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Radicalization of Global Islamist Terrorists

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Mr. Chairman, thank you for inviting me to present my views on the threat of violent Islamist extremists in Europe and the United States. There is a great disparity in the threat faced in these two continents. Data on arrests for Islamist terrorism related charges indicate that the rate of arrest per Muslim capita in Europe is about five times that of the United States. In order to understand this discrepancy, we must analyze the process transforming normal young Muslims into people willing to use violence for political ends. The understanding of this process of "radicalization" is critical to assessing the threat facing the West and should be the basis guiding our interventions to counter it. This is a complicated issue, and given the time constraints of this hearing, my remarks will necessarily sound too simplistic. I apologize for this, but I would like to suggest the outline of a framework that might organize our thinking about how us to tackle this problem. These ideas are more fully developed in my new book[1], which I will gladly provide to the committee as soon as it is available.

My continuing research into Islamist extremism[2] shows that the terrorists are idealistic young people, who seek glory and thrills by trying to build a utopia. Contrary to popular belief, radicalization is not the product of poverty, various forms of brainwashing, youth, ignorance or lack of education, lack of job, lack of social responsibility, criminality or mental illness. Their mobilization into this violent Islamist born-again social movement is based on friendship and kinship. Lately, over 80% of arrested terrorists in Europe and the United States are part of the Muslim Diaspora, mostly second and now third generation of immigrants. They are radicalized in the West, and not in the Middle East. Usually, they are small groups of friends and relatives, who spontaneously self organize into groups that later turn to terrorism.   Before 9/11, they were able to travel freely and to connect with al Qaeda central, giving the movement a greater appearance of unity than it ever had. At this point, only some British Islamist radicals with family connections in Pakistan can physically connect with fellow travelers of the al Qaeda terrorist organization. Otherwise, these new groups are physically isolated but connected through Internet forums, inspired by the extremist ideology and hoping that they will be accepted as members of al Qaeda through their terrorist operations.

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[1] Marc Sageman, in press, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-first Century*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

[2] See also Marc Sageman, 2004, *Understanding Terror Networks*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

From my review of the literature and my field research both in Europe and in the United States, I have come to think about the process of radicalization as consisting of four prongs: a sense of moral outrage; a specific interpretation of the world; resonance with personal experiences; and mobilization through networks. These four factors are not stages in a process, nor do they occur sequentially. They are simply four recurrent phases in this process. As mentioned earlier, this process is driven by young Muslims chasing dreams of glory by fighting for justice and fairness as they define it. They are enthusiastic volunteers, trying to impress their friends with their heroism and sacrifice. Suicide bombers, or *shahids* as they call themselves, have become the rock stars of young Muslim militants.

1. **Moral Outrage.** One of the major utterances from Islamist radicals is a sense of moral outrage, a reaction to perceived major moral violations, like killings, rapes or local police actions. Before 2003, the major source of such outrage was the killings of Muslims in Bosnia, Chechnya, the second Palestinian intifada and Kashmir. Since 2003, the war in Iraq is definitely fueling this process of radicalization. Although the war in Iraq did not cause this social movement – after all, 9/11 occurred before the invasion of Iraq –, it has since captured all the sense of moral outrage in Muslims all over the world. In all my talks with Muslims, Iraq is monopolizing the theme of any conversation about Islam and the West. The humiliations of Abu Ghraib and GITMO as well as multiple statements from Western leaders surface in such conversations. More locally, many Muslims also cite local law enforcement actions against Muslims, bridging the local and global in their worldview.

2. **Interpretation.** This sense of moral outrage must be interpreted in a certain way to foster radicalization. The common interpretation is that all these global and local moral violations are examples of a unified Western global strategy, namely a "War against Islam." Having said this, it is important to realize that this worldview is deliberately vague and that there has been far too much focus on ideology in trying to understand radicalization. In my observations of Islamist terrorists, I came to the conclusion that there were <u>not</u> Islamic scholars. The defendants at the Madrid bombing trial, at the Operation Crevice trial in London, at the Operation Pendennis litigation in Australia or at the various Hofstad Group trials in Holland are far from being Islamic scholars. The same is true for the perpetrators of 9/11 and those indicted in Miami, New York, New Jersey and Toronto for attempted terrorist operations. These people are definitely not intellectuals who decide what to do after careful deliberation. I believe that the explanation for their behavior is not found in how they think, but rather in how they feel. All these perpetrators dream about becoming Islamic heroes in this "War against Islam," modeling themselves on the seventh century warriors that conquered half the world and the Mujahedin who defeated the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Many hope to emulate their predecessors by now fighting in Iraq against coalition forces. Their interpretation, a "War against Islam," occurs within a cultural tradition, and this is where Europe and the United States differ. First, in Europe, nations are founded on the basis of the myth of a certain essence, namely Frenchness, Englishness, Germanness… In the United States and other countries built on successive modern waves of immigration, the founding myth is that of a "melting pot." The point is that the myth of a national essence excludes non-European immigrants, while that of a melting pot facilitates their inclusion into the host society. Second, the notion of the American Dream, the land of

opportunity, partially protects the United States from this form of terrorism. Whether it is true or not, the important point is that people believe it. A recent poll found that 71% of Muslim Americans believe in the American Dream[3]. This is not the case in Europe, where Muslims complain about discrimination in the labor market. Third, American Individualism partially prevents the generation of a collective explanation for any personal adversity. For instance, if a Muslim American is asked why he did not succeed at work, he or she will usually answer, "I did not try hard enough." This individualistic answer also combines the core of the American Dream, namely equal opportunity. On the other hand, when I ask Muslim Europeans the same question, they usually answer with a shrug, "I'm Muslim." This is a collective explanation, which may eventually give rise to anger against the host society. Other polls demonstrate that Muslim Europeans answer that they feel Muslim first rather than a member of their host nation. This does not bode well for the future of European Muslim relations. Finally, U.S. tradition of local grass root voluntarism allows Muslim Americans to channel some of their discontent in local politics. This is less likely in Europe. A sense of local empowerment might be protective against a larger strike against the society in general.

3. **Resonance with Personal Experience.** The interpretation that the West is engaged in a War against Islam sticks more to Muslim Europeans than Americans because it resonates with their everyday personal experience. This notion of resonance brings in the social, economic, political and religious factors that constitute the infrastructure of their everyday life. This factor is what scholars traditionally define as the "root causes" of terrorism. First, from a historical perspective, we are dealing with very different communities. The United States was able to cherry pick immigrants and allowed Muslim engineers, physicians, university professors and businessmen to immigrate. The result is that the Muslim American community is solidly middle class, with a higher average income than the rest of society. This is not true of Europe, which imported unskilled labor to reconstruct the continent that had been devastated by World War II. So, on a socio-economic scale, we are dealing with very different communities: middle class in the United States and an unskilled labor pool in Europe. In terms of the labor market, Muslim Americans believe that they are facing equal opportunity. Europeans know that this is not the case, as the male Muslim unemployment rate is much higher than the average rate in the rest of society. Muslim Europeans strongly believe they are facing discrimination because they are Muslim. Welfare policy also distinguishes Europe from the United States, and allows Europe to tolerate a high unemployment rate. Many Muslim Europeans, because they are unemployed, are on the welfare payroll. Many do not feel the urgency to get a job and a few spend their idle moments talking about jihad. In essence, European nations are funding some young people to be full time jihadi pretenders. As terrorist operations do not cost much, much of the funding for attempted operations come from European states, from their welfare payments. One cannot underestimate the importance of boredom in an idle population, which drives young people to seek the thrill of participating into a clandestine operation.

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[3] Pew Research Center, 2007, *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream*, at
http://pewresearch.org/assets/pdf/muslim-americans.pdf

4. **Mobilization through networks.** The factors described above influence some young Muslims to become angry, and vent their frustration on the Internet. What transforms very few to become terrorists is mobilization by networks. Up to a few years ago, these networks were face-to-face networks. They were local gangs of young immigrants, members of student associations and study groups at some radical mosques. These cliques of friends became radicalized together. The group acted as an echo chamber, which amplified their grievances, intensified the members' bonds to each other, generated local values rejecting those of society and facilitated a gradual separation from their host society. These natural group dynamics resulted in a spiral of mutual encouragement and escalation, transforming a few young Muslims into dedicated terrorists, willing to follow the model of their heroes and sacrifice themselves for comrades and the cause. Their turn to violence and the terrorist movement was a collective decision, rather than an individual one. Over the past two or three years, face-to-face radicalization is being replaced by online radicalization. It is the interactivity of the group that changes people's beliefs, and such interaction is found in islamist extremist forums on the Internet. The same support and validation that young people used to derive from their offline peer groups are now found in these forums, which promote the image of terrorist heroes, link them to the virtual social movement, give them guidance and instruct them in tactics. These forums, virtual marketplaces for extremist ideas, have become the virtual "invisible hand" organizing terrorist activities worldwide. The true leader of this violent social movement is the collective discourse on half a dozen influential forums. They are transforming the terrorist movement, recruiting ever younger members and now more prominently women, who can participate in the discussions.

Now that I have outlined my analysis of the threat, and commented on the cultural and structural differences between Europe and the United States, what can we do about it? From the driver of the process – a search for glory – it becomes obvious that we need to eliminate the glory from this activity and reduce it to common criminality. There is nothing more glorious than to go against men and women in uniform from the only remaining superpower. We need to demilitarize this fight against terrorists and turn it over to law enforcement. It is also important not to give too much importance to the terrorists who are arrested or killed. We should resist the temptation to hold press conferences to publicize another "major victory" in the war on terror. These have the undesired effect of elevating the status of these criminals to that of heroes.

On the first prong, it is important to remove as soon as possible U.S. troops from Iraq, which has become the main source of inspiration of the new generation of Islamist terrorists. In the West, the Muslim community is very sensitive to the action of local law enforcement agencies. If it perceives them to act against its members, it will assume that the state is also against it. In a sense, this is what happened in many European countries, where Caucasian policemen patrol immigrant neighborhoods. Local police forces need to be seen as part of the community at large and their recruitment need to reflect the composition of their communities. It is not enough to have regular meetings with Muslim community leaders, whom the younger generation does not respect. Through the recruitment of young Muslims, police forces would have an ongoing everyday relationship with young people in the

community. Furthermore, it is important to win the Muslim community over and explain police actions to them. This has become a problem in England because of the legal ban on commenting on criminal cases in litigation. However, the opposite – making exaggerated claims of threat for short term political benefits – will also alienate the Muslim community. So far, Muslim Americans have shown themselves to be very patriotic, but this has not been well recognized either by the press or by our government. It is important to trust them to continue in this path and not to alienate them.

On the second prong, it is important to show that our counterterrorism efforts are not part of a war on Islam. We have made many mistakes in this arena. Most Muslim Americans do not believe that the U.S. led war on terrorism is a sincere effort to reduce terrorism. Here, it seems that actions speak louder than words. The government should actively challenge those who question the loyalty of Muslim Americans. The American Dream is alive and well among Muslim Americans. It should be further confirmed through the continued publications of some of their success stories. These stories should become sources of inspiration and hopes for young Muslims, who should be encouraged to emulate these positive role models rather than those of Islamist terrorists. To become successful for a young Muslim American should be viewed as "cool." I see the "war of ideas" or the search for a "counter-narrative" as generally misguided: terrorists are not intellectuals. They do what they do because of vague images of glory, not out of well thought out positions derived from any scripture. The "war of ideas" should be replaced by the inspiration of new dreams and hopes for young Muslims. We should learn our lessons from our own experience with the Civil Rights movement, when Reverent Martin Luther King inspired a generation with his speech "I Have a Dream!"

On the third prong, the United States is doing much better than Europe. We should continue to be fair and fight any discrimination in the labor market, at airports, and law enforcement. Our social internal successes should be internationally advertised through programs sending abroad successful Muslim Americans to talk about their life in our country. Muslims should also be encouraged to enter into the realm of politics and show that they can peacefully influence their environment.

On the fourth prong, it is of course important to disrupt the networks that threaten the United States, Europe or any population. We must eliminate terrorists and bring them to justice. However, this should be done quietly, so as not to elevate common criminals to the status of heroes. Now, many such networks are virtual, centered in Internet forums, where young Muslims share their dreams, hopes and grievances. This is an internal Muslim discussion. However, we can encourage some young Muslims, who reject violence, to actively participate in these discussions in order to actively challenge the various calls to violence emerging from them.

The American Muslim community is relatively young, having mostly immigrated in the last half century. Its young generation is searching for its identity and trying to define its role with respect to the rest of American society. It is important for the rest of American society to welcome Muslim Americans and help them integrate better within the fabric of our nation. We are doing better than our European counterparts in this regard, but we must continue to promote core American values of justice and fairness and fight those elements in our society that try to single out and antagonize part of our nation.