

Statement for the Record
Committee on Homeland Security's Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing,
and Terrorism Risk Assessment
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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Minority Member Lofgren, and members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to come today and speak to you about the problem of radicalization and its implications for the Homeland. I plan to be brief this afternoon, so my colleagues from the FBI and DHS can describe the significant efforts their Agencies have undertaken to understand the scope of the problem in this country and to counter it.

First, however, let me give you a strategic picture of the radicalization problem as NCTC sees it. I will speak to you first about two paths to radicalization — one in which young American Muslims, generally male, become radicalized overseas, and the other in which the radicalization process is predominantly homegrown. Then I will give you a brief overview of what we sometimes call “gateways to extremism”—in other words, those environments where the atmosphere is ripe for radicalization to occur.

Radicalization is not a new problem, nor is violent extremism—as you know. What is disturbing, however, is the extent to which the message of violent extremism is reaching and resonating with some young Muslims around the world, including Europe, Canada, and the United States. The examples this past year from Europe, the UK in particular, and Canada have been well publicized. One of the key lessons for us is that we cannot assume that young people who grow up surrounded by Western values, ideals, and culture are immune from messages that translate into violent extremism.

Al-Qa'ida is well aware of that point and there is little subtlety in their approach to trying to radicalize and recruit others here and elsewhere in the West. It is no accident that many of the videos from Usama bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri are produced with English subtitles. The video released the week before the five-year anniversary of 9/11 featuring California native Adam Gadahn—a radicalized American operating in al-Qa'ida senior circles—and the martyrdom videos of two of the July 2005 London bombers--spewing extremism in perfect West Yorkshire accents--are powerful examples of direct recruitment and radicalization efforts of Western Muslims.

On this point, let me mention two examples of radicalization from this country since 9/11 that are particularly striking. Two young men, John Walker Lindh and Majid Khan, one born in this country and one born in Pakistan but spent his teen years here, became radicalized during extended time abroad.

For Lindh, a series of travels in the Middle East and South Asia before 9/11 put him on a path to extremism that terminated at al-Qa‘ida’s al-Faruq camp and on the front lines fighting for the Taliban during Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. In Khan’s case, his parents have said that after 9/11 a relative in Pakistan led him to al-Qa‘ida and to 9/11 mastermind Khalid Shaykh Muhammad, where — we now know — he brainstormed possible attacks against gas stations in his adopted country.

The examples of Lindh and Khan illustrate the first kind of radicalization I mentioned — radicalization that occurs overseas. Clearly the danger there is that young men who have attended extremist madrassas or terrorist training camps, or who have studied with imams who condone a violent form of Islamic extremism, could return to the Homeland and act as agents of radicalization. Today, the overseas radicalization process appears to be more common—at least when we talk about violent extremists who turn to terrorism.

The other form of radicalization is predominantly homegrown. In the cases we have seen of this since 9/11, young men — often converts to Islam — adopt extremist views and even engage in some nascent plotting efforts. Many of the homegrown extremists we have identified also have a criminal background. I’ll highlight two examples here as well: in 2005, we saw a Torrance, California group that originated in the prison system, Jam'iyyat Ul-Islam Is-Saheeh, engage in armed robberies to bankroll planned attacks. And earlier this year, a group with criminal ties that claimed affiliation with a black separatist movement called the Moorish Science Temple, was formulating a plot against the Sears Tower in Chicago and Federal buildings in the Miami area.

These homegrown extremists have never been to Afghanistan, Pakistan, or the Middle East or attended an organized terrorist training camp. They have, as far as we know, never met a member of al-Qa‘ida or any other foreign terrorist organization. But they have absorbed the message of violent extremism. And they have incorporated it into their groups’ culture, and are using it to justify crime and terrorism.

Regardless of whether the radicalization occurs overseas or at home, the stark lesson of the Madrid and London transportation attacks, the arrests in Toronto, and most of the examples here at home that I have cited is that the next Homeland attack may come not from individuals who penetrate our borders, but from long term residents and citizens already in our midst who view their own country as the enemy.

While there is no “one size fits all” answer to radicalization and why some turn to terrorism and others do not, let me conclude by mentioning a few of those “gateways to extremism” that the Intelligence Community has identified as areas ripe for exploitation by extremists. The prison system is a fertile ground for radicalization, with its gang culture and population of Muslim converts. The cell I mentioned in Torrance was actually formed in Folsom prison and members were recruited from both inside and outside the prison.

University campuses offer an atmosphere where extremists — either radical imams or students themselves — could spot and assess young men and women who could be susceptible to a message of violent extremism. We need look no further than the radicalized Hamburg cell of students who piloted three of the four hijacked planes on 9/11.

Some mosques and community centers offer a similar environment where extremist religious leaders encourage Muslims to travel overseas and fight, ostensibly for Muslim causes. We have seen that threat play out with deadly consequences from foreign fighters who have fought against us in Iraq.

Finally, the Internet continues to worry us as a virtual recruiting station open to anyone with access to a computer and an Internet connection. It is the convergence of globalization and technology—all happening in real-time.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to review this critical topic with this subcommittee. I look forward to your questions.