

Statement of Senator Susan M. Collins  
**“The Roots of Violent Islamist Extremism and  
Efforts to Counter It”**

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

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Islam is a major world religion with more than one billion adherents worldwide. Like most other religions, Islam has myriad variations that are adopted or rejected by people from all walks of life, who view these different alternatives through the lens of their own experiences. The vast majority of Muslims lead peaceful lives, following the tenets of faith, prayer, fasting, charity, and pilgrimage that characterize mainstream Islam.

There are also some Muslims who subscribe to an extreme variation of Islamic ideology that is antithetical to our Western culture and our constitutional democracy.

**Yet, they too may pose no threat to our way of life nor to the free exercise of other faiths.**

**But there also exists a subset of violent Islamist extremists, who seek to impose their worldview – including the creation of a global totalitarian state – through all means, including violence. These terrorists turn to violence to achieve their ideological goals, seducing recruits and supporters with religiously laced rhetoric that legitimizes and exalts violence.**

**To better understand the roots of violent Islamist extremism, this Committee is exploring the radical religious ideology that can be used to incite or to justify acts of terror. Specifically, we seek answers to the following questions:**

- **Is a certain ideology a necessary, albeit not sufficient, factor in leading an individual to embrace violence?**
- **How do some extremists use ideology to legitimize terrorist acts and incite others to commit them?**
- **What other factors contribute to turning an individual from the non-violent advocacy of an ideology to violent extremism?**
- **How can we deter the use of violence in support of any ideology?**

**Learning more about Islamist extremist ideology is only part of our inquiry, however. To understand why an individual becomes violent, we must also consider other triggers, including the social, political, and**

**psychological factors that may combine with ideological beliefs to lead recruits down the path of terrorism.**

**This is a complex area of inquiry not susceptible to easy analysis and quick fixes. I do not believe that we can say that ideology is *the* root cause of terrorism any more than we can say that racism or perceptions of injustice and oppression are sufficient in themselves to explain violent extremism. Indeed, experts have debunked myths that all terrorists are psychotic, poor, uneducated, or otherwise fall within an easily identifiable profile.**

**As we gain a better understanding of all the factors that might contribute to terrorism, we must work with leaders in the American Muslim community to address these root causes and to delegitimize violence as a means of promoting a system of beliefs.**

**As the Committee explores these issues, we must be clear that our efforts are designed to prevent *violence*, not suppress the peaceful expression of ideas, even those beliefs that we may find repugnant. For example, I am alarmed when extremist ideology is used to justify the oppression of women or those of other religious faiths. As a public official, however, my personal abhorrence cannot color my judgment as to the fair treatment of those who espouse this ideology, so long as it is not accompanied by violence.**

**Let me emphasize that point: I condemn any group or individual of any ideology that supports, condones, finances, or otherwise uses terrorism to advance their goals. Let me say in equally uncertain terms: I also condemn any action by any government that would**

**punish individuals merely for the exercise of their unalienable rights to worship and speak as they choose.**

**More than 230 years ago, as this country declared its independence from tyranny, it also declared through the protections of the First Amendment of our Bill of Rights that on these shores the clash of ideas would be waged with words – not guns and bombs.**

**To that end, our duty as policy-makers is to protect the political institutions that give individuals the right to express their views and exercise their rights without resorting to violence. For in a world where terrorists kill innocent men, women, and children to forcefully impose their beliefs on others, the true battle is between those who are violent and those who are not.**

**The Constitution protects an individual's right to *hold* any belief he or she may choose. This constitutional principle underlies some of the unique features of the American way of life that have so far helped to prevent violent extremism from taking root in this country. These values – such as the openness of our society, tolerance for different viewpoints, and assimilation of peoples of different faiths and ethnicities – are incompatible with extremist ideas like the suppression of other religions. This is an ongoing struggle, but if we remain true to our democratic ideals, it is one that I am confident we can win.**