

**US counter-radicalisation strategy:  
the ideological challenge**

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Since the September 11 attacks ten years ago, terrorism and counterterrorism have loomed large in the national security consciousness of the US. The '9/11 decade' was driven by the belief that al-Qaeda inspired terrorism, Islamic militancy or 'violent jihadism,' as it came to be called, was the single greatest security threat to the West.

Ten years on, the world's a different place. The international political landscape has changed. The global financial crisis brought deep recession and economic uncertainty to much of the Western world and beyond. It has weakened Washington's ability and appetite to take the lead in foreign ventures. The Arab Spring ushered in indigenous and spontaneous changes to the Middle East that are still being played out. The US has withdrawn from Iraq and is planning a significant drawdown of troops in Afghanistan. The Obama administration has stepped back from 'War on Terror' rhetoric and has instead emphasised international engagement, particularly with the Muslim world. Al-Qaeda's former leader, Osama bin Laden, is dead and many of its high-level operatives have been killed or captured, including American-born preacher Anwar al-Awlaki, a man responsible for radicalising many individuals to commit attacks against the US.

So, with politics passing al-Qaeda by and its leadership decimated, does the end of the 9/11 decade mean the end of al-Qaeda related terrorism, particularly home-grown terrorism in the US and the West? Not exactly. Although the deaths of ideologues such as bin Laden and the emergence of the Arab Spring de-emphasised many political grievances that have driven attacks in the past, jihadist ideology still presents a potent form of rebellion against alienation and US foreign policy.

So long as jihadist ideology remains unchallenged, the US will always have a problem with terrorism, especially home-grown terrorism. Unfortunately, very little has been done to directly challenge the ideology driving radicalisation and terrorism at home. Until the ideology itself, not just its adherents and organisations, is directly challenged, individuals will continue to radicalise and the violent Islamic extremist threat will remain.

## Home-grown radicalisation

Two recent studies examining home-grown terrorism and radicalisation in the US were conducted independently by the RAND Corporation and the New America Foundation in partnership with Syracuse University.<sup>1</sup> Since 9/11, 176 individuals have been identified as involved in plots involving home-grown terrorism in the US. When compared to the number of murders a year, incidents of radicalisation in Europe and even domestic terrorism incidents prior to 9/11, this is a statistically small number. Of those 176 individuals, only two succeeded in killing anyone. Home-grown radicalisation, despite a spate of high-profile plots and arrests, isn't a significant trend in America and hasn't reached European levels. There have been no sleeper cells, no terrorist underground networks and no prolific radicalisation among the American Muslim community.

However, the two studies also found that nearly half of those cases occurred in 2009 and 2010, a time when the geopolitical landscape of the 9/11 era was markedly changing and al-Qaeda was strategically weak. Despite the small numbers, incidents of home-grown radicalisation increased at a time when they should have been decreasing.

According to the RAND report, most of the home-grown cases occurred in 2009. They included the November attack at Fort Hood by US Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan and the June attack against military recruiters in Arkansas by a Muslim convert returning from Yemen. Also in 2009, there were numerous cases of Somali-American youths going off to fight with al-Shabaab in Somalia, producing the first ever American suicide bomber. In 2010, there was the thwarted attack by Faisal Shahzad in Times Square, the arrest of Najibullah Zazi, who plotted to blow up New York subway stations, and the curious case of 'Jihad Jane'—a white female convert from Pennsylvania who conspired to kill a Swedish cartoonist.

Most of these individuals were removed from the traditional grievances in the Arab world that had originally galvanised al-Qaeda. What they did have in common, however, was a belief in a radical ideology that drove first their thinking, then their actions.

Experts continue to debate the precise role ideology plays in radicalising people towards violent action. According to Matthew Levitt of the Washington Institute:

Radicalisation lies at the intersection of grievance and ideology. However, grievances are ever-present and very few individuals choose to act upon them. Ideology, on the other hand, offers a blueprint for action that mobilizes potential terrorists.<sup>2</sup>

However, other analysts such as Risa Brooks argue that ideology is not necessarily a predictor of violent action. According to Brooks:

Many people could be doing or thinking things similar to those committed to violence, but never take actions related to terrorism. They may listen to radical sermons and engage with activists, discuss with friends Muslim persecution across the globe, and exhibit the signatures of extremist modes of thinking, without considering plotting an attack or otherwise aiding a terrorist organization.<sup>3</sup>

While it's true that holding extremist views doesn't necessarily mean proclivity to violent action, it also remains the case that belief in the ideology is a precursor to action for those who commit violence in the name of *jihād*. It provides a rationale for violence based on piety, even altruism. So, despite tactical counterterrorism successes, a changed geopolitical landscape and the strategic weaknesses of the al-Qaeda movement, the unchecked ideology of violent jihadism ensures that home-grown radicalisation will continue to appeal to the alienated and continue to be a matter of concern for American policymakers.

## The White House strategy to counter violent extremism

Since taking office, the Obama administration has sought to distance itself from Bush's 'War on Terrorism' rhetoric. However, it's continued many of the same policies and even increased drone strikes against key leadership targets. The Obama administration has also had notable successes on the counterterrorism front, such as the killing of Osama bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki among other high-profile terrorist leaders.

Nevertheless, it sought to frame the debate differently by placing a priority on restoring America's image in the so-called Muslim world. In 2008 and 2009, the administration largely refrained from engaging in counter-radicalisation efforts and instead focused on tactical counterterrorism measures. However, the uptick in home-grown attacks in 2009 and 2010 forced its hand. For the first time since the September 11 attacks, the US Government is focused on issues of domestic radicalisation. *Empowering local partners to prevent violent extremism in the United States*, a White House report released in August 2011, focused heavily on the concept of community engagement. The short, eight-page document argues that local partnerships and community engagement are the key components of counter-radicalisation and counterterrorism efforts.

The White House report was important in that it placed national emphasis on community engagement and law enforcement training, but those programs have been ongoing for years. Furthermore, all of the information garnered for counterterrorism purposes through community engagement is gathered after radicalisation has already occurred. Therefore, for effective counter-radicalisation, community engagement for the sole purpose of identifying radicalised individuals will not be sufficient. Rather, a broader view of community engagement is needed. The extremist narrative and ideology should be challenged, and mainstream political and religious voices should be empowered.

The US strategy recognised the importance of internet propaganda but didn't take the extra step of identifying the need to actively challenge the extremist ideology behind radicalisation.

In fact, little has been done over the past decade to expose and counter radical Islamist ideology, and none of the guiding principles in the latest White House strategy addresses that need. In countering al-Qaeda's ideology, national governments have an important role to play in articulating values, empowering and coordinating local efforts and drawing attention to and discrediting ideologies that can lead to violence and harm the national interest.

It's especially important to address the ideology because, as al-Qaeda has grown more diffuse, the most deadly attacks against the West have come from self-radicalised individuals with indirect, if any, contact with al-Qaeda operatives or trainers. Now it's mostly the ideology that binds them, rather than personal networks, shared fighting experience and terrorist training camps.

The reluctance to engage with the ideology behind violent Islamism is perhaps due to a reluctance to engage in religious debates or to be seen as challenging the beliefs of religious or ethnic communities. Or perhaps it's due to the fact that al-Qaeda's principles are so outside the mainstream that it's obvious to most people why the *jihadis* shouldn't be dignified with a response.

But challenging radical, violent Islamism isn't a challenge against a particular religion. Al-Qaeda's way of looking at the world isn't religious, but ideological. Islam isn't Islamism, but the understandable confusion between the two has made the US Government reluctant to tackle this matter officially, particularly because freedom of speech and belief are founding principles of the nation.

Islamism can be described as a sociopolitical ideology that incorporates elements of the Muslim faith as a basis for its particular political program. Islamism is espoused by al-Qaeda but also by other groups that have many adherents in the West, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, which don't directly espouse violence but nevertheless promote non-inclusive political views, such as advocacy for a global Islamic caliphate and the stance that democracy is incompatible with Islam. These ideological views undermine the inclusive values of democracies and should be labelled as such.

While some praised the Obama administration for tackling domestic radicalisation, other political and media reactions to the report suggested that more should be done to tackle radicalisation's ideological underpinnings. One press report on the White House strategy stated:

The eight-page plan, more than a year in the making, is short on specifics and stakes out no new ground on the thorny issue of homegrown terrorism. It repeats many of President Barack Obama's past statements and in parts is quite similar to a document President George W. Bush's administration produced five years ago.<sup>4</sup>

US senators Sue Collins and Joseph Lieberman issued a joint statement stating that they were disappointed that the administration didn't specifically identify violent Islamist ideology as a root cause of home-grown terrorism. They also criticised the report for not having greater emphasis on internet radicalisation and not articulating more robust proposals to counter that threat.

## Two visions of counter-radicalisation

The mixed reaction to the White House strategy is a reflection of two countervailing visions of radicalisation and counter-radicalisation in the US. One vision, promoted by the Department of Homeland Security, relies on community policing and community engagement to counter radicalisation; it's essentially a softer, community-oriented method of counterterrorism. This has been the dominant way of dealing with home-grown radicalisation in the US to date. However, the other vision, adopted more by the US State Department, focuses, according to the department's Counterterrorism Coordinator, Daniel Benjamin, on 'making environments non-permissive for terrorists seeking to exploit them'. Part of that task is the establishment of a resilient ideological ground so that extremist ideologies don't take root in the first place.

To address the 'cognitive' radicalisation that occurs before recruitment or self-recruitment to the ranks of the *jihadis*, the State Department model for countering violent extremism abroad should be applied to domestic radicalisation. Al-Qaeda's ideology connects a person's individual and local grievances with global grievances and what they would term a universal Muslim identity. This is a well-known trajectory, yet little has been done so far to address the *jihadis*' radicalising narrative and ideology.

Many counter-radicalisation programs focus on the process or method of radicalisation—what in an individual's background or history would make them susceptible to radicalisation: the triggers to violent action. Although this is important, many studies have demonstrated that each individual is radicalised in their own unique way and has their own unique triggers to move from extremism to violence. Therefore, it's been difficult to formulate policy by looking at the process of radicalisation alone.

However, examining and challenging the ideology behind the radicalisation process may provide a better way forward. Despite the diversity of the many individuals who radicalise, the one common denominator has been their commitment to the same violent Islamist ideology.

According to a Washington Institute report on effective counter-radicalisation:

Ideology is the common strand that binds these plots and individuals and is a driver for this global movement. To be at war with the network, therefore, requires both tactical efforts to thwart attacks and strategic efforts to counter the extremist radicalization that fuels its hatred and violence and undergirds its strategy and global appeal.<sup>5</sup>

## A new terrorism landscape

The threat of terrorism from al-Qaeda and affiliated individuals and groups is now more diffuse and complex than it was in 2001. The al-Qaeda organisation has grown more decentralised since the September 11 attacks, but the ideology underpinning its violence runs unchecked on the internet. Once a concentrated liquid in a bottle, al-Qaeda has been put under pressure and sprayed out in tiny particles, making both counterterrorism operations and community engagement more difficult.

Over the years, al-Qaeda has become less of an organisation and more an ideological movement. It's now less likely to commit another spectacular September 11-type attack, but 'micro-terrorism' is on the rise. According to Australia's Ambassador for Counterterrorism, Bill Paterson, micro-terrorism is 'simple local actions on the part of [radicalised] individuals ... small-scale, opportunistic, with little preparation, training or lead times'<sup>6</sup>—such as shootings or small explosive attacks that cumulatively drain law enforcement resources and community security.

## What to do

With the threshold for attacks lowered and tactical counterterrorism becoming more difficult, the need to tackle the jihadist ideological underpinnings becomes more pressing. The extremist Islamist narrative must be challenged directly in the public domain; mainstream voices must be amplified, empowered and networked by government efforts.

In order to avoid the well-intentioned but ultimately vague, broadbrush approach of the White House strategy, it is important to attach specific recommendations to any proposal that seeks to counter the ideology behind violent domestic terrorism. The following are some suggestions.

### **Recognise that a frank discussion of violent Islamist ideology will not necessarily stoke anti-Muslim sentiment if it's done honestly and openly**

There's a legitimate concern about stoking Islamophobia by discussing the radical Islamist ideology behind radicalisation. That's why the White House report aims for a more holistic approach, referring to 'violent extremism' rather than identifying the ideology behind jihadist violence. However, Islamophobia won't be avoided by avoiding an honest discussion. The reality is that terrorism based on violent jihadist ideology is the main domestic terrorist threat. There are other violent actors—such as neo-Nazi groups and other right-wing extremists—but the threat from them isn't the same as that from al-Qaeda inspired groups, and the statistics bear that out. A frank discussion of the facts is not equivalent to scapegoating a particular religion or community. Political correctness can't be allowed to get in the way of productive discussions about the threat.

The US and other Western countries would do well to learn from their previous struggles against white supremacists. White racists would often use Christian religious themes as underpinnings for their ideology, but no-one else saw their beliefs as religiously sanctioned or legitimate. Governments had no qualms



about challenging white supremacist ideology and identifying it as anathema to democratic, inclusive values. For effective counter-radicalisation, the same needs to be done against extreme and violent Islamist ideology.

### **Have public officials explain why violent Islamist ideology is against democratic values**

Having public officials publicly and specifically articulate why jihadist ideology is against democratic values will help to mitigate charges of Islamophobia by focusing on the tenets of that ideology rather than making a broadbrush condemnation of violent Islamic extremism or Muslim communities. Importantly, it will also challenge the argument put forward by jihadist ideologues that democracy is anathema to Islam.

Although it may seem obvious and unnecessary, it's important that public officials also articulate the merits and values of democratic government and society as superior alternatives to the ideology espoused by al-Qaeda inspired groups. This should be done in public speeches and official government documents. It should also be incorporated in a discussion of ideology in outreach efforts.

### **Apply some of the State Department's tactics for countering violent extremism abroad to domestic radicalisation, particularly in relation to radicalisation via the internet**

The State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communication (CSCC) has within it a Digital Outreach Team (DOT): an 11-person team of Arabic, Urdu and Persian speakers who go onto different online forums, post comments and engage with internet users. The DOT didn't originally interact on extremist sites but has now reoriented its efforts to challenge radicalising messages online. The DOT's posts focus on correcting misperceptions of US foreign policy and ridiculing and addressing the myths and conspiracy theories about the US that tend to abound and fuel extremist narratives.

Domestic counterterrorism agencies should partner with the CSCC and integrate their efforts with its overseas work. The internet has no boundary, so the bureaucratic division of international versus domestic counterterrorism efforts should not apply.

### **Solicit the assistance of and empower Muslim groups and leaders that are opposed to violent Islamist ideology**

In the US, Muslim communities are generally resistant to militancy and cooperate with law enforcement and counterterrorism efforts. A research effort funded by the Department of Justice studying four Muslim American communities found that there were many efforts initiated by the communities to prevent and expose signs of militancy through internal outreach programs, self-monitoring and self-policing. In the case of one accused bomber from Oregon, it was his own family who tipped off authorities to his extremist views.

Self-monitoring within communities for any signs of militancy or extremist ideological belief, as well as cooperation with law enforcement agencies, has been the key to keeping levels of radicalisation low. However, the US Government has only focused on tactical counterterrorism cooperation with Muslim and ethnic community leaders. It hasn't taken advantage of broader community monitoring efforts on a strategic level; nor has it helped to counter the ideology behind radicalism.

Because many domestic terrorism cases fall outside of established Muslim community networks, it would be useful to work with community leaders to help them expand their reach. Government agencies should ask those leaders to

articulate intolerance of violent Islamist ideology in the wider society, instead of just within their established communities. New converts, who do not have the same embedded sense of their religion as mainstream Muslim communities, are often the most prone to the pull of extremist ideology. Helping Muslim leaders expand their reach beyond their immediate communities and into the broader public domain may help new converts and those who are prone to be influenced by violent Islamism to better understand mainstream Muslim views and teachings.

## Notes

- 1 The New America Foundation and Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Public Policy, 'Homegrown terrorism cases 2001–2011', available from <http://homegrown.newamerica.net/table>; and Brian Michael Jenkins, 'Stray dogs and virtual armies: radicalization and recruitment to jihadist terrorism in the United States since 9/11', 2011, available from [http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional\\_papers/OP343.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP343.html).
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- 3 Risa Brooks, 'Muslim "homegrown" terrorism in the United States: how serious is the threat?' *International Security*, 36(2), Fall 2011.
- 4 Eileen Sullivan, 'Whitehouse to hit violent extremism', Associated Press, 3 August 2011, available from <http://news.yahoo.com/white-house-strategy-hit-violent-extremism-070426160.html>.
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6. Bill Paterson, 'Transnational Terrorism: Evolving challenges -- An Australian perspective', available from <http://www.gwumc.edu/hspi/events/australiaART301.cfm>

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