

Testimony by Dr. Peter Neumann

Visiting Scholar, Bipartisan Policy Center;

Founding Director, International Center for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR) at King's College London

The following is a summary of the recently published report 'Preventing Violent Radicalization in America', which can be downloaded in full at <http://www.bipartisanpolicy.org/library/report/preventing-violent-radicalization-america>.

The report was released by the Bipartisan Policy Center's National Security Preparedness Group, which is led by Governor Tom Kean and Representative Lee Hamilton, the former chairmen of the 9/11 Commission. I was the report's principal author. For more information on the group, see <http://www.bipartisanpolicy.org/category/projects/homeland-study-group>.

Introduction

In December 2010, Attorney General Eric Holder told journalists that the terrorist threat had changed from “foreigners coming here to... people in the United States, American citizens”. A number of independent studies have confirmed this assessment. One of the most recent – published by the New America Foundation and Syracuse University – showed that “nearly half” of the 175 cases of Al Qaeda related homegrown terrorism since September 11, 2001, occurred in 2009 and 2010.

The threat is sufficiently serious to ask whether the U.S. government is fully prepared to confront this new challenge. “Hard” counterterrorism efforts – both at home and abroad – have become sophisticated and successful, yet there still is no domestic equivalent of the State Department’s “Countering Violent Extremism” policy, that would seek to prevent young Americans from being radicalized at home.

Last September’s report by the National Security Preparedness Group, *Assessing the Terrorist Threat*, concluded that the lack of a coherent approach towards domestic counter-radicalization has left America “vulnerable to a threat that is not only diversifying, but arguably intensifying”. The purpose of the report is to provide guidance on ongoing efforts aimed at developing such an approach.

Radicalization and Counter-radicalization

- *There isn't a simple template or formula that would explain how people radicalize.* Radicalization involves many steps and stages at which the process can be stopped or reversed. They are opportunities for prevention, which can (and should) be harnessed by policymakers.
- *Unlike counterterrorism, which targets terrorists, counter-radicalization is focused on the communities that are targeted by terrorists for recruitment.* The aim is to protect, strengthen, and empower these communities, so they become resilient to violent extremism.
- *Counter-radicalization is a policy theme, not a single policy.* It is delivered through a multitude of channels. The range of relevant activities is potentially unlimited, but typically involves: messaging; engagement and outreach; education and training; and capacity-building.
- *None of the instruments of counter-radicalization are coercive.* Counter-radicalization is not primarily a law enforcement tool. Law enforcement, however, has a role to play. It represents a “bridge” between counterterrorism and counter-radicalization, and helps to inform both.

Lessons from Abroad

In recent years, many Western countries have launched counter-radicalization policies. They offer a useful pool of lessons for how counter-radicalization may work in a democratic setting:

- *It's important to be clear about the policy's aims.* Policies will differ depending on whether they seek to prevent “cognitive” or “violent” radicalization.
- *Governments need to be careful in choosing community partners.* Outreach efforts should reflect communities' diversity, and distinguish between “engagement” and “empowerment”.
- *Most counter-radicalization is local.* National governments can provide guidance, resources, and coordination, but relationships and networks have to be leveraged from the ground up.
- *Governments should avoid “securitizing” their relationships with communities.* Counter-radicalization and counterterrorism must be separate.
- *It is critical – but not always easy – to measure success.* Governments should be rigorous in assessing the impact and effectiveness of local initiatives.

The American Experience

Any policy needs to be informed by America's unique set of constitutional, political, and cultural imperatives:

- *Policymakers need to respect the values embodied in the Constitution.* This means countering extremist narratives in the “market place of ideas”, and refraining from “adjudicating intra-religious affairs”.
- *Any policy should reflect the size, complexity and dynamics of American government.* Domestic counter-radicalization will require strong leadership and coordination. It also needs to be cost effective, and should take full advantage of the American philanthropic tradition.
- *Counter-radicalization in America must account for the diversity and attitudes of American Muslims.* Approaches will need to be varied, and should seek to capitalize on Muslims' commitment to the American Dream.
- *Policymakers need to address concerns about counterterrorism policies.* Perceived grievances about counterterrorism and America's role in international affairs should be dealt with proactively.

Strategic Survey

Despite the absence of an openly stated policy, the range and scale of counter-radicalization related activities at the federal level have increased significantly since early 2010. While many of these activities are positive, they sometimes lack coordination and strategic oversight:

- *Engagement* with American Muslims is carried out through the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties; the Department of Justice's (DoJ) Community Relations Service; the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC); and the U.S. Attorneys (DoJ).
- It remains unclear who is leading the effort to *share information*. Both DHS and DoJ's office for Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) share best practices on community policing. NCTC coordinates information sharing on counterterrorism.
- Very little *training* is aimed specifically at counter-radicalization. DHS and DoJ offer counterterrorism and cultural competency training for their staff. They also provide training grants for state and local governments.

- Activities that serve to *promote good governance and build capacity* within Muslim communities include civil rights enforcement (DoJ); programs for new immigrants (DHS) and prisoners (DoJ); as well as civic education and community empowerment (Departments of Education, and Health and Human Services).
- *Analysis* on issues related to violent extremism is produced by units within DHS and NCTC.
- High-level *messaging* on violent extremism originates within the National Security Council.

State and local governments' involvement in counter-radicalization is uneven. Only a small number have institutionalized engagement with Muslim communities, while most have delegated this responsibility to their police forces. *Of the non-governmental entities involved in counter-radicalization, those that don't describe themselves as "Muslim" or "Islamic" are often overlooked.*

The federal government's emerging policy aims to provide coherence and a clear(er) division of labor between federal agencies as well as between the federal and other levels of government. Its underlying assumptions are fundamentally sound:

- The overall framework will be generic and allow for different kinds of threats to be addressed. The government's principal target for the time being will be Al Qaeda, and most counter-radicalization efforts will – therefore – revolve around mobilizing American Muslims against Al Qaeda and its ideology.
- The federal government will serve as a “broker” and “convener”, who empowers states, local governments and communities. The aim is to produce a “mosaic of engagement” in which the federal government coordinates, evaluates and shares best practices but doesn't run activities on the ground.

Recommendations

Messaging

- *Communication with Muslim communities must include an “ask”.* If the government believes that American Muslims have a unique role to play, it shouldn't be reluctant to say what it is.
- *Al Qaeda's ideology should be challenged as well as contested.* The government's current efforts focus on *contesting* Al Qaeda's ideology by contrasting the positive vision of equal citizenship, religious freedom and shared aspirations with Al Qaeda's claim that being Muslim is incompatible with being an American. Especially in smaller settings, rather than only offer a competing vision, it may be appropriate to *challenge* the group and its ideology directly and aggressively.
- *Government should be careful not to meddle in religious debates.* While government should rebut the claim that devout Muslims can't be loyal Americans, government pronouncements about the character of Islam or the “true” meaning of religious concepts – however well intentioned – are not credible, nor do they do justice to complex theological debates. It is not for the U.S. government to decide what Islam – or any other faith – is, and what it is not.
- *The policy of refusing to name the ideological underpinnings of Al Qaeda is contrived and counterproductive,* especially when educating law enforcement officers and other officials. Police officers, FBI agents, and prison guards should be taught how to distinguish between the faith practices of ordinary Muslims and the murderous ideas of “violent Islamist extremists.”

Structure and Organization

- *Any policy requires strong leadership and coordination.* The White House should lead the policy across government. For each policy function, there needs to be a lead department or agency.
- *Counterterrorism and counter-radicalization must be separate.* None of the agencies that are mainly concerned with counterterrorism should be seen to play a dominant role in counter-radicalization.

Information-sharing

- *The White House should designate one agency that serves as the principal hub for collecting, disseminating, and evaluating information on counter-radicalization.*
- *Government must promote standards for effectiveness.* The objective is for benchmarking to become a “best practice”, so that uniform standards will emerge over time.
- *The development of an intervention capability that is consistent with American culture and values should be a priority.*

Outreach and Engagement

- *Outreach efforts should reflect the diversity of Muslim communities.* Government mustn't rely on religious interlocutors alone to convey its message to American Muslims.
- *Officials need to understand the difference between engagement and empowerment.* The government should seek to maintain open lines of communication with a wide array of community groups, but recognize that not all groups are appropriate government partners. As a minimum, government partners should be committed to (1) upholding the Constitution of the United States, and be consistent in (2) expressing their opposition to acts of terrorism and (3) the killing of Americans anywhere.
- *Federal engagement efforts need to galvanize local activities.* Otherwise, federal outreach remains an intermittently engaged “flying circus”, while local engagement continues to be reactive, not proactive.
- *The new role of the U.S. Attorneys as anchors of federal outreach is positive and should be institutionalized.* They should be given adequate resources and institutional incentives to fill it.

Capacity-building

- *Capacity-building must focus on places and populations “at risk”.* It should concentrate on penetrating difficult environments and hard to reach populations.
- *Each department and agency should “scan” existing programs for counter-radicalization impact.* Doing so will help to “mainstream” the concept. It also makes good fiscal sense.
- *Government must engage non-profits and the private sector.* The government should use its “convening power” and bring “outsiders” to the table.

Training

- *DHS and DoJ must overhaul their procedures for awarding training grants.* In their current state, they counteract the aims of counter-radicalization.
- *More training needs to be offered on engagement, outreach, and cultural competency.* Such training should be available to police and “civilian” officials at all levels of government.

Community Policing

- *Government must recognize the limits of community policing.* Community policing is an important element of generating trust, but it is not a substitute for counter-radicalization.

Above all, the government must be persistent. Building resistance to Al Qaeda and its narrative will not occur overnight, and it will require the government to review how well counter-radicalization policy is being implemented and improved over a long period of time. Congress and the American public have an important role to play in ensuring the government's commitment to challenging and countering radicalization never wavers. As the 9/11 Commission pointed out, making America safe from terrorism is a “generational challenge”, and “the American people are entitled to expect their government to do its very best” in meeting it.