

The Risk of Radicalization and Terrorism in U.S. Muslim Communities

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THE UNITED STATES HAS BEEN remarkably free of terrorist attacks by Muslim-Americans, in contrast to Western Europe where the latest attacks have been carried out by Muslim émigrés and recent descendants of Muslim émigrés. Is the United States, as some have suggested, relatively immune to the Islamist extremism wracking Europe because of its more diverse traditions, or is terrorism in the United States just late in developing, and soon to explode?

In evaluating the risk of Muslim radicalization in the United States, it is important to observe that the majority of U.S. Muslims are members of diasporic communities. In this paper, the spectrum of Muslim diasporas is first reviewed. We conclude that there is not just one, but rather a variety of Muslim diasporas in both Europe and the United States, each of which must be considered in its own unique cultural, social and political context. Consideration is also given to Muslim converts with no previous familial or associational ties to Muslim states, and therefore no ties to traditional Muslim diasporas.

Following is analysis of the radicalization of Europe's Muslim diasporas. It is estimated that some 80 percent of new recruits to the global Salafi jihad are children and grandchildren of Muslim émigrés who have felt alienated from their host cultures.¹ This alienation is the driving force behind not only Islamist radicalization but also the radicalization that results in more quotidian political and social violence. While the U.S. tradition of diversity may have slowed or deterred the radicalization of Muslim émigrés in the United States, this review suggests reasons to believe that the phenomenon now so threatening in Europe could become more threatening in the United States as well.

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Considering that immigrants to Western countries can have sharply contrasting integrative experiences and vastly different amounts of cultural capital in their new home countries, immigrant status is rendered a less relevant factor in explaining radicalization. Yet the diaspora represents a more specifically defined social category that is not limited to a single generation. The criteria for inclusion in a diaspora make it the most important pool of prospective domestic radicals. Hence results from the academic field of diaspora studies are extremely relevant to understanding Western terrorists' conditions and motivations. There are several definitions of diasporas and related terms that illuminate their distinction from immigrations.² Our working definition of the diaspora phenomenon is "groups of persons of the same ethno-national origin who themselves or whose ancestors migrated from one place to one or more other places, settled in these other places, and maintain various kinds of contacts with their place of origin."

102 To expand on this definition, an ethno-national diaspora is a social-political formation of people who are, and regard themselves as, united by the same ethno-national-religious origin, and who permanently reside as minorities in a hostland or hostlands. While deciding to remain in the new hostland, core members of diasporas still deliberately retain their common original culture and national identity. Ethno-national diasporans become organized and active in cultural, social, economic, and political spheres. Coping strategies for the complex situations of diasporans' lives include: integration (learning to operate within the new system, but possibly maintaining cultural distance from it), acculturation (blending into the new culture), communalism (maintaining themselves as a separate community), corporatism (having representative organizations which are recognized by the hostland government and political system), autonomism (acting in accordance to their cultural, social, political and economic background and interests) and isolation (going it alone). Most members of ethno-national diasporas select a combined communalist and autonomist strategy. Members of such entities maintain regular or occasional contacts with their homelands and with individuals and groups of the same ethno-national origin residing in other hostlands. Among their various activities, core members of such diasporas establish local and transnational networks that reflect and deal with the complex relations between diasporas, their host countries, homelands, and international actors. Typically they also develop a loyalty to their hostlands, and to avoid conflicts that could derive from this dual loyalty, they tend to follow the applicable rules of both homeland and hostland.³

The field of diaspora studies has evolved in the past 30 years in response to the tremendous growth in the number and size of diasporic communities worldwide. Increasingly, the ease of transportation and communication, and more porous bor-

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ders—especially in Europe and the United States—have increased the number of legal and illegal immigrants, many of whom settle as permanent members of diasporas in their host country.⁴ As diasporas grow, their members take on greatly enhanced roles in legal and illegal activities in their homelands, hostlands, and in international politics and economics. This growing political and economic participation has led to greater interest in the study of the general diasporic phenomenon and of specific diasporas.

There are two basic theoretical approaches to current diaspora studies. One approach views diasporas as transnational communities, espousing imagined, de-territorialized identities that are robustly influenced by postmodern, globalized, and hybridizing processes. The main argument of this school is that diaspora entities lose their ties to their homelands and exist as independent or highly autonomous units in the new global environment. The second approach argues that because of their inherent ethno-national identities and deeply rooted connections to a real or imagined homeland, most diasporas cannot be viewed as pure transnational entities. Researchers are beginning to see that dichotomies portrayed by these theories are not realistic and that diasporas exhibit characteristics of both.⁵

BACKGROUND—THE EUROPEAN SITUATION

The radicalization of alienated, young, and well-educated Muslims in Europe is especially alarming. This population includes those who have immigrated in search of a better life or education for themselves as well as their descendants. Members of these diasporas generally do not feel accepted by the recipient society and have often been radicalized within the mosque.⁶ For example, Mohammad Atta, the ringleader of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and two of his co-conspirators were graduate students in the Technological Institute in Hamburg, Germany. While in Germany, they joined a local mosque and were soon attracted to an extremist faction of Islam. The 11 March 2004 Madrid train bombings were conducted by Muslim émigrés and members of the Muslim diaspora originally from countries in North Africa. The 7 July 2005 London bombings were carried out by Muslim youth with Pakistani family roots, living in a Muslim diasporic community in Leeds, England.

These events raise concerns about so called “homegrown terrorists”: young, second- and even third-generation residents of Western countries driven by alienation and possibly inspired by the global Salafi jihad but carrying out attacks independently of it. Recent events, however, show that “homegrown” may be too simple a characterization. In August 2006, the major terrorist plot to hijack and blow up 10 U.S.-bound airliners out of London’s Heathrow Airport was led by British individuals of Pakistani descent who had traveled back to Pakistan, where apparently they were in contact with

al-Qaeda members for training in explosives.

The influence and involvement of al-Qaeda (which in a sense is also a transnational diasporic entity), suggests that the group inspired and facilitated such acts of the disaffected among Muslim British citizens. The director-general of the British security service MI5, Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller, stated in January 2007 that the service was watching 1,600 people "who are actively engaged in plotting, or facilitating, terrorist acts here and overseas." She said they had identified nearly 30 plots that "often have links back to al-Qaeda in Pakistan and through those links al-Qaeda gives guidance and training to its largely British foot soldiers here." She also said that other countries—Spain, France, Canada, and Germany—faced similar threats.⁷ Four months before the Madrid train station bombing, for example, an analytical essay calling for terrorist attacks to pressure the Spanish government to withdraw its troops from Iraq was found in a manual published on an al-Qaeda website.⁸

Social discontent and political violence motivated by diasporic alienation has taken other forms as well. While the October and November 2006 riots in Marseilles and Paris were not acts of terrorism, they certainly manifested the frustration and alienation of the Muslim émigrés and members of the Muslim diaspora who had not found acceptance in French society, but confronted a choice between being French and being Muslim. The murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam by a Muslim extremist Dutch Moroccan, angered by his film story of the plight of four Muslim women, is another example of this wrath.⁹

In the consensus document of the Committee on the Psychological Roots of Terrorism chaired by Dr. Post that was developed for the Madrid Summit on Terrorism, Security and Democracy (March 2005), several of the summary statements reflected the role of diasporas in the proliferation of terrorism and the need to adopt policies to deal with this growing problem:

Although most Muslim immigrants and refugees are not "stateless," many suffer from an existential sense of loss, deprivation and alienation from the countries where they live. They are often exposed to extreme ideologies that increasingly radicalize them and can foster entering the path of terrorism. The diaspora has been identified as particularly important for the global Salafi Jihad, with a large percentage (80 percent) of recruits joining and becoming radicalized in the diaspora.¹⁰

The committee recommended that Western governments actively integrate refugees and diaspora youth into the political culture of Western liberal democracies, while accepting immigrants' cultural and social beliefs and views. The Muslims in their diasporas should not be forced to choose between their new and original cultures, as were the French Muslim girls who were prohibited by a new law from wearing their hijabs while in school. It is no coincidence that France—which experts on the European Muslim

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diasporas regard as having the largest and least-integrated Muslim community in Europe—witnessed the previously mentioned rioting by poor, mostly well-educated but unemployed young men; the rioters were alienated Muslim youth who were protesting their estrangement from the mainstream French society, even while rejecting their parents' Islamic identity. To be sure, they were avowedly secular, mostly protesting economic inequities, but it is just such frustrated youth that were vulnerable to radicalization and ultimately terrorist recruitment in the radical mosques in Great Britain and Germany. That their vandalism has also been expressed as hate crimes against Jewish synagogues and Jewish centers in the suburbs of Paris suggests this group frustration could easily become a politically extremist and violent force.

MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN THE UNITED STATES¹¹

While there is no official tally of U.S. Muslims, a common estimate is between six and seven million.¹² Like Muslims in Europe, U.S. Muslims represent a number of ethno-national diasporas and are very heterogeneous, differentiated by a host of factors.¹³ Muslim diasporas in the United States hail from geographically diverse countries of origin—listed in order they are Iran, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine, and Iraq, and there are Yemenite and Egyptian communities as well—and these different origins matter. There is, for example, a major difference between the collective psychology of those of the Palestinian diaspora, who view themselves as stateless and are extremely resentful of what they perceive as biased U.S. policy, and those of the Iranian diaspora, many of whom fled Iran in the wake of Khomeini's Islamic revolution.

Diasporas differ in their generational composition; they can comprise mostly first-generation émigrés, those seeking a better life, or perhaps who fled persecution and unfavorable social and political conditions in the country of origin; or they can be primarily second-generation and beyond—those who may have become more integrated within the recipient U.S. culture (for some of these, the post-9/11 U.S. fear of Arabs and wariness of Muslims has led to bitterness).

Muslim diasporas maintain different levels of contact with relatives, other individuals

There is not a monolithic Muslim diaspora in Europe or United States.

and groups, and governments in their countries of origin and in other Muslim countries. U.S. Muslim diasporas vary widely in degrees of religious involvement and include those who are ultra-orthodox, those who rarely attend mosque, and non-practicing or ex-Muslims who are still part of a Muslim community. Additionally U.S. Muslim immigrants are assimilated and integrated into U.S. culture to varying degrees which, although difficult to capture empirically, can be indicated by such measures as voter registration, public school attendance, and inter-religious marriage. Though these fac-

tors are by no means the only sources of heterogeneity in U.S. Muslim communities, they highlight the fact that just as there is not a monolithic Muslim diaspora in Europe or United States. This heterogeneity in both Europe and the United States means that one should be careful not to generalize and view all Muslims as potentially or actually belonging to terrorist and criminal groups or organizations. It also means that there is a need to study far more carefully and more specifically the various individuals and groups to detect the potential for terrorist or criminal activities.

One of the only commonalities among U.S. Muslims is that most live in major metropolitan areas: 20 percent live in California, 16 percent in New York State, 8 percent in Illinois, 4 percent each in New Jersey and Indiana, and 3 percent each in Michigan, Ohio, and Virginia. The largest Muslim communities in Canada are found in Vancouver and Toronto. Dearborn, Michigan is considered the Muslim "capital" of the United States; it has the largest concentration of Muslims in the country, originating primarily from Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Israel/Palestine. Los Angeles has the largest community of Iranian-Americans. Houston also has a large Muslim population. In addition, of particular interest to those concerned with the implications of alienation is the incarcerated African-American population, some 30 percent of whom have accepted Islam while in prison.¹⁴

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM¹⁵

The United States has been remarkably free of terrorist attacks by Islamist residents, but not totally immune. It is important to recall that the first World Trade Center attack in 1993 was committed by U.S. Muslims from a radical mosque in New Jersey. Sheikh Abdul Rahman, the blind Egyptian cleric who inspired the attack, is currently seriously ill in federal prison and has called for acts of violence should he die in a U.S. prison. Moreover, Canadian and U.S. Muslim diasporas financially and politically support some of the terrorist groups in their homelands and other countries and maintain contacts with various terrorist groups, apparently including al-Qaeda. Terrorist attacks plotted by Vancouver and Toronto residents against U.S. targets have been thwarted, including the so-called "millennium plot" against Los Angeles International Airport for New Year's Day, 2000. In September 2002, the so-called Lackawanna Seven were arrested for providing material support to terrorism. Members of a Yemeni Muslim community in a working-class town just south of Buffalo, New York, they had been under FBI surveillance since the spring of 2001, when the seven had traveled to Pakistan and the al-Farooq training camp near Kandahar, Afghanistan. There they met with Osama bin Laden, and were trained in the use of automatic weapons and rocket-propelled grenade launchers and explosives. They were identified in their arraignment as "an al-Qaeda

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trained terrorist cell on American soil.”¹⁶ In the summer of 2005, four young Muslim men were arrested and charged with being members of “a radical Islamic organization”¹⁷ called Jam’iyyat Ul-Islam Is-Saheeh (JIS), meaning Assembly of Authentic Islam, and planning “to levy war against the United States” by deadly attacks on military installations and synagogues in Southern California. In June 2006, seven people were arrested in Miami in connection with an alleged plot against targets that may have included the Sears tower in Chicago.¹⁸ This was a domestic group, some of whom were alleged to belong to a radical Muslim group, who had tried to get into contact with al-Qaeda to discuss their plan. The group’s plan was naïve: they did not have explosives in their possession, and they can ultimately be discounted as self-aggrandizing, self-styled terrorists. Yet the case raises the question of how many others within the United States may be inspired by radical Islamic rhetoric to lash out violently. In February 2007, echoing the sectarian violence in Iraq, a wave of vandalism against Shiite mosques and businesses, believed to have been perpetrated by Sunni Muslims, struck Dearborn. Tensions among these communities developed at Rutgers University in New Jersey and other universities as well, in a development that can be seen as “a microcosm of what is happening in Iraq.”¹⁹

Without discounting the seriousness of the aforementioned acts of and support for Islamic terrorism by U.S. residents, given that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were perpetrated by non-resident aliens (albeit ones who had spent time in the United States, and maintained connections with local Muslim communities), it would appear that, for the most part, U.S. Muslims are not yet as radicalized and ready to participate in terrorist activities as are some European Muslims. Nevertheless, many Muslims in the United States feel alienated from U.S. society and angry about U.S. foreign and domestic policy. Thus one must assume that there are other factors accounting for the discrepancy between the U.S. and European experience with the willingness of resident Muslim diaspora members to engage in violent activity against the host country.

One explanation contends that the difference between the U.S. and European experiences is a reflection of the more vigorous tradition of diversity in the United States. Yet, the U.S. celebration of diversity might be more robust in myth than in practice. While Islam is one of the fastest growing religions in the United States, nearly 40 percent of Americans polled by Gallup self-report feelings of prejudice towards Muslims.²⁰ These prejudicial attitudes cannot be completely hidden (to say nothing of those who air them publicly), and certainly do not go undetected by U.S. Muslims. A particularly egregious example of anti-Muslim sentiment stemmed from the recent

election of Minnesota Congressperson Keith Ellison, a convert to Islam who traces his roots in this country back to 1742. When Ellison declared his intention to be sworn in with a Koran (which he subsequently was), Virginia Representative Virgil Goode wrote a letter to his constituents decrying Ellison's plan, insisting that he be sworn in with the Christian Bible, and suggesting that traditional U.S. values are threatened by the expanding U.S. Muslim population. Goode received overwhelming support from his constituents. Clearly there is confusion among some in the U.S. population about what it means to be a Muslim and a good citizen on one hand, and a radical Islamist intent on causing harm to the United States on the other; this confusion no doubt increases the sense of alienation on the part of some Muslims.

Given that the same social attitudes driving feelings of alienation among émigré and diasporic communities in Europe are pervasive in the United States, are Americans more immune to the terrorism and violence currently threatening Europe? Some argue that Americans are just later in generating the threat already materialized in Europe. Professor Gabriel Sheffer contends that the apparent resistance to radicalism among U.S. Muslims heretofore may well change. He observes, for example, that the Palestinian-American community is increasingly active, organized, and angered by its perception of a one-sided U.S. policy towards Israel and a total disregard for the plight of the Palestinian people, and suggests that the same trend of discontent over U.S. policy towards the country of origin applies to other U.S. Muslim diaspora communities as well. Thus, U.S. Iraqi communities are similarly beginning to show their dissatisfaction with the U.S. presence and role in Iraq.

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THE COMPLEXITY OF TERRORISM PREDICTION

Since militant Islam is a highly complex phenomenon, the goal for U.S. academics, security forces, and policy makers should be to identify the variables or factors that do predict the turn to militancy, and to measure them in Muslim populations in the United States, thereby evaluating the threat of Islamist terrorist actions here. Among the factors that should be considered are:

- The degree of organization of Muslim communities—which is higher in Europe than in the United States
- The host society's level of tolerance for the diaspora—in Europe there is opposition and even hatred demonstrated towards European Muslims by large segments of societies and governments, while the United States is seemingly more accustomed to ethnic heterogeneity, and the degrees of rejection and deprivation are lower, though as discussed above, not absent
- The speed of assimilation and full integration processes of Muslims—in Europe this may take generations, if it ever occurs, while in the U.S. assimilation and integration of diasporans can occur more quickly

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- The closeness of connections between the core members of Muslim communities to their homelands—to what extent does geographic proximity and political conditions in both the country of origin and hostland translate to personal bonds, and does this matter?
- The degree of radicalization of religious leadership

DIASPORANS AND TERRORISM

Reflecting concerns about terrorism, there is a growing interest in immigrants' and diasporans' involvement in terrorist activities in their homelands, hostlands, other states, and internationally. While we are still very far from fully understanding diasporans' motivations, strategies, and tactics in these sensitive and complex issues, there has been scholarly work on terrorism in the context of diasporas. Bruce Hoffman discusses the encouraging effect that the Munich Massacre at the 1972 Summer Olympics had on terrorist groups worldwide. The murder of eleven Israeli athletes and one German police officer by the Palestinian group Black September brought so much worldwide attention to the Palestinian cause that the number of organizations engaged in international terrorism increased from 11 in 1968 to 55 in 1978. In particular, Hoffman compares the struggles of the Armenian and Palestinian diasporas, showing how the former learned lessons from the latter about the valued attention terrorist acts can bring to one's cause. Sheffer refines the relationship between the various categories of "others" (from tourists, asylum seekers, guest workers, organized trans-state ethnonational diasporas, to cultural and religious transnational dispersals) and terrorism.²¹ He states that there is a need for comparative investigations of the roles and purposes of members of these diverse groups, and the terrorist activities in which they may become involved. There are also a number of other noteworthy studies relating diaspora communities and terrorism.²²

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HOMEOWN MUSLIM TERRORISTS

Beyond the question of radicalization of second- or third-generation Muslims within Muslim diaspora communities, the question of so-called "homegrown terrorists," (i.e., converts to Islam and in particular to virulent, radical Islam) and the danger they pose should briefly be considered. While their number is likely small, the danger may be considerable because of their relative geographic mobility as U.S. citizens with long-standing cultural ties to the country. Included in this small group are Jose Padilla, the so-called "dirty bomber"; John Walker Lindh, who joined and fought for the Taliban; Ryan Anderson, a Muslim convert and member of the Washington National Guard who was convicted of providing military intelligence to al-Qaeda; and most strikingly Adam Gadahn, known as "Azzam the American", who served as a major propagandist

for al-Qaeda and was the first American to be charged with treason in more than 50 years.²³

110 Six months after 9/11, Padilla presented a proposal to Abu Zubaydah, al-Qaeda's chief of operations, to detonate "an H-bomb." Zubaydah reportedly cautioned Padilla to think smaller and consider getting training and attacking the United States with a dirty bomb, a conventional explosive packed with radioactive waste. Anderson declared in a sting operation, "I wish to defect from the United States. I wish to join al-Qaeda, train its members, and conduct terrorist attacks." Now 28, Azzam, the son of a prosperous Jewish physician, converted to Islam at age 17. He is the narrator in a 45-minute long al-Qaeda documentary called *An Invitation to Islam*, in which he calls on Americans to give up their previous religions, adopt a virulent brand of Islam, and "join the winning side." In the documentary, Azzam refers to the United States as "enemy soil" and celebrates the 9/11 hijackers as "dedicated, strong-willed, highly motivated individuals." He is a new addition to the U.S. government's most-wanted list of terrorists, with a \$1 million bounty for information leading to his capture. Richard Reid, (the so-called "shoe bomber"), who is currently serving a life sentence in the United States, was reportedly sent on his mission by Khalid Sheikh Mohammad. While Reid was a British citizen who converted to Islam, what led him on his radical pathway is important to understand and may have bearing on U.S. "homegrown." For most of Reid's boyhood years, his Jamaican father was in prison; Reid himself was involved in street crime and spent years in Britain's Young Offenders' Institution, where he converted to Islam. The issue of conversion to Islam by African-Americans incarcerated in U.S. prisons is an area of major academic and policy community concern in terms of vulnerability to radicalization. While a more robust discussion of the issue is beyond the scope of this paper, prison conversion is unique in processes that could lead to radicalization in how inextricably tied it is to feelings of alienation. In depth case studies of these "homegrown" cases can help inform understandings of this small but growing and important phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

The finding that 80 percent of new recruits to the global Salafi jihad become disaffected and are radicalized within diaspora communities leads inexorably to the conclusion that these communities must be a major focus of efforts to counter the growing threat of Islamist radicalism generated within these diasporic communities. A principal recommendation of the 2005 International Summit on Democracy, Terrorism, and Security was for "interventions that respect cultural differences while helping to integrate the refugees with the recipient societies."²⁴ This will require Western governments to develop

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and implement community-based interventions with the goal of promoting community- and individual-based changes, while, and this is key, respecting the cultural integrity of the émigré population. In Western Europe, the degree of alienation and feelings of societal rejection have become so intense that this will be a very difficult endeavor, requiring a sustained effort over decades. It is imperative in the United States, where the attitudes apparently are not nearly so intense and entrenched, that such programs be implemented to forestall deeper and more pervasive alienation and subsequent radicalization. But it should be emphasized that in fact we do not have a firm grasp of the degree of alienation already present in Muslim diasporic communities in the United States; gaining such knowledge requires culturally sensitive research to identify the attitudinal issues that must be addressed. 

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