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**Hearing before the Senate Homeland Security and
Governmental Affairs Committee**

Hearing on

**Roots of Violent Islamist Extremism and
Efforts to Counter It**



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**Statement for the Record
of
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Chairman Lieberman, Ranking Member Collins, and distinguished members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss terrorist efforts to spread their ideology, the Intelligence Community's (IC) efforts to understand it, and the broader U.S. Government's efforts to counter it. I will focus my remarks on the role of ideology in the radicalization process that can lead to violent extremism and the National Counterterrorism Center's (NCTC) initiatives to improve US national security at home and abroad.

Violent extremism is always possible in any ideologically-driven movement, just as we see in al-Qa'ida today. Two decades ago, for example, one of our principal concerns was the violence of left-wing extremists, such as the Red Brigades. Today's hearing is on the radicalization process that has led to violent extremism in Islam, but what I'm about to describe could be applicable in a variety of circumstances.

Ideology gains importance in the latter stages of what we assess to be a four-step radicalization process. It takes on a crucial role in preserving some radicals' commitment to violent extremist activities, which usually requires continuous socialization in a subculture of violence.

The extremist ideological leanings that set the precedent for many of today's radical Islamic movements were articulated by Sayyid Qutb, a member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, during the 1950s and 1960s. He argued the notion that Islam's primary enemies are Western cultural liberalism and its Middle Eastern ally—Zionists and Jews generally—and condemned practically all contemporary governments of the Middle East for introducing secular ideologies and developing economic ties to the West that subjugate Islam.

- The ideas set forth in his book, Signposts on the Road (1965), became the major themes for the ideology of many of today's violent extremist movements. His stress on the critical importance of militant struggle became a starting point for seminal figures of jihadist thought including Usama Bin Ladin and 'Ayman al-Zawahiri. Since then many other ideological tracts have been written and disseminated that espouse similar views including Abu Musa'b al-Suri's 1600-page book, The Global Islamic Resistance Call; Yusif al-'Iyari's Iraq's Jihad—Hope and Dangers. An Analysis of the Current Situation, Looking to the Future,

and Practical Steps Toward the Blessed Jihad; and Abdallah ‘Azzam’s Defense of Muslim Lands, the First Obligation After Faith.

Al-Qa’ida propaganda echoes the thought of Sayyid Qutb and other ideologues. The core narratives repeated in al-Qa’ida messages are that the West and its allies in the Muslim world seek to destroy Islam, that Muslims must counter this threat through violence, and that just rule under Islamic law is the reward for expelling Western influence.

- Bin Ladin and other al-Qa’ida leaders have consistently claimed the 9/11 attacks were a necessary response to Western efforts to subjugate Muslims. In his public commemoration of the sixth anniversary of 9/11, Bin Ladin charged that America “insisted on erasing Islamic identity and destroying its strength.”
- Ayman al-Zawahiri in a July 2007 video called on HAMAS and other Islamist movements to “cooperate and support each other in order for the word of God to be supreme, and for *shari‘ah* to rule and have undisputed authority, and to free all occupied Muslim lands, and to establish the caliphate.”

There is no single underlying catalyst for the initial stages of radicalization. Although most individuals reject extremism outright, personal frustration at perceived social injustice and other grievances can prompt individuals to reassess their accepted worldview and be more open to alternative perspectives—some of which espouse violence. The most common catalysts—particularly in Muslim majority countries—include blocked social mobility, political repression, and relative socioeconomic deprivation.

- Violent extremist groups try to foster and take advantage of this period of reassessment through propaganda and public outreach. For example, extremists use the Internet, videos, and leaflets with graphic images of Muslim casualties to induce moral outrage and a sense of crisis. For Arab audiences in particular, the radicals are likely to exploit engrained historic grievances, such as incidents in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Some individuals seek answers to their sense of frustration through religion – in this case Islam. Obviously, seeking answers through religion is not in and of itself a bad approach. The problem arises when the individual comes in contact with a violent extremist group or message, which is often the pivotal point for an individual and a second step in the radicalization process. Several factors increase the likelihood that a person seeking answers in religion will make contact with a radical movement.

- Individuals are often introduced to the fringes of violent extremist groups by friends, family members, authority figures, and through the Internet when the immediate environment does not provide access. For example, Mohammad Siddique Khan—thought to be responsible for recruiting and radicalizing at least

two men suspected in the London bombings on 7 July 2005—was a teaching assistant and “mentor” at the Hamara Youth Access in Leeds.

- Many violent extremists emphasize that they turned to leaders who were willing to talk politics when mainstream religious figures refused, citing the belief that Muslims should avoid controversial political and social issues and focus on piety.

Being brought into a radical group initially does not mean that an individual will be drawn fully into violent extremist activity because an important factor, and the third stage of this radicalization process, is the individual’s willingness to accept the sacred authority of the violent extremist – that is the violent extremists’ right to interpret Islam or provide an ideological framework.

- The ideological understanding of individuals undergoing radicalization into a subculture of violence is vulnerable because they are typically younger and have a much less thorough and rigorous religious training than their nonviolent counterparts.
- Proponents of violent extremism try to portray themselves as self-sacrificing truth seekers who only want to serve Islam, while they revile nonviolent Muslims as corrupt and deviant.
- Individuals drawn to extremist groups have indicated to academic researchers that the personality and charisma of the group’s spiritual leader also play important roles in perceptions of the leader’s sacred authority. Violent extremists frequently disparage mainstream Islamic scholars, portraying them as cold, arrogant, and part of a generation that is out of touch with the concerns of younger Muslims.

Simply reaching step three in this process does not explain why some individuals absorb this ideology and others do not. The following factors may play a role in determining the final stage where an individual accepts the extremist worldview and ultimately engages in violent, high-risk behavior.

- Previous knowledge of Islam. An academic study of extremist Muslims in the UK found that many radicals had low levels of religious knowledge before their exposure to a radical group.
- Learning/authority attributes. Sociological and psychological studies indicate that individuals and communities that emphasize rote memorization and an unwillingness to challenge authority are more likely to lend themselves to radical indoctrination than others.
- Technical education. The black and white ideology of violent extremism appears to be more appealing to individuals from technical and scientific backgrounds, such as Usama Bin Ladin and ‘Ayman al-Zawahiri.

- Countervailing influences. Lack of exposure to a variety of Islamic perspectives and non-Islamic worldview makes it more likely that individuals will fully internalize the extremist message.
- Peer Pressure. Group dynamics, particularly in extremist study circles, most likely affect the prospects for successful indoctrination. An academic researcher found that strong social ties played a factor in both the radicalization and de-radicalization of Italian left-wing terrorists.
- Lack of exposure to extremist atrocities. A Pew poll study published in July 2007 found that confidence in Bin Ladin among Jordanians dropped by 36 percent between 2003 and 2007, reflecting widespread revulsion toward the bombings of three hotels in Amman in November 2005. The poll indicated declining confidence in Bin Ladin in all seven countries surveyed during this timeframe.

The vast majority of Muslims reject al-Qa'ida's ideology, particularly its extreme interpretation of Islam and justifications for violence. Many of the themes in al-Qa'ida propaganda, however, exploit viewpoints that are widespread in Muslim countries. The fact that many Muslims sympathize with grievances claimed by al-Qa'ida yet the overwhelming majority of Muslims reject al-Qa'ida's actions suggests that political or economic grievances alone are not sufficient to explain terrorist recruitment.

- Polling data suggests many Muslims are predisposed to believe al-Qa'ida's claim that the United States threatens Muslims, but disagree that conflict between the West and Islam is inevitable. A Pew survey published in July 2007 found that between 63 and 93 percent of respondents in 11 predominantly Muslim countries worried that the US could pose a military threat to their country, yet a World Public Opinion poll in April 2007 only found that minorities in four surveyed Muslim countries believed violent conflict between Islam and the West is "inevitable."
- Many Muslims also broadly accept calls for Islamic law, yet not on al-Qa'ida's harsh terms. A Gallup study published in February 2007 found that majorities in all nine surveyed Muslim countries—except Turkey—wanted some form of Islamic law as the basis of governance. However, no less than 82 percent of respondents—in contrast to al-Qa'ida—also would include provisions for free speech in a hypothetical new constitution for their country. These attitudes likely reflect dissatisfaction with the probity of existing governments than a desire for Taliban-like conditions in their own countries.
- Like al-Qa'ida, many Muslims accept that attacks on US soldiers in Muslim countries are legitimate—but few agree with the group's targeting of innocents. The World Public Opinion poll found that 91 percent of urban Egyptians approved of attacks on US forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time, fewer than 8 percent in any of the four surveyed countries agreed attacks on

civilians for political ends were strongly justified or approved of attacks on US civilians.

NCTC's evolving understanding of Muslim communities and the process by which individuals are indoctrinated into the ideology of violent extremism informs the Center's efforts to produce objective, timely, and accurate intelligence and to coordinate, integrate, and synchronize the US Government's counterterrorism activities.

- Our Directorates of Intelligence and Strategic Operational Planning each have teams dedicated to this important mission and collaborate constantly constituting one of the Center's most successful linkage of subject matter expertise with deliberate strategic planning. Much of NCTC's growth over the past two years—and much of our planned growth in the coming year—is dedicated to government-wide coordination and analysis to counter radicalization.
- We are working with the Office of Management and Budget to identify the USG's current capabilities and to develop desired end states and performance metrics to help guide our resource decisions and address impediments to progress. This step is critical because U.S. Government resources to combat violent extremism are dispersed among numerous Departments and Agencies.
- Through our leadership, the various Departments and Agencies of the US Government are becoming more sophisticated in their understanding of the ideological challenges to combating violent extremism and more capable of bringing their respective expertise, capabilities, and authorities to bear against this difficult problem set. Our analysts—who approach this issue from a variety of perspectives, to include religious, socio-economic, regional, and psychological—work extremely closely with senior policy makers, foreign governments, and others to fully inform government actions.
- NCTC's knowledge not only drives its daily operations, but increasingly guides broader US Government efforts and informs the activities of our partners and allies in combating the worldwide threat of violent extremism. In particular, NCTC is closely partnered with the Department of State's Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy, James Glassman, the Department of Homeland Security's Civil Liberties and Privacy Officer, Dan Sutherland, and many other officials within the U.S. Government who are responsible translating analytic assessments and strategic plans into operational action.
- We are also increasingly supporting more “non-traditional” partners, to include State and Local governments to try to help inform their efforts to counter violent extremism. For example, we seek to author intelligence assessments that use comparative studies to help inform actions within the United States. As with other efforts, we do this principally by supporting the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security.

- Finally, we are seeking to harness more effectively the efforts of “non-traditional” federal partners whose programs might not normally be considered parts of the fight against violent extremism but which can, if properly informed and targeted, reduce some of the drivers to violent extremism that we identify.

As our understanding of violent extremism improves, we are able to fine-tune our approach to the problem. Working with partners at home and abroad, we can develop targeted and refined approaches—using messaging and other tools—to undermine the attractiveness of violence to certain susceptible audiences, eventually denying violent extremists that critical flow of cannon-fodder recruits.
