



UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE [www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)

# SPECIAL REPORT

1200 17th Street NW • Washington, DC 20036 • 202.457.1700 • fax 202.429.6063

## ABOUT THE REPORT

In response to the recent surge in the number of American Muslims involved in terrorist activities, several agencies in the U.S. government have begun devising a comprehensive counterradicalization strategy. In doing so, they are following the lead of certain European countries that have invested significant human, financial, and political capital in counterradicalization programs. The challenges European authorities have had to face are similar to those their U.S. counterparts are expected to confront, and several lessons are at hand from the European experience.

Lorenzo Vidino, a 2009–10 Peace Scholar with the United States Institute of Peace, is currently a TAPIR fellow at the RAND Corporation in Washington, D.C. He previously held fellowships at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, the Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. His latest book, *The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West*, was published by Columbia University Press in September 2010.

© 2010 by the United States Institute of Peace.  
All rights reserved.

SPECIAL REPORT 262

NOVEMBER 2010

## CONTENTS

The Impetus to Counterradicalization	2
Understanding the Radicalization Process	3
Determining the Role of Religion	3
Defining the Aims of Intervention	4
Choosing Partners	6
Avoiding Stigmatizing the Muslim Community	9
Assessing Success and Failure	10
Policy Recommendations	10

*Lorenzo Vidino*

## Countering Radicalization in America Lessons from Europe

### Summary

- The recent surge in the number of American Muslims involved in terrorism has led U.S. authorities to question the long-held assumption that American Muslims are immune to radicalization, and to follow the example of other Western democracies in devising a comprehensive counterradicalization strategy.
- Radicalization is a highly individualized process determined by the complex interaction of various personal and structural factors. Because no one theory can exhaustively explain it, policymakers must understand the many paths to radicalization and adopt flexible approaches when trying to combat it.
- The role of religion in the radicalization process is debated, but theories that set aside ideology and religion as factors in the radicalization of Western jihadists are not convincing. Policymakers who choose to tackle religious aspects should do so cautiously, however, cognizant of the many implications of dealing with such a sensitive issue.
- Policymakers need to determine whether a counterradicalization strategy aims to tackle violent radicalism alone or, more ambitiously, cognitive radicalism. The relation between the two forms is contested. Challenging cognitive radicalism, though possibly useful for both security and social cohesion purposes, is extremely difficult for any Western democracy.
- Finding partners in the Muslim community is vital to any counterradicalization program. In light of the fragmentation of that community, a diverse array of partners appears to be the best solution. There is the risk, however, that counterradicalization efforts could be perceived by Muslims as unfairly targeting them.
- Partnerships with nonviolent Islamists could provide results in the short term, but there are doubts as to their long-term implications. All aspects of a partnership with such groups should be carefully examined before any decision is made.
- Policymakers need to find ways to empirically measure their programs' effectiveness.

## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan institution established and funded by Congress. Its goals are to help prevent and resolve violent conflicts, promote post-conflict peacebuilding, and increase conflict management tools, capacity, and intellectual capital worldwide. The Institute does this by empowering others with knowledge, skills, and resources, as well as by its direct involvement in conflict zones around the globe.

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS

**J. Robinson West** (Chair), Chairman, PFC Energy, Washington, D.C. • **George E. Moose** (Vice Chairman), Adjunct Professor of Practice, The George Washington University, Washington, D.C. • **Anne H. Cahn**, Former Scholar in Residence, American University, Washington, D.C. • **Chester A. Crocker**, James R. Schlesinger Professor of Strategic Studies, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. • **Kerry Kennedy**, Human Rights Activist • **Ikram U. Khan**, President, Quality Care Consultants, LLC., Las Vegas, Nev. • **Stephen D. Krasner**, Graham H. Stuart Professor of International Relations at Stanford University • **Jeremy A. Rabkin**, Professor of Law, George Mason University, Arlington, Va. • **Judy Van Rest**, Executive Vice President, International Republican Institute, Washington, D.C. • **Nancy Zirkin**, Executive Vice President, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights

### MEMBERS EX OFFICIO

**Michael H. Posner**, Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor • **James N. Miller**, Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy • **Ann E. Rondeau**, Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy; President, National Defense University • **Richard H. Solomon**, President, United States Institute of Peace (nonvoting)

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.

To request permission to photocopy or reprint materials, e-mail: [permissions@usip.org](mailto:permissions@usip.org)

## The Impetus to Counterradicalization

Since 2009, U.S. authorities have witnessed a remarkable surge in the number of American Muslims engaged in terrorist activities. Dozens of cases have been identified nationwide involving militants of diverse backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> Although some have simply been fellow travelers inspired by jihadist ideology, others have had strong operational links to the upper echelons of al-Qaeda and affiliated groups. This development has led many to question the long-held assumption that American Muslims, unlike their European counterparts, are virtually immune to radicalization. This realization has recently led the Obama administration to ask several governmental agencies to craft policies to “counter violent extremism” and devise appropriate counterradicalization plans.<sup>2</sup>

In doing so, the Obama administration is following the lead of numerous other countries. Basing their judgment on direct experience and academic studies, many governments have come to reject the more simplistic assumptions about radicalization. Few believe that terrorists are deviants who are born terrorists or that once a terrorist, always a terrorist. On the contrary, it is widely believed that, in at least some cases, the radicalization process that leads people to carry out acts of politically motivated violence can be prevented or even reversed.

Working from these revised assumptions, several countries have created counterradicalization programs that differ markedly in their extent and aims. Counterradicalization commonly includes three types of programs, each with a distinctive objective: deradicalization, disengagement, and radicalization prevention.<sup>3</sup> Deradicalization measures seek to lead an already radicalized individual to abandon his or her militant views. Disengagement entails a less dramatic shift whereby an individual abandons involvement in a terrorist group or activities while perhaps retaining a radical worldview. Radicalization prevention measures seek to prevent the radicalization process from taking hold in the first place and generally target a segment of society rather than a specific individual.

Certain Muslim-majority countries, having been the first targets of al-Qaeda’s or al-Qaeda-inspired attacks, have been among the first to engineer counterradicalization programs, focusing mostly on deradicalization and disengagement. The programs implemented in Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, for example, have attracted the attention of experts and policymakers for their innovative approaches.<sup>4</sup> Although the lessons to be derived from these efforts are extremely interesting, U.S. policymakers are likely to find the experiences of other Western, non-Muslim-majority countries more relevant. Over the past few years, Singapore, Canada, and several European countries have invested considerable human, financial, and political capital in counterradicalization programs. Initiatives included in these programs range from the deradicalization of incarcerated al-Qaeda militants to the creation of Muslim-oriented magazines and TV programs, from government-sponsored lectures by moderate Muslim clerics to field trips to Auschwitz, and from professional development seminars to soccer matches with police officers.

The counterradicalization programs implemented in Western countries differ greatly from one another in terms of aims, budget, and underlying philosophy. Each experience is deeply shaped by political, cultural, and legal elements unique to that country. Moreover, the programs have been in place for just a few years, and it is therefore difficult to assess fully their impact. Nevertheless, the experience to date points to certain key characteristics and challenges common to all Western counterradicalization programs. This report draws on the accumulated experience of various European countries to outline six core challenges a future U.S. domestic counterradicalization program is likely to face.

## Understanding the Radicalization Process

A logical first step in creating a counterradicalization program is understanding the radicalization process. Yet few issues have proven more divisive and controversial among experts, both within and outside government, than trying to identify the reasons that drive people to embrace radical views and then to act on them in violent ways. As a consequence, and absent reliable supporting evidence, theories about radicalization abound.<sup>5</sup> Some focus on structural factors such as political tensions and cultural cleavages, sometimes referred to as the root causes of radicalization. Others emphasize personal factors, such as the shock of a life-changing event or the influence of a mentor. In a May 2010 Special Report titled “Why Youth Join al-Qaeda,” U.S. Army Colonel Matt Venhaus aptly divided those seeking to join jihadist networks into revenge seekers needing an outlet for their frustration, status seekers needing recognition, identity seekers in need of a group to join, and thrill seekers looking for adventure.<sup>6</sup> Finally, several theories have been formulated to explain the radicalization specifically of Western Muslims; these range from a search for identity to anger over relative economic deprivation.<sup>7</sup>

It seems that radicalization is a complex and highly individualized process, often shaped by a poorly understood interaction of structural and personal factors. And just as there is no grand theory of radicalization and no common terrorist profile, there is no single explanation for why people deradicalize or disengage from a militant group. The factors that trigger this process are as many and varied as those that lead individuals to radicalize.

Aware of these complexities, most authorities have understood the need to adopt highly flexible approaches to counterradicalization. There is broad consensus that no single approach will work in all cases, and in some cases none will. Methods used in radicalization prevention might not be appropriate in deradicalization. Efforts should be adapted to the specific circumstances, supported by a deep knowledge of the characteristics of the individual or group they are directed to, and continuously assessed.

***Just as there is no grand theory of radicalization and no common terrorist profile, there is no single explanation for why people deradicalize or disengage from a militant group.***

## Determining the Role of Religion

Few issues are more heavily debated than the importance of religion in the radicalization of jihadist militants, with the extremists in the debate attributing to it either a central role or no role at all. Most Muslim-majority countries that have implemented counterradicalization programs view religion as a major factor, though not the only one, in radicalization. They generally see jihadists as having absorbed a twisted interpretation of Islam and consider their own interpretation of Islam to be the antidote. Several examples can be adduced in this connection. Hamoud al-Hitar, a Yemeni judge and founder of Yemen’s counterradicalization program, refers to jihadists detained in the country’s prisons as “the deceived group” and believes that a dialogue showing them the fallacies of their theological positions will deradicalize them.<sup>8</sup> In Saudi Arabia, authorities have based their richly funded program on the assumption that jihadists are naïve men who have been fooled by cunning recruiters into believing a false interpretation of Islam, and see an education in “true Islam” as the solution. Indonesia’s efforts are based on similar assumptions. Indonesian authorities have benefited from the cooperation of two former Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) militants who have engaged fellow militants detained in the country’s prisons by challenging their views from a theological perspective. “When their Islamic argument is already defeated,” explains a top Indonesian official, “then it is easy for us. Then we enter.”<sup>9</sup> In Singapore, the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG), a body of local Muslim clerics and experts established to combat radicalization in that island state, has similarly emphasized the need for engaging militants on a theological level. According to the RRG, JI’s “simplistic, literal, nonintellectual inter-

***European governments have ... often resorted to supporting individuals and organizations that have challenged jihadist ideology from a theological perspective.***

pretation extinguishes centuries of mainstream Islamic intellectual tradition” and “can only be de-legitimized by ideological and theological refutation.”<sup>10</sup>

Many argue that Western countries should follow a similar approach. Although in some cases addressing socioeconomic and personal factors might suffice, in others it will be necessary to address ideological and theological aspects of the radicalization process. European governments have therefore often resorted to supporting individuals and organizations that have challenged jihadist ideology from a theological perspective. Authorities have created university courses to train imams, organized lectures of Muslim clerics, and more generally provided a platform for various voices considered moderate. The underlying idea is to help these voices reach a wider audience. Those who are exposed to moderate or mainstream interpretations of Islam are in turn expected to be less likely to embrace (or to become more resilient to, in counterradicalization parlance) radical interpretations of it.

Such an approach on the part of Western countries is not universally endorsed, however. Some hold that other factors, such as politics and socioeconomics, play a much larger role in the radicalization of Western Muslims.<sup>11</sup> Others acknowledge the importance of the religious aspect but raise feasibility issues. Most Western countries embrace the principle of separation of religion and state. Steep constitutional and legislative limits therefore prevent many governments from supporting, even indirectly, religious activities. But even if these limits could be bypassed, governments that funded some groups over others could expose themselves to the charge of exercising an undue influence in religious affairs. It is not the role of the government, critics of this approach say, to promote a certain sect (for example, the Sufis) as a way to counter the influence of a school of thought (such as Salafist) that authorities deem dangerous.

Moreover, such an exercise in religious engineering could prove counterproductive. Western policymakers, who often lack even a basic knowledge of Islam, are unlikely to determine its evolution, and their attempts to do so could backfire. Scholars at London’s International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, for example, argue that “promoting ‘good Islam’ means that the ‘other Islam’ (or ‘bad Islam’) is what the West fears most, and it therefore unwittingly promotes al-Qaeda’s claim to be the only alternative to Western globalization.”<sup>12</sup> In substance, a government’s support of an interpretation of Islam it considers more attuned to its views could be seen as strengthening the jihadist argument that the West is at war with Islam.

## **Defining the Aims of Intervention**

Any government devising a program to stem radicalization needs to define its aim with precision. A first determination is whether the program seeks to counteract the violent form of radicalization or, more broadly, its cognitive form. Cognitive radicalization is the process through which an individual adopts ideas that are severely at odds with those of the mainstream, refutes the legitimacy of the existing social order, and seeks to replace it with a new structure based on a completely different belief system. Violent radicalization occurs when an individual takes the additional step of using violence to further the views derived from cognitive radicalism. Violent radicalization poses an immediate threat to the security of the collectivity, and all counterradicalization programs therefore target it. But should a government also target cognitive radicalism?

***Should a government target cognitive radicalism?***

A number of European governments have limited their interventions to what could be termed a narrow definition of radicalism, indissolubly linking it to violence. The declared aim of Prevent, the British government’s counterradicalization strategy, for example, is “stop[ping] people becoming terrorists or supporting violent extremism.”<sup>13</sup> Under this interpretation the state should not concern itself with the fact that an individual espouses ideas

considered radical, not least because such an assessment is highly subjective. Governmental intervention is warranted only when such radicalism clearly leads to the commission of acts of violence.

Authorities in other countries have opted for a broader definition of radicalization and therefore a more encompassing statement of aims. The AIVD, the Netherlands' domestic intelligence agency, states that its role is to monitor radicalization leading to terrorist violence, but it is equally concerned about "forms of non-violent radicalisation which could severely disrupt society."<sup>14</sup> These include "the creation of parallel community structures with forms of self-defined justice and the propagation of anti-democratic behaviour which could result in polarisation, inter-ethnic and inter-religious tensions and serious social unrest." Therefore, the working definition of radicalization used by Dutch authorities is "the growing preparedness to wish to or to support fundamental changes in society that do not fit within our democratic system of law." Whether these sentiments are accompanied by the use of violence will determine how Dutch authorities will intervene, but both violent and cognitive radicalization are considered phenomena the government should tackle.

The reasoning behind adopting the broader definition of radicalization is that, aside from its impact on the social cohesion of the extremely diverse societies of Western Europe, cognitive radicalism is widely understood to be the logical antecedent to behavioral radicalism. Because all terrorists have undergone a radicalization process and hence, before becoming violent radicals, were cognitive radicals, it is argued, the state should intervene as early as possible in the process to prevent the spread of radical ideas. Critics who challenge this position state that there is "no empirical evidence of a causal link between extremism and violent extremism."<sup>15</sup> They point out that though it might be true that all terrorists are radicals, the vast majority of radicals never make the leap into violence.<sup>16</sup> The rhetoric of a "slippery slope from political mobilisation to anger and, finally, to violent extremism and terrorism" is, according to some, flawed and not supported by facts.<sup>17</sup>

Another criticism comes from those who believe that cognitive radicals should be "tackled as social problems, not as a 'subset' of the al-Qaeda threat."<sup>18</sup> A report by the British think tank Demos clearly describes this position:

Certain kinds of behaviour, dress and attitudes—for instance among the Salafi community—are problematic for a secular, liberal state such as the UK, and raise wider questions about the status of faith in British politics, the legitimacy or otherwise of certain forms of sharia law, and an individual's right to behave in the private realm in ways that might be at odds with social norms or even laws. These are important questions that we need to debate as a society, but we must not let them get in the way of the priority of tackling terrorism.<sup>19</sup>

In substance, it is argued that certain ideologies do undermine social cohesion and that the government should aim at fostering integration and empowering disenfranchised communities to prevent the diffusion of such ideologies among them. Yet these efforts should be pursued separately from counterterrorism efforts.<sup>20</sup> According to critics of current approaches, a counterradicalization strategy that blurs the line between supporting social cohesion and countering terrorism is likely to achieve neither.<sup>21</sup> Authorities in various European countries have pointed out that linking well-intended integration and social cohesion initiatives with counterterrorism efforts irremediably taints the former, as the Muslim community feels stigmatized and believes itself to be perceived by the government as a security threat.<sup>22</sup> These sentiments further alienate some members of the Muslim community, possibly fueling a turn to radicalization.

The single most important factor influencing the decision of policymakers to focus counterradicalization efforts on violent radicalism or cognitive radicalism is the security threat facing their country. Governments confronting a severe threat of a terrorist attack are more likely to focus on violent radicalization than on more general and less immediately

***Cognitive radicalism is widely understood to be the logical antecedent to behavioral radicalism.***

visible threats to social cohesion. Another factor influencing the decision is the institutional mandate of the body making the decision. Institutions whose mandate is simply to prevent acts of violence are likely to focus solely on violent extremism. On the other hand, institutions that aim at preserving a harmonious and cohesive society are more likely to adopt a broader definition. A country's political culture is also important. Great Britain has a long tradition of tolerance for extreme rhetoric and potentially subversive activities, and some continental European countries have a much lower threshold and are more prone to move against cognitive radicalism before specific acts of violence emerge.

Most European countries have struggled to find a balance. In the interests of social cohesion and security, should a democratic state fight ideas it dislikes? There are many reasons why any government would want to oppose the spread of radical views, both from a social cohesion perspective and from a security perspective. Although the means to counteract violent and nonviolent radicals should be different, some argue that the latter should also be challenged. Yet the legal, political, and moral issues arising from doing so are significant. In a free democratic society, being a radical is a sacrosanct right, and the state should not impinge on its citizens' freedom to espouse any kind of idea. As a consequence, most Western democracies, lacking the legal tools and the political will to engage in an all-out war of ideas, have often found it easier to focus on violent extremism.

***Most Western democracies, lacking the legal tools and the political will to engage in an all-out war of ideas, have often found it easier to focus on violent extremism.***

In this regard, the recent convergence of views among British and Dutch counterradicalization authorities is instructive. The British, who have traditionally identified "violent extremism" as the target of their efforts, have recently begun to express what appears to be a reassessment of their goals. In 2009, the Home Office stated that its aim is "not simply about tackling violent extremism" but "is also about tackling those who espouse extremist views that are inconsistent with our shared values."<sup>23</sup> The Dutch, by contrast, have traditionally identified radicalization more broadly as any rejection of democratic values, even if not accompanied by violence. Faced with myriad practical difficulties in developing programs to challenge nonviolent Islamism, however, they are increasingly focusing just on violent radicalization.<sup>24</sup>

## Choosing Partners

No counterradicalization effort can succeed without the help of the Muslim community, and establishing strong trust-based partnerships with individuals and organizations in it is considered of paramount importance. But Western Muslim communities are deeply divided along ethnic, national-origin, linguistic, sectarian, and political lines.<sup>25</sup> The consequence of this fragmentation is that in all Western countries, no single organization can legitimately claim to represent a section of the Muslim community even close to being a majority. Unlike their counterparts in Muslim-majority countries and even in Singapore, which can count on an established and widely respected Islamic leadership, Western policymakers have to decide which of these many organizations to partner with. Choosing many local partners, which are more likely than large national organizations to have roots in the specific community, is the best way to address this problem. Further, creating partnerships with multiple organizations is more likely to harness the full potential of the Muslim community than is relying on few self-appointed middlemen.

Issues of credibility and legitimacy are paramount.<sup>26</sup> Which voices are listened to in the community and can deliver the government's message? In this regard, a particularly controversial matter is the role of nonviolent Islamists. In virtually all Western countries, networks and organizations close to the Muslim Brotherhood, Jamaat-e-Islami, or to the nonjihadist/political Salafists have gained a certain amount of influence, particularly among second-generation Western Muslims. These groups espouse various tenets of Islamist ideology that

make them radical in the eyes of most Western observers, particularly those having to do with religious freedom and women's rights. Yet even though they endorse acts of violence in certain Middle Eastern theaters, they do not advocate violence in the West. On the contrary, they have often publicly condemned terrorist acts carried out by al-Qaeda in Europe and North America. Could these "nonviolent Islamists" become partners of the government against violent radicalization?

A large number of experts believe that any government would be foolish not to harness the enormous potential that a partnership with nonviolent Islamists could hold.<sup>27</sup> Although some of their views might be offensive, nonviolent Islamists genuinely oppose violence and are in a unique position to influence those most likely to engage in violence. Only they have the legitimacy and street credibility to be listened to by young Muslims on the path to radicalization. Governments should therefore, it is thought, empower the work of these groups, which constitute the ultimate bulwark against violent radicalization.

One of the most enthusiastic supporters of this view is Robert Lambert, the former head of the Muslim Contact Unit, the section of the London Metropolitan Police devoted to engaging the city's Muslim community. Lambert argues that the "ideal yes-saying" Muslim leaders lack credibility in their communities and have no knowledge of radicalism.<sup>28</sup> Claiming that only nonviolent Islamists have the credibility to challenge the narrative of al-Qaeda and influence young Muslims who might be on the path to violent radicalization, he advocates "police negotiation leading to partnership with Muslim groups conventionally deemed to be subversive to democracy."<sup>29</sup> Lambert uses as an example of this potential the counterradicalization program STREET (Strategy to Re-Empower and Educate Teenagers), run by strict Salafists in the Brixton area of London.<sup>30</sup> According to Lambert, STREET, thanks to its combination of "street skills and religious integrity," has been particularly successful in counteracting the recruitment efforts of al-Qaeda-linked preachers in the area.<sup>31</sup>

Lambert's position is based on his extensive professional experience and his view of nonviolent Islamists as a firewall, preventing cognitive radicalization from becoming behavioral. The Danish security services (PET) share this view, arguing that in some cases "it is precisely these individuals who have the best chance of influencing the attitudes of the young people who are in a process of radicalisation, in a non-violent direction."<sup>32</sup> Others disagree and see nonviolent Islamist organizations not as firewall but rather as a conveyor belt for further radicalization. German security services, for example, publicly state in their annual reports that nonviolent Islamist organizations "do not carry out recruitment activities for the purpose of the violent 'Holy War' (Jihad). They might rather claim to immunise young Muslims against Jihadist indoctrination by presenting to them an alternative offer of identification. However, one has to critically ask whether their activities that are strongly directed at preserving an 'Islamic identity' intensify disintegration and contribute to the development of Islamist parallel societies."<sup>33</sup> Moreover, they argue, there "is the risk that such milieus could also form the breeding ground for further radicalization," laying the ideological groundwork for violent groups.<sup>34</sup>

Some British critics have laid out similar arguments. Former Home Secretary Jacqui Smith has stated that nonviolent Islamists "may not explicitly promote violence, but they can create a climate of fear and distrust where violence becomes more likely."<sup>35</sup> In the words of the Quilliam Foundation, a London-based think tank established by former members of Hizb ut-Tahrir who have rejected Islamism, nonviolent Islamists "advocate separatist, confrontational ideas that, followed to their logical conclusion, lead to violence. At the very least, the rhetoric of radicals provides the mood music to which suicide bombers dance."<sup>36</sup>

In light of these divisions it is difficult to assess whether Western governments can achieve their interests by engaging with nonviolent Islamists. Different perceptions of what the state interest is lead to different answers. If the state interest in counterradicalization

***Could these "nonviolent Islamists" become partners of the government against violent radicalization?***

programs is to prevent terrorist attacks, then, prima facie, there are reasons to think that engagement might bear fruit, at least in the short term. But if success in counterradicalization is deemed the almost complete marginalization of extremist and anti-integration ideas among young Western Muslims, then many believe that partnering with nonviolent Islamists is counterproductive. In that case, short-term and occasional forms of cooperation with nonviolent Islamists might be used to achieve gains against jihadists, but such tactical partnerships should not develop into a permanent strategy. The long-term implications would likely offset the results obtained in the security field.

Many security officials in European countries embrace the view that identifying the enemy only in violent groups is self-deceiving. Alain Grignard, deputy head of the Belgian police force's antiterrorism unit and a professor of Islamic studies at Brussels Free University, calls al-Qaeda an "epiphenomenon," the most visible aspect of a much larger threat that is political Islam.<sup>37</sup> Alain Chouet, the former head of France's counterintelligence service DGSE, agrees with Grignard, observing that "Al-Qaeda is only a brief episode and an expedient instrument in the century-old existence of the Muslim Brotherhood. The true danger is in the expansion of the Brotherhood, an increase in its audience. The wolf knows how to disguise itself as a sheep."<sup>38</sup>

Chouet's comparison of the Muslim Brotherhood to a wolf in sheep's clothing is echoed by many security experts, who fear that nonviolent Islamists are attempting to benefit from what in social movement theory is known as positive radical flank effect.<sup>39</sup> According to the theory, more moderate wings of a political movement improve their bargaining position when a more radical fringe emerges. Applied to nonviolent Islamists, the positive radical flank effect would explain why the emergence of al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups has led European governments to see the less radical fringe—the nonviolent Islamist groups—more benignly, and even to flirt with the idea of establishing forms of partnership. The emergence of a severe and prolonged terrorist threat, argue people like Chouet, has led European governments to lower the bar of what is acceptable and to endorse extremist organizations as long as they oppose violence on the Old Continent.

Yet, argue many, the social engineering program envisioned by nonviolent Islamists, which entails a rejection of many core Western values, is the real problem. And by empowering them through various forms of partnership, authorities make an enormous mistake of short-sightedness. Espousing this view, Shiraz Maher, a former high-ranking member of the British branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir, has written that

the central theoretical flaw in PVE [Preventing Violent Extremism, Britain's counterradicalization strategy] is that it accepts the premise that non-violent extremists can be made to act as bulwarks against violent extremists. Non-violent extremists have consequently become well dug in as partners of national and local government and the police. Some of the government's chosen collaborators in "addressing grievances" of angry young Muslims are themselves at the forefront of stoking those grievances against British foreign policy; western social values; and alleged state-sanctioned "Islamophobia". PVE is thus underwriting the very Islamist ideology which spawns an illiberal, intolerant and anti-western world view. Political and theological extremists, acting with the authority conferred by official recognition, are indoctrinating young people with an ideology of hostility to western values.<sup>40</sup>

Both arguments have some merit, and it is easy to see why the choice of partners can be the most challenging decision officials have to make. Intuitively, it can be argued that in some cases nonviolent Islamists act as a firewall, in others as a conveyor belt, yet there is little conclusive evidence to support either argument. It is fair to say they could serve a role in limited deradicalization efforts, in that they seem best positioned to intervene with already radicalized individuals. Partnering with them in radicalization prevention, on the other hand, is more controversial. Such a decision should be made only after an informed and nonideological assessment of the short- and long-term consequences of any form of engagement.

***Nonviolent Islamists . . . could serve a role in limited deradicalization efforts, in that they seem best positioned to intervene with already radicalized individuals.***

In sum, the lack of a clearly defined path to radicalization and the dearth of evidence on it make conclusive assessments of the role of nonviolent Islamist organizations in the radicalization process impossible. As a consequence, policies swing almost erratically. Most recently, though, British authorities, who had arguably been the most open among Europeans to tactical partnerships with nonviolent Islamist groups, have signaled a change of policy. Making clear that those who express views “which fall short of supporting violence and are within the law, but which reject and undermine our shared values and jeopardise community cohesion” should not be criminalized, the government also stated such groups would no longer receive any form of public support.<sup>41</sup>

## **Avoiding Stigmatizing the Muslim Community**

Prevent and other counterradicalization programs implemented in Europe have often been accused of unfairly targeting Muslims.<sup>42</sup> Communities that since 9/11 have been the frequent targets of negative portrayals in the media have reported feeling stigmatized by counterradicalization programs and being treated as “suspect communities,” as security threats rather than as full-fledged citizens. Many have argued that counterradicalization programs imply that Muslims are inherently prone to terrorism and represent a special problem. They point out that other forms of extremism, such as that coming from the far right, pose a significant threat to both social cohesion and security, yet only Islamism has been targeted with uncommon vigor. Some critics have also argued that programs such as Prevent are in reality nothing more than covers for spying on Muslims, leading a British Muslim community activist to call it “the biggest spying programme in Britain in modern times and an affront to civil liberties.”<sup>43</sup>

Authorities have often denied the claims that counterradicalization programs unfairly target Muslims or are used to spy on them, yet these perceptions remain widespread. It is critical for authorities to challenge these views, which can severely hamper the credibility and effectiveness of their programs. Branding and marketing are therefore no less important aspects of a counterradicalization program than its substance is. If the community perceives every governmental gesture, even the best intentioned, as being made only to stop radicalization, it could “alienate[s] the very community that it seeks to engage and influence positively, unwittingly heightening potential vulnerabilities to radicalisation.”<sup>44</sup>

Another criticism often levied against counterradicalization programs, and particularly their deradicalization components, is that they infringe on civil liberties and criminalize thought rather than behavior. A scheme that has been the focus of particularly intense attention is the Channel program, a deradicalization intervention system created by British authorities. Like similar systems in various European countries, Channel seeks the help of civil servants, teachers, social workers, community leaders, and other members of the public, who are instructed to report individuals they consider exhibiting signs of radicalization. A panel of experts that includes police officials, community leaders, and other authorities then assesses the case and might recommend some form of intervention, in most cases mentoring sessions with individuals the subject respects.

These referral schemes have been criticized as intrusive and as targeting people for expressing a view. The issue was raised in hearings held in the House of Commons in March 2010. Charles Farr, director general of the Office for Security and Counter Terrorism at the Home Office, gave an explanation as to why, in the government’s view, Channel is not set up to criminalize individuals whose views are radical but not a criminal offense but, on the contrary, “precisely to avoid them criminalising themselves.”<sup>45</sup> In the same testimony, Farr pointed to the poignant example of Hasib Hussain, one of the four British Muslims who carried out the suicide attacks in London on July 7, 2005:

***Authorities have often denied the claims that counterradicalization programs unfairly target Muslims or are used to spy on them, yet these perceptions remain widespread.***

We started to unpick what was known about Hasib Hussain. He had never come to the notice of the police at any stage in his young life and therefore in terms of opportunities for the police to intervene to prevent what went on to occur, there were just no hooks there. However, what we did discover is that as a model student whilst at Matthew Murray School his exercise books were littered with references to al-Qaeda, and the comments could not have been taken as other than supportive comments about al-Qaeda. To write in one's exercise book is not criminal and would not come on the radar of the police, but the whole ethos, the heart of Prevent is the question for me of whether someone in society might have thought it appropriate to intervene. What do I mean by intervention? I do not mean kicking his door down at 6 o'clock in the morning and hauling him before the magistrates. I mean should someone have challenged that? They are the sorts of cases that get referred through the Channel scheme.<sup>46</sup>

Farr's statement highlights the dilemma facing European policymakers. On the one hand, the idea of establishing a police-led system that singles out individuals simply for expressing views that, according to very vague and subjective standards, could be considered extremist is at odds with the ideals of all Western democracies and could stigmatize the Muslim population. On the other hand, traditional law enforcement techniques cannot always detect and neutralize the ever-evolving terrorist threat, and seemingly intrusive means such as Channel could serve a valid purpose. Policymakers therefore find themselves dealing with a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" dilemma in implementing some of the more intrusive measures of a counterradicalization strategy.

## Assessing Success and Failure

Measuring the effectiveness of counterradicalization programs is an inherently difficult task. Even the most comprehensive and well-thought-out deradicalization programs are unlikely to be completely successful. If, for example, one hundred individuals go through a deradicalization program and only a handful of them revert to terrorism, how is the program to be assessed? The success of radicalization prevention is even more challenging to evaluate because it requires planners to prove a negative: the number of individuals who did not become terrorists because of the program.

Governments have attempted to set clear metrics to empirically verify the effectiveness of their actions, ranging from simple quantitative analyses of program participation to more complex indexes seeking to determine the level of community engagement. Yet all these attempts fall short of providing a clear assessment. Nevertheless, measuring effectiveness is increasingly necessary. In times of deep budget cuts, demonstrating that the resources dedicated to counterradicalization programs are allocated for a reason is of paramount importance.

## Policy Recommendations

Counterradicalization programs are an immensely complex and controversial subject. They touch on extremely sensitive issues, such as religion, identity, and integration. They can be highly intrusive, impinge on civil liberties, and risk further alienating the very group they seek to reach. Despite these enormous difficulties, a preventive approach and a deradicalization effort are necessary components of a comprehensive counterterrorism policy. Countries such as Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Denmark have been at the forefront of devising counterradicalization programs. Their experiences hold some lessons that U.S. authorities should keep in mind as they devise their own counterradicalization program.

- **Policymakers should first understand the radicalization process.** Understanding the process is key to the subsequent development of countermeasures. The absence of a grand theory of radicalization reflects not the failure of experts but rather the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon. However, the absence of a single path to radicalization and the

complexity of factors causing it should not discourage policymakers from intervening. Through understanding the many factors—personal, structural, ideological—that shape the path to radicalization, authorities are in better position to devise a flexible approach built on an extensive knowledge of the individual or group targeted. It should be accepted that many efforts may ultimately prove ineffective, but the best recipe for success is a holistic and flexible approach.

- **Policy makers need to decide whether to target only violent radicalism or, more broadly, cognitive radicalism.** Any state has two reasons to opt for the latter. The former is strictly security-related. It is unquestionably true that the majority of cognitive radicals do not become violent radicals. But it is equally true that terrorism is not born in a vacuum and that most of those who commit acts of politically motivated violence first embrace a radical worldview. Moreover, some ideas espoused by Islamist groups severely undermine integration and social cohesion, making governmental intervention opportune. Such intervention would take very different forms, depending on whether it sought to tackle cognitive or behavioral radicalism. In a liberal democracy, individuals should be allowed to express their views, as abhorrent as they might be. But it is not unreasonable for a government to seek to oppose these views by introducing a counternarrative or by lending support to alternative voices.
- **Policy makers should be aware of the deepening role of ideology in the radicalization of Western Muslims.** Although some scholars still challenge the notion that religion plays any role in the radicalization of Western Muslims, it is increasingly evident that jihadist ideology, which is based on a particularly extreme interpretation of Islam, is the main driver behind the radicalization of some Western Muslims. Nowhere is this phenomenon more evident than in the United States, where most militants arrested over the past few years have had few to no economic problems. Poverty might be a driving factor for militants in areas of Africa, the Middle East, or South Asia, but very few Western Muslims join al-Qaeda for economic gain. Relative deprivation and economic segregation could contribute to the sense of disenfranchisement felt by many Western Muslims but would not in themselves cause violent radicalization without the existence of an ideology that interprets them and provides an alternative. Among jihadists, this ideology is unquestionably a religious one.<sup>47</sup>
- **Therefore, an effective counterradicalization strategy must be prepared to intervene in ideological and theological matters.** Despite the many difficulties of treading on such sensitive grounds, and despite the legal obstacles originating in the principle of separation of religion and state, the U.S. government should find ways to counter the theological message of violent Islamism. Because efforts to intervene in theological matters could potentially backfire (on numerous grounds), they should be preceded by a careful evaluation of opportunities, limits, and long-term implications. These determinations should be made at the highest levels and then implemented uniformly at the local level, as a lack of message consistency will severely undermine any effort.
- **Counterradicalization programs should choose partners carefully.** Efforts to counter radicalization, especially its theological components, are best conducted in partnership with the Muslim community. Identifying potential partners is problematic, as the Muslim community is fragmented, with no group representing more than a fraction of U.S. Muslims. Choosing many local partners with roots in specific communities is likely to build more trust and be more effective than partnering with large organizations at a national level. Partnerships with nonviolent Islamist groups pose a special problem. Such partnerships have achieved results in the security field, yet concerns about the long-term consequences for integration and social cohesion are always present. Partnership decisions should be

made only after a careful assessment of the nature of the specific group being engaged and the full spectrum of potential outcomes a partnership with it could trigger.

- **Policymakers and program managers should deliver appropriate messages to mitigate problems in implementation.** Even after program aims are defined and partners chosen, problems are likely to arise during the implementation phase. Appropriately framing and marketing initiatives is fundamental to avoiding the perception in the Muslim community that the U.S. government sees the community only through the lenses of counterterrorism or considers it an inherent security problem. No matter how well crafted, counterradicalization programs are destined to fail if they do not manage to overcome this perception.
- **Policymakers need to devise metrics to empirically measure the results of their actions.** Measurement is necessary not just to assess the successes or deficiencies of the programs but also to demonstrate their effectiveness and to survive budget cuts.

## Notes

1. In 2009–10, some seventy American citizens were charged with or convicted of terrorism or related crimes (U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, hearing, *Nine Years After 9/11: Confronting the Threat to the Homeland*, September 22, 2010). See also Lorenzo Vidino, *The Homegrown Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland*, Special Report ARI 171/2009 (Madrid: Real Instituto Elcano, December 18, 2009).
2. See [www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/rm/2010/138175.htm](http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/rm/2010/138175.htm) and [www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/hsac\\_cve\\_working\\_group\\_recommendations.pdf](http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/hsac_cve_working_group_recommendations.pdf).
3. For some definitions, see Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, eds., *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (London: Routledge, 2009); Froukje Demant, Marieke Sloomman, Frank Buijs, and Jean Tillie, *Decline and Disengagement: An Analysis of Processes of Deradicalization*, IMES Report Series (Amsterdam: Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies, 2008).
4. For an overview of the Saudi program, see Christopher Boucek, "Extremist Re-Education and Rehabilitation in Saudi Arabia," in Bjørgo and Horgan, eds., *Leaving Terrorism Behind*, 212–23. For Indonesia, see "Deradicalisation" and *Indonesian Prisons* (Jakarta and Brussels: International Crisis Group, November 19, 2007).
5. See, for example, Ryan Evans and Peter Neumann, *Islamist Militant Radicalisation in Europe: A Critical Assessment of the Literature* (London: International Center for the Study of Radicalisation, April 2009), and Transnational Terrorism, Security & the Rule of Law Consortium, *Causal Factors of Radicalisation*, (The Hague: TTSRLC, April 2008), [www.transnationalterrorism.eu/tekst/publications/Causal%20Factors.pdf](http://www.transnationalterrorism.eu/tekst/publications/Causal%20Factors.pdf).
6. Colonel John "Matt" Venhaus, "Why Youth Join al-Qaeda," USIP Special Report (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, May 2010), 8–11.
7. For an excellent overview of the literature on radicalization among European Muslims, see Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 9 (2010): 797–814.
8. Abdul-Aziz Oudah, "Judge Hamoud al-Hitar, Minister of Islamic Affairs, Talks about Using Dialogue to Confront Extremists," *Yemen Observer*, June 4, 2008, [www.yobserver.com/reports/10014374.html](http://www.yobserver.com/reports/10014374.html) (accessed September 4, 2009).
9. Quoted in Natalie O'Brien, "Terrorists Who Say No to Terrorism," *Australian*, October 22, 2007.
10. Religious Rehabilitation Group, sample presentation no. 1, [www.rrg.sg/edisi/data/trans.pdf](http://www.rrg.sg/edisi/data/trans.pdf) (accessed September 14, 2009); Mohamed Feisal bin Mohamed Hassan, "The Roles of Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) in Singapore," [www.rrg.sg/edisi/data/The\\_roles\\_of\\_RRG.pdf](http://www.rrg.sg/edisi/data/The_roles_of_RRG.pdf) (accessed September 14, 2009).
11. This is the opinion, for example, of the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee as outlined in its March 2010 report, *Preventing Violent Extremism*, Sixth Report of Session, 3.
12. *Perspectives on Radicalisation and Political Violence: Papers from the First International Conference on Radicalisation and Political Violence* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2008), 13.
13. *The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering International Terrorism* (London: Home Office, March 2009), 80.
14. *The Radical Dawa in Transition: The Rise of Islamic Neoradicalism in the Netherlands* (Zoetermeer: AIVD, 2007).
15. Rachel Briggs, "Community Engagement for Counterterrorism: Lessons from the United Kingdom," *International Affairs* 86, no. 4 (2010): 971–81.
16. Jamie Bartlett and Jonathan Birdwell, *From Suspects to Citizens: Preventing Violent Extremism in a Big Society* (London: Demos, July 2010), 8–9.
17. Rachel Briggs, Catherine Fieschi, and Hannah Lownsbrough, *Bringing It Home: Community-Based Approaches to Counter-Terrorism* (London: Demos, 2006), 43.
18. Jamie Bartlett, Jonathan Birdwell, and Michael King, *The Edge of Violence: A Radical Approach to Extremism* (London: Demos, 2010), 14.
19. Briggs, Fieschi, and Lownsbrough, *Bringing It Home*, 17.
20. Bartlett, Birdwell, and King, *The Edge of Violence*, 22; Bartlett and Birdwell, *From Suspects to Citizens*, 3; Briggs, "Community Engagement for Counterterrorism."
21. Bartlett, Birdwell, and King, *The Edge of Violence*, 22.
22. See, for example, H.C. Communities and L.G. Committee, *Preventing Violent Extremism*.
23. Home Office statement regarding the BBC program *Muslim First, British Second*, February 16, 2009, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/panorama/hi/front\\_page/newsid\\_7888000/7888793.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/panorama/hi/front_page/newsid_7888000/7888793.stm).
24. Interviews with Dutch officials, The Hague, December 2009.
25. Carolyn M. Warner and Manfred W. Wenner, "Religion and the Political Organization of Muslims in Europe," *Perspectives on Politics* 4, no. 3 (September 2006): 457–79.
26. In the UK, the Research Information and Communications Unit (RICU) conducted extensive research on the matter, interviewing hundreds of British Muslims. The resulting report is *Credible Voices: Exploring Perceptions of Trust and Credibility in Muslim Communities* (London: Home Office, March 2010).
27. Bartlett, Birdwell, and King, *The Edge of Violence*, 7.
28. Robert Lambert interview, London, December 2008.
29. Robert Lambert, "Empowering Salafis and Islamists against Al-Qaeda: A London Counterterrorism Case Study," *Political Science & Politics* 41 (2008): 31–35.
30. Jonathan Githens-Mazer and Robert Lambert, "Why Conventional Wisdom on Radicalisation Fails: The Persistence of a Failed Discourse," *International Affairs* 86, no. 4 (2010): 897.
31. *Ibid.*, 898.
32. *A Common and Safe Future: Proposal for an Action Plan to Prevent Extremist Views and Radicalisation among Young People* (Copenhagen: Danish Ministry of Refugee, Immigration and Integration Affairs, June 2008), 36.
33. *Integration as a Means to Prevent Extremism and Terrorism: Typology of Islamist Radicalisation and Recruitment* (Köln: Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution), January 2007), 5.

34. *Annual Report of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution* (Koeln: Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, 2005), 190.
35. Alan Travis, "Time to Tackle the Non-Violent Extremists, Says Smith," *Guardian*, December 11, 2008.
36. Quilliam Foundation, "Pulling Together to Defeat Terror," April 2008, 3, [www.quilliamfoundation.org/images/stories/pdfs/pulling-together-to-defeat-terror.pdf](http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/images/stories/pdfs/pulling-together-to-defeat-terror.pdf).
37. Quoted in Sylvain Besson, *La Conquête de l'Occident* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), 40.
38. Quoted in Caroline Fourest, *Brother Tariq: The Doublespeak of Tariq Ramadan* (New York: Encounter, 2008), 103.
39. See, for example, Herbert H. Haines, "Black Radicalization and the Funding of Civil Rights: 1957–1970," in *Social Movements*, eds. Doug McAdam and David A. Snow (Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing, 1997), 440–41.
40. Shiraz Maher and Martyn Frampton, *Choosing Our Friends Wisely: Criteria for Engagement with Muslim Groups* (London: Policy Exchange, 2009), 5.
41. *The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering International Terrorism (CONTEST 2)*.
42. H.C. Communities and L.G. Committee, *Preventing Violent Extremism*.
43. "Government Anti-Terrorism Strategy 'Spies' on Innocent," *Guardian*, October 16, 2009; Arun Kundnani, *Spooked! How Not to Prevent Violent Extremism* (London: Institute of Race Relations, October 2009); H.C. Communities and L.G. Committee, *Preventing Violent Extremism*, 8.
44. H.C. Communities and L.G. Committee, *Preventing Violent Extremism*, Sixth Report of Session, March 2010, 8.
45. *Ibid.*, 16.
46. *Ibid.*, 17.
47. Although not necessarily representative of the views of other Western jihadists, a comment by Omar Hammami, the Alabama-born convert to Islam currently occupying a high-ranking position in al-Shabaab, is very telling in that sense. "They can't blame it on poverty or any of that stuff," he wrote his sister on Facebook, explaining his reasons for joining the al-Qaeda affiliate in Somalia. "They will have to realize that it's an ideology and it's a way of life that makes people change" (Andrea Elliot, "The Jihadist Next Door," *New York Times*, January 27, 2010).



An online edition of this and related reports can be found on our Web site ([www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)), together with additional information on the subject.

## Recent titles from USIP Press

- *Why Youth Join al-Qaeda* by Col. Matt Venhaus (Special Report, May 2010)
- *The Go-Between: Jan Eliasson and the Styles of Mediation* (2010) by Isak Svensson and Peter Wallensteen
- *Light Intervention: Lessons from Bougainville* (2010) by Anthony Regan
- *Evaluating the 2010 NPT Review Conference* by Jayantha Dhanapala (Special Report, October 2010)
- *Dangerous Liaisons with the Afghan Taliban: The Feasibility and Risks of Negotiation* by Matt Waldman (Special Report, October 2010)
- *Civic Education and Peacebuilding* by Daniel H. Levine and Linda S. Bishai (Special Report, October 2010)
- *Local Justice in Southern Sudan* by Cherry Leonardi, Leben Nelson Moro, Martina Santschi, Deborah H. Isser (Peaceworks, October 2010)



**United States  
Institute of Peace**

1200 17th Street NW  
Washington, DC 20036

[www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)