tendencies combined with their unfamiliarity with Army policy on command authority allowed Hasan to continue serving in the military.

Status quo operations of the Army Officer Evaluation system hurt the Army's collective performance in general and in the case of Major Hasan compromised the safety of Army personnel. Army medical corps officers repeatedly identified Hasan's poor performance and extremist tendencies, yet his performance records provide little indication of these concerns. Inaccurate

documentation by Hasan's superiors led investigators to dismiss warning signs correlating Hasan's online activities and extremist tendencies. Military evaluation reports look remarkably similar across all officers regardless of performance. Military leaders need improved training on the valuable purpose of evaluation reports for accurately assessing performance and providing tangible indicators of officer negligence and extremism.

Officers at all levels, in all services and in all specialties must understand their options for removing poor performers with extremist tendencies. A supervisor identified early in Hasan's residency the dangers of retaining his officer. However, a limited understanding of the authorities and procedures for removing Hasan frustrated attempts to remove Hasan from service. Commanders must gain a deeper understanding of their options for removing individuals whose behavior clearly threatens fellow service members.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

For more information, contact Alan Luxenberg at 215-732-3774, ext. 105, email fpri@fpri.org, or visit us at www.fpri.org.