Radicalization in the Homeland—the Need for Community Partnership and Education

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On Aug. 5 2010, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder announced the indictment of 14 for involvement in a deadly network sending extremists to Somalia to join the terror group al-Shabaab. At least half were reported to be U.S. citizens. These arrests are part of a series of such actions to disrupt terrorists with connections to the U.S. homeland over the last two years. Cyber-radicalization became a hot topic of discussion following revelations of possible internet communications between U.S.-born, Yemeni based, radical cleric Anwar Al-Awlaki and Maj. Nidal Hassan of the Fort Hood shootings, as well as Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab of the failed “underwear” bombing during a flight inbound to Detroit on Christmas Day, 2009. Other recent examples of radicalization include Bryan Neal Vinas, a New York native who provided information for attack planning against Grand Central Station in New York City and who was captured while fighting against coalition forces in Afghanistan; Faisal Shahzad, who attempted to carry out a car bombing in Times Square; and Omar Hammami, an American-born leader in al-Shabaab. What can we learn about the radicalization process from these cases and what does it inform us about the type of response necessary to provide early warning of terror activities in the U.S.?

Radicalization of American Citizens

For many years after 9/11 a myth of “them” permeated American thinking about Islamic extremists. Extremists were from faraway places, with grievances based upon local conditions—often tied to poverty, lack of opportunity and general anomy—this popular line of thinking went. As examples of radicalization in Europe continually presented themselves, it became popular to blame extremism there on failed European policies of multi-culturalism. According to this paradigm, Muslims lived together in communities in Europe where they were offset and alienated from their host culture, making radicalism more potent and appealing. This same problem didn’t exist in the “melting pot” of the U.S. where immigrant populations were quickly integrated in search of the American dream. This myth conveniently ignored early examples of home-grown radicals such as John Walker Lindh, Jose Padilla and the Lakewanna Six.

What is now apparent is that radicalization can happen anywhere, and American citizens are not immune. Omar Hamammi explained his opinion of why people radicalize: “They can’t blame it on poverty or any of that stuff. They will have to realize it’s an ideology and it’s a way of life that makes people change. They will also have to realize that their political agendas need to be fixed.”

There are ideological factors involved in radicalization as well as political grievances and aspirations. Those that have radicalized in the U.S. have been educated, middle-class and
generally unremarkable. In most cases they were not practicing Muslims earlier in their lives, and several were converts to Islam. A moment of self-reflection, generally brought on by crisis, led to a search for answers. For example, Faisal Shahzad is known to have had significant financial problems in the period prior to his radicalization; Nidal Hassan turned to Islam after the death of his parents; Bryant Neal Vinas converted to Islam after a traumatic divorce by his parents.

In their quest for solace, the individual comes into contact with Salafi Islam. Salafism is an extreme interpretation of Islam. Its adherents believe that Islam was lived in its truest and purest form during the prophet Mohammed's life. In the years immediately following his death, the Islamic Ummah was led by the companions of the prophet, the four "rightly guided caliphs" or Rashidun, Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman and Ali. Salafists seek to turn Islamic worship back to their interpretation of Islamic practices during that period, which ended in 661 A.D. Though Salafists are not terrorists, almost all Sunni-based terror groups are Salafists. Introduction to Salafi Islam includes indoctrination in concepts regarding the requirement to jihad until Islam is spread throughout the earth, and Takfirism, wherein one Muslim may identify another as a Takfir, or apostate. According to Salafis, apostates must be put to death. Indoctrination into Salafi beliefs will come from contact with other Salafis on the Internet, a student association, radical literature such as Sayyid Qutb's Milestones, or other friends and associates. This period of ideological indoctrination leads some to seek out opportunities to live in accordance with their newfound beliefs—watching of jihadist videos, engaging in pseudo militant activities such as paintballing and martial arts with other salafists, and an eventual desire for travel abroad either for further ideological and militant training or to actually participate in terror operations.

Knowing the Process, What Response is Needed?

While it should be expected that law enforcement and intelligence would monitor the activities of key radicalizers, the diffusion of Salafi beliefs means that these efforts will reveal only a limited number of individuals being radicalized. Rather, like other dispersed criminal enterprises, law enforcement and public safety officials must continuously educate citizens on the threat, and then rely on their cooperation to identify and neutralize these threats. Those most closely associated with individuals being radicalized will see the changes in personal behaviors that should present red flags if they are properly informed. As Americans we prize freedom and liberty. Yet, many of the danger signs are things that are completely legal and constitutionally protected behaviors. Taken together they should raise concerns to a thoughtful and informed person that is well acquainted with the past behaviors of the individual in question. It is only through a partnership between the community and law enforcement that such instances of radicalization can be identified and neutralized before irreparable harm is committed. Such warning signs include:

- Change from secular lifestyle to religious lifestyle--includes cessation of drinking, smoking, Islamic dress and prayer five times a day. A move towards Salafism will include being critical towards others that are not living their lives in the same manner. The individual may cut off associations with family or other long-standing relationships if persons are considered too secular and may be rude and refuse to speak to secular persons or non-Salafi Muslims.
- Increasing interaction with Salafists whether in person or online; watching al-Qa'ida and other terror propaganda videos.
Withdrawal from more orthodox religious groups, e.g. the local Mosque, because the imam or Muslims attending are not devout enough—belief that moderate imams conceal the truth about the duty to jihad.

Adoption of anti-American political views—a belief that the United States is at war with Islam, is killing innocent Muslims, will be subject to Allah's wrath for violation of Muslim lands etc. They may become politically active, e.g. joining or organizing anti-war rallies and speaking events.

Raising money for non-local Islamic charities.

Adopting views of inferiority of women; forcing wives and girlfriends to wear hijab, avoiding personal and social contact with women and belief that beating women is a right.

Adopting strong anti-Semitic views; an ideology that Jews will eventually all be killed before the end-of-days. Calling Jews "pigs and monkeys."

Advocating for killing of apostates—viewing of secular leaders in Muslim lands as apostates. Belief that democracy and all other forms of government are apostate except for Islamic Law, Sharia, and must be destroyed to make way for the return of an Islamic Government, Caliphate.

Belief that non-Muslims have three choices: to convert, subject themselves to Islamic rule and pay the appointed tax, or die.

Interest in militant training and activities or association with other Salafists engaged in para-military drills and exercises.

Desire to travel to Muslim lands, with special concern for Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan. True interests may be masked from non-Salafist friends and family. Look for vague and suspicious communications, e.g. "I'll be gone a while and might not be back," "I'm taking a trip to Pakistan and may not return," and "I have something important to do; you'll hear about me on the news."

Interest in, obsession with and advocacy of jihad-belief that Islam will be spread through jihad.

Summary

These views represent Salafist interpretations of Islam as espoused by al-Qa'ida and ideologues like Sayyid Qutb. Though personal views are not a crime, a dramatic shift from secular or traditional Islamic lifestyle to that of a militant Salafi is cause for concern that should not be ignored. By educating our citizenry on the process and signs of radicalization we encourage early detection and warning of potential terror activities in the homeland. Without such an effort, we are at a marked disadvantage.