

Written Testimony of

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“Assessing and Addressing the Threat: Identifying the Role of the National
Commission on the Prevention of Violent Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism”

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Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing, and Terrorism Risk Assessment

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Thank you, Congressman Bennie Thompson, Congresswoman Jane Harman, and members of the House Homeland Security Committee's Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing and Terrorism Risk Assessment for inviting me to testify on "Assessing and Addressing the Threat: Defining the Role of a National Commission on the Prevention of Violent Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism." On behalf of the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), I am honored to offer analysis and recommendations that we believe can be helpful and constructive in increasing the understanding and role of the mainstream Muslim American community within the broader strategy of protecting the country. While one of the most underutilized assets, understanding and partnering with the Muslim American community and its legitimate, authentic and credible leadership is the key to countering extremism and radicalization.

One major aspect of any effective counterterrorism strategy is community-based policing, similar to neighborhood watch groups that have been effective in dealing with various crimes throughout the United States. To this end, MPAC launched the National Grassroots Campaign to Fight Terrorism in 2004 (<http://www.mpac.org/ngcft/>). This program was based on three critical components: 1) amplifying Islam's message against terrorism; 2) developing partnerships between law enforcement and local Muslim communities; and 3) offering guidelines to Muslim institutions to demonstrate transparency and accountability in the post 9/11 era. This program is based on the Quranic instruction: *"Whosoever killed a human being - unless it be in punishment for murder or for spreading corruption on earth - it shall be as if he had killed all humankind; whereas, if anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he had saved the lives of all humankind."* [5:32]

Down the street from this House Office Building is the FBI Headquarters, and in the interior is etched an important quote underscoring the need for partnership: "The most effective weapon against crime is cooperation ...the efforts of all law enforcement agencies with the support and understanding of the American people."

Hence, the role of community-based organizations like MPAC is critical to bridging the governmental and non-governmental agencies in any policy initiative. To do so, there must be an environment of mutual trust and respect. Muslim Americans want to be treated as partners in making America safe and secure, not suspects. Treating them as suspects by advocating for policies that single out and hence isolate the entire community undermines and impedes efforts for homeland security.

Engagement

Direct engagement with the Muslim American community is now a clear strategy of several federal agencies. It is the time to look more closely at the human and intellectual resources Muslim Americans can offer in the various areas of interest. Lately, hearings on radicalization have focused on campuses, the internet and prisons. For each of these problem areas, there are solutions found within the Muslim American community.

Muslim Americans want to be part of the solution and do away with the stigma of being part of the problem. On the issue of universities, Muslim organizations and individuals work with students in counseling and guidance towards problem-solving. On the issue of the internet, there are several internet sites that provide thoughtful analyses on current affairs and counter extremist rhetoric. On the issue of prisons, Muslim chaplains are a critical part of the answer to self-styled leaders that wear the cloak of Islam. Here I'd like to focus on Muslim

Youth and the key factors in supporting rather than isolating our youth. In order to scratch beyond the surface to begin understanding and preventing radicalization from taking root in the United States amongst our youth, we must identify and explore the critical issues of identity, the government's responsibility to partner with credible leadership, the effects of Islamophobia, and the application of counterproductive language.

Muslim Youth

MPAC recently issued a special report on Muslim youth entitled "The Impact of 9/11 on Muslim American Young People: Forming National and Religious Identity in the Age of Terrorism and Islamophobia" (<http://www.mpac.org/article.php?id=512>). The recommendations in this report identify important steps that universities, government, media professionals and Muslim American institutions can take to begin their collective contribution to supporting and protecting our youth. In regards to the government's role, the recommendations include but are not limited to creating an Inter-Agency Muslim American Youth Advisory Board of leaders and young professionals, eliminating conflation of every criminal activity by Muslims as terrorism, more vocally speaking out against anti-Muslim hate speech, and inviting young Muslim American professionals and youth to trans-Atlantic dialogues that aim to create space for Western Muslim Youth to compare their experiences and build friendships and alliances. Furthermore, our federal law enforcement agencies should publicize the important and productive relationship they hold with Muslim American organizations and their leadership in order to demonstrate to the American public that mainstream Muslims are working alongside the government to protect their communities and

their country. As we discuss the potential threat of homegrown terrorism and radicalization, universities also play a critical role in fostering inclusion.

For this reason, we recommend that universities institutionalize a Muslim chaplain position for every campus in the United States. While every campus has a Hillel support system or a Christian chaplaincy, Muslim students have no comparable support. Hence, MPAC is calling for a collaborative effort emanating from the leadership of every college campus to institute a Muslim religious advisor funded, staffed and certified by the university to ensure the applicability of the chaplain's contributions are germane to each campus. In tandem, universities should dedicate resources to the creation of centers for Muslim American studies that can foster better understanding of the Muslim landscape, including much needed academic research. This research, when coupled with direct engagement, should facilitate further integration of Muslim Americans into American pluralism.

Credibility of Leadership

The word moderate has been politicized in the discourse on counter-extremism to the extent that it has lost its impact. Moderate has become associated with the individuals who have left Islam and condemn the religion wholesale. Government partnering with credible leadership within the Muslim American community is a key component in effective engagement. The Commission needs Muslims who are self-critical without being self-hating. A major problem in the policy-making circles is the absence of Muslim Americans who represent the mainstream community with a track record in enhancing civic engagement, interfaith and human relations.

Campus life should represent the best of America in offering opportunities for critical thinking, free speech and civil discourse. Hence, discussions with federal agencies on the distinctions between free speech and incitement to violence are crucial to the development of healthy debate in universities. Federal programs in promoting dialogue and countering hate speech could be very instructive and beneficial to Muslim and non-Muslim student groups.

Islamophobia

Those involved in counterterrorism policy-making should understand that the more negative the image of Islam is in public discourse, the more fertile the soil will be for radicalization of Muslim youth throughout America. Young people react to perceived threats upon their identity by amplifying the most noticeable anti-social elements as symbols of their independence and chosen identity.

MPAC offers the Muslim American identity as the model for healthy integration into American pluralism. We reject the “clash of civilizations” theory as we see no friction between the founding principles of America and the values of Islam. As we have repeatedly stated, “Home is not where our grandparents are buried, but home is where our grandchildren will be raised.” Hence, America is home, and defending it against all who seek to harm her is our priority. Defending the Muslim American community against those who scapegoat and stereotype Islam and Muslims is a priority in effective civic engagement and securing our nation.

Terminology

While radicals use Islam to justify terrorism, we cannot afford to lend Islamic legitimacy to extremist groups. Hence, using “Islamic” before terms like fascism, terrorism, violent radicalism is counterproductive. MPAC appreciates the initiative of the Committee on Homeland Security to make distinctions between Islam and its exploitation by extremists.

In conclusion, to the mainstream Muslim American community, Islam is the antidote to violent radicalization. The empowerment of the mainstream Muslim American community is the most effective but underutilized resource in creating effective counter-terrorism strategies. MPAC is optimistic and is ready to foster cooperation and mutual understanding between our government and the Muslim American community.