

Home-grown Jihadism and the Factors of Terror

BY JAMES R. HENDERSON

For decades political scientists, sociologists and law enforcement officials have been studying terrorist activity in the hope of deciphering any patterns that might shed light on its root causes, those key factors that may leave certain groups more vulnerable to radicalization. Many scholars will point out that terrorism cannot be broken down into simple cause-and-effect formulas, and that individuals who become terrorists do so for a combination of reasons. While it is certainly true that there is no single factor which determines a group or individual's propensity to terrorism, certain groups do exhibit a disproportionately high susceptibility to radicalization.

In recent years, Muslim populations in Western Europe have appeared to be more vulnerable to radicalization than those in the United States, as evidenced by the new phenomenon of "home-grown" jihadism: Muslim youth who were born and raised in Europe becoming radicalized jihadists who participate in terrorist activities against their own countries. "Jihad" is an Arabic word expressing the idea of "struggle" or "striving," and usually appears in the Qur'an in the context of "striving in the path of God."¹ There are two distinct connotations of the term: internal struggle, or moral striving, and armed struggle.² This latter form of jihad is what is commonly associated with Islamic terrorism.

In France, Britain, Germany and Denmark, home-grown jihadism has developed into a serious security issue, so much so that a former White House advisor was quoted in *The Economist* referring to Europe as a "field of jihad."³ Europe has become a primary breeding ground for radical Islam and, in fact, every terrorist attack carried out by al-Qaeda before and since 9/11 has had some link to Europe. In contrast, the United States has experienced

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virtually no home-grown jihadism. To put the disparity in context, one study demonstrated that there have been approximately 2,300 arrests in Europe that were directly linked to Islamic terrorism compared to only sixty in the United States.⁵ The United States and Europe both have significant Muslim minorities, but for various reasons, the Muslim populations of European countries appear more susceptible to radicalization. The rise in jihadist activity in Europe has been demonstrated by the Madrid train bombings in 2004, the London attack in 2005, the murder of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004, and a failed attempt to blow up trains in Germany in 2006. The fact that the United States has not seen similar levels of home-grown terrorism is astonishing considering the perception of America as the epitome of

anti-Islamic, Western, infidel culture in the eyes of the jihadists. If anything, one would expect to see a higher frequency of home-grown jihadism within America.

The vast majority of Muslims neither hold these radical views, nor accept terrorism as a legitimate means of initiating social, political or religious change.

Theories concerning the root causes of terrorism tend to focus on either sociological or ideological causes. The former perspective identifies the problem as a result of particularly desperate social conditions faced by many Muslims world-wide, while the latter perspective views the current wave of jihadist terrorism as a product of radical theology being disseminated. This paper compares

the phenomenon of home-grown jihadism in Europe and its conspicuous absence in the United States as a means of evaluating the various theories of the “root causes” of terrorism. In order to do this, the most prominent theories will be examined, first on their own, and then within the context of Islamic radicalization in Europe versus the United States, ultimately concluding that a mixture of social grievances and radical ideology creates an atmosphere in which individuals are most susceptible to radicalization.

One final point before continuing: This paper is in no way intended to label Muslims as terrorists. Rather, the terms “Islamic terrorist” and “jihadist” are used to identify those individuals holding a radicalized and perverted Islamic theology. The vast majority of Muslims neither hold these radical views, nor accept terrorism as a legitimate means of initiating social, political or religious change. That being said, there is a clear pattern of radicalization taking place within many Islamic communities that must be addressed. The violent form of jihadism practiced today is a threat to non-Muslims and Muslims alike.

Sociological Theories

Poverty

While there have been many thoughtful proposals put forward explaining how extreme poverty may act as a catalyst for terrorism, a number of studies have indicated that this intuitive hypothesis does not bear out in actual experience. As Paul Smith points out, "There is no direct link between poverty and unemployment and the person who becomes a terrorist." Smith continues, "Many of the world's wealthier Muslim-majority countries have paradoxically produced more terrorists than poor Muslim-majority countries."⁶ However despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, many politicians and academics continue to cite poverty as a root cause, or even the root cause, of terrorism.

Daniel Pipes, who rejects this proposition outright, goes so far as to say that an argument can be made that Islamic terrorism is actually better cultivated in an atmosphere of wealth than in one of poverty, noting that individuals with a high standard of living are more likely to engage in ideological discussion.⁷ Sheikh Hamed Al-Betawi, a spiritual leader of Hamas, reinforces Pipes' position, remarking, "Those who undertake martyrdom actions are not hopeless or poor, but are the best of our people, educated, successful."⁸ In fact, data demonstrates that the majority of terrorist attacks are actually carried out by individuals from the middle class. For instance, a plot to blow up the West End of London and Glasgow Airport in June 2007 was planned by physicians from elite families.⁹

Despite much evidence to the contrary, poverty nonetheless continues to be cited as a root cause of terrorism. This is perhaps because a relationship does exist, but not in an obvious way. For instance, it is possible that those individuals who carry out terrorist attacks are not necessarily experiencing devastating poverty themselves, but empathize with their Muslim brothers and sisters in foreign lands who do suffer great hardships. This idea leads directly into the next theory.

Social Humiliation & Alienation

An increasingly popular theory concerning the root causes of terrorism is that social humiliation, whether direct or by proxy, increases an individual's vulnerability to radicalization. Mohammed Ayoob supports this view, arguing that loss of dignity is a key driving force behind jihadist activity, stating, "The common denominator among Islamists... is the quest for dignity, a variable

often ignored by contemporary political analysts in the West.”¹⁰ Harvard professor Jessica Stern, having interviewed a number of incarcerated jihadists, supports this proposition, noting that the common thread among those

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captured is a driving sense of humiliation.¹¹ Stern concludes that, “Holy wars take off when there is a large supply of young men who feel humiliated and deprived; when leaders emerge who know how to capitalize on those feelings; and when a segment of society is willing to fund them.”¹²

Farhad Khosrokhavar asserts that, in many cases, vicarious humiliation can function in a similar manner as direct humiliation, noting that young Muslims in the West often “cannot understand how it is possible to both watch the repression of the Muslim world on television, and live peacefully in a world of arrogant wealth and immoral complicity with the oppressors without raising their voice in protest or without taking action.”¹³ Khos-

rokhavar identifies three sources of Muslim humiliation: first, Muslims feel economically marginalized and forced into a position of social inferiority; second, they experience humiliation by proxy for Islamic brethren suffering in other countries, such as Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq; and third, they feel humiliated that the West has influenced (and defiled) their pure Islamic culture.¹⁴

Closely associated with the idea of humiliation is that of social alienation. Social alienation occurs when a group is unwilling or unable to integrate into the larger society, as is the case with many Muslim communities in Europe. The 2006 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism identifies “political alienation” as a condition under which terrorism flourishes, stating, “Transnational terrorists are recruited from populations with no voice in their own government and see no legitimate way to promote change in their own country. Without a stake in the existing order, they are vulnerable to manipulation by those who advocate a perverse political vision based on violence and destruction.”¹⁵ During that same year, the White House’s National Security Strategy noted that, “In the long run, winning the war on terror means winning the battle of ideas, for it is ideas that can turn the

disenchanted into murderers willing to kill innocent victims.”¹⁶ This point leads to the next set of theories, based on ideological causes.

Ideological Theories

Radical Ideology

While it is true that the “War on Terror” is not a battle of the West – or worse yet, Christianity – against Islam, it would be foolish to ignore the religious and theological aspects of the terrorist threat the U.S. faces today. Terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman, discussing the substantial increase in suicide terrorism between 2001 and 2005, remarks that the “dominant force behind this trend is religion.”¹⁷ Journalist and international security scholar Daniel Benjamin writes, “The motivation for the [9/11] attack was neither political calculation, strategic advantage, nor wanton bloodlust. It was to humiliate and slaughter those who defied the hegemony of God; it was to please Him by reasserting His primacy. It was an act of cosmic war.”¹⁸ The point that these scholars are trying to make is that radical theology creates an environment that can, and often does, precipitate terrorism.

The idea that theology is a root cause of terrorism is certainly not universally accepted. Dissenters argue that the ideology promoted by the jihadists is political rather than theological at its base, with most young volunteers lacking proper religious training to spot “the flaws in the religious arguments.”¹⁹ Marc Sageman attempts to discredit theology as a root cause of terrorism, arguing that most jihadists are not well educated in religion, having been self-taught and generally adhering to a non-traditional interpretation of Islam.²⁰ Sageman’s findings indicate that a majority of Islamic terrorists actually grew up in secular environments, with only 13 percent having received a madrassa education.²¹

Radicalized Islamic terrorists are not simply a group of rebels who have decided to commit terrorist acts, utilizing religion to justify their actions; they are often devout young Muslims who – whether well-versed in Islamic scholarship or not – are deeply committed to a set of theological principles backed by extensive scholarship that has been evolving for centuries. One need only listen to the confessions of the jihadists themselves to recognize the religious motivations under which they are operating. The suicide note left by Mohammed Atta, head of operations for the 9/11 attack, encouraged his fellow “martyrs” with the words, “Be happy, optimistic, calm... because you are heading for a deed that God loves and will accept. It will be the day, God willing, you spend with the women in paradise.”²² The promise of

72 virgins awaiting jihadists who die a martyr's death is a frequently-cited motivation for the young men who offer their lives as suicide terrorists. In fact, some Palestinian newspapers have begun reporting suicide bombing attacks in the wedding announcement section of the paper instead of the obituaries.²³

Nationalism and a Response to Western Foreign Policy

Another ideological perspective views jihadism as a strategic and rational political tactic. Robert Pape argues that, "the taproot of suicide terrorism is nationalism – the belief among members of a community that they share a distinct set of ethnic, linguistic, and historical characteristics and are entitled to govern their national homeland without interference from foreigners."²⁴ Bruce Hoffman agrees with Pape's proposition that jihadism does entail a certain "strategic logic," maintaining that, "The terrorists' decision to employ this tactic [suicide terrorism] therefore, is neither irrational nor desperate, as is sometimes portrayed; rather, it is an entirely rational and calculated choice, consciously embraced as a deliberate instrument of warfare..."²⁵ From this point of view, the current wave of Islamic terrorism should be viewed not so much as emotive or fanatical, but rather as tactical and deliberate.

When jihadism is viewed within this paradigm, the root cause appears to be a mixture of nationalism – especially in regard to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict – and a response to Western foreign policy. Many Muslims see the situations in Palestine, Kashmir, and Afghanistan as evidence that the West is anti-Islamic. Paul Smith notes, "These local conflicts help foster a 'narrative' that Islam is under assault."²⁶ Indeed, the jihadists who perpetrated the London attack in 2005 were motivated by what they perceived to be Western atrocities against the Muslim world. A quote from the video statement they released declared, "Your democratically elected governments continuously perpetuate atrocities against my people all over the world. And your support of them makes you directly responsible, just as I am directly responsible for protecting and avenging my Muslim brothers and sisters."²⁷

Opponents of this view, such as Tony Blair and French scholar Olivier Roy, argue that al-Qaeda developed independently of Western policy and influence. They believe that al-Qaeda represents a movement not so much in opposition to the U.S.-led war in Iraq as to Western culture and society in general.²⁸ While the war in Iraq has certainly assisted in the mobilization of al-Qaeda, the underlying animosity of the group stems from a violent ideology. Similarly, in the National Security Strategy, the White House argues that, "Terrorism is not simply a result of the Israeli-Palestinian issues. Al-Qaeda's

plotting for the September 11 attacks began in the 1990s, during an active period in the peace process.”²⁹ Professor Stuart Gottlieb supports this point, noting that “during the 1990s the U.S. had explicitly pro-Muslim policies in Bosnia, Kosovo and Palestine, yet al-Qaida and its global ideology only grew in prestige and power.”³⁰ Thus “bad” Western policy is an insufficient explanation of jihadist activity. The next section examines the different circumstances facing European and American Muslims.

Comparing the Demographic Groups

European Muslims

Though there is no single, autonomous ethnic group of “European Muslims,” but a number of Muslim populations from several Islamic countries living in different areas, the various Islamic populations in Europe face a similar pattern of social and economic distress. The original influx of Muslim immigrants into Europe occurred in the 1950s and -60s, a period of rapid growth and rebuilding following World War II. The European powers initially thought that these “guest workers,” many of whom were Islamic immigrants from North Africa, would return to their countries of origin following the period of reconstruction.³¹ As the rebuilding period came to a close, many European governments encouraged the workers to return home, but to no avail. In spite of the financial hardships facing Muslims in Europe, prospects in their home countries were even worse, so the majority decided to stay as permanent residents. As Robert Leiken notes, “Once children were born and went to school in Western European cities, these temporary workers tended overwhelmingly to become permanent.”³²

The social standing of American Muslims is completely different from that of their European counterparts.

Today there are roughly fifteen million Muslims living in the twenty-seven countries that comprise the European Union, and that number is expected to double by 2025.³³ The Muslim populations in Western Europe have not integrated well into the broader societies, often living in enclaves in outer “inner city” communities or ghettos,³⁴ and experiencing severe poverty and unemployment. The Pew Research Center reports that “surveys of Muslim populations in Great Britain, France, Germany and Spain ... found Muslims to be much less affluent relative to the general populations of those nations.”³⁵ Further, the unemployment rate for Muslim men between the ages of fifteen

to thirty in Europe is roughly three times higher than that of non-Muslims.³⁶ As a consequence of the desperate social position of European Muslims, there has been an increase in crime and violent protest. James Fallows notes, "Most measures of Muslim disaffection or upheaval in Europe – arrests, riots, violence based on religion – show it to be ten to fifty times worse than [in the United States]."³⁷

Muslim-Americans

The modern immigration of Muslims to America began in 1965 when major reforms in U.S. immigration laws made it possible for non-European immigrants to enter the country.³⁸ At that time there were only between 100 thousand and 150 thousand Muslims living in the United States.³⁹ The most reliable estimates today place the Muslim-American population at approximately 2.35 million, less than one percent of the total U.S. population.⁴⁰ The social standing of American Muslims is completely different from that of their European counterparts. Unlike Muslim immigrants in Europe, American Muslims do not live in isolated communities, but are instead highly dispersed throughout the country.⁴¹ Whereas the median income of Muslims in Europe is much lower than that of the rest of the population, the median income of American Muslims is actually higher.⁴² Additionally, 59 percent of American Muslims have at least an undergraduate education, making them the highest educated group in America.⁴³ The Pew Research Center reports that "the Muslim American population is youthful, racially diverse, generally well-educated, and financially about as well-off as the rest of the U.S. public."⁴⁴

Some argue that the difference between the American and European Muslim populations is a result of the rigorous screening policies of the American immigration system which favor middle-class professionals. There is no doubt some truth to this observation, but it is clear that America, perhaps on account of its nature as an immigrant nation, has had much more success than Europe in welcoming and assimilating Muslims into the broader society. This success can be seen in the children of Muslim-American immigrants who readily identify themselves as "American," and this sense of identity and acceptance tends to prevent the dangerous feelings of alienation that have devastated many Muslim-European youth.

Testing the Theories

Social Theories

Comparing the differences in social circumstances faced by Muslims in the United States and Europe with the differences between each group's apparent vulnerability to radicalization seems to support sociological theories regarding terrorism's root causes. It is easy to imagine how young Muslims living in ghettos outside of Paris would be more likely to empathize with the suffering of the Palestinians or Chechens. It is possible that vicarious social humiliation, in tandem with the already desperate social conditions faced by European Muslims, accentuates the outrage they feel about their own situation and renders them more vulnerable to radicalization.

With regard to social alienation, European culture in general values the distinctiveness of each country's heritage, the French valuing what is perceived as uniquely French, the British what is uniquely British, etc. This attitude creates an unreceptive environment for immigrants with non-European ancestry, making it difficult for them to assimilate into the culture.⁴⁵ The United States, on the other hand, prides itself on being a "melting pot" with the integration of peoples from various cultures being a key value and element of the American identity. These conflicting paradigms, pride in diversity versus a pride in distinction, offer America a clear advantage in assimilating people from different cultures. Whereas American Muslims often find it easy to feel both American and Muslim, a British citizen of Pakistani descent, for instance, may feel neither British nor Pakistani, and Islam becomes a substitute identity.⁴⁶

The U.S. government believes that spreading democracy is one of the best ways to combat alienation, because democracies enfranchise the citizenry by design, although not always in practice. The 2006 National Strategy for Combating Terrorism states, "In some democracies, some ethnic or religious groups are unable or unwilling to grasp the benefits of freedom otherwise available in the society. Such groups can evidence the same alienation and despair that the transnational terrorists exploit in undemocratic states. This accounts for the emergence in democratic societies of home-grown terrorists – even among second- and third-generation citizens."⁴⁷ This statement is one of the most cogent and complete explanations of why home-grown jihadism has developed in Europe and not in the United States. Discerning whether the culpability lies with European governments or the Muslim communities is not nearly as important as recognizing the fact that this alienation does exist, and certainly contributes to the problem of Islamic terrorism.

Ideological Theories

Considering the behavior of European and American Muslims, the explanations of jihadism as a response to anti-Muslim foreign policy or as a form of Islamic nationalism are undermined. If the current onslaught of terrorism was based on Western foreign policy, which is clearly repugnant to many European and American Muslims, one would expect the reactions of European and American Muslims to be comparable. The fact that it is not signifies that this theory is either erroneous or incomplete. Similarly, there is no reason to

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believe that Islamic nationalism should be a more potent instigator of terrorism in Europe than in the United States unless, of course, these feelings are being exacerbated by the disparity of social circumstances faced by Muslims in those two areas.

The effect of radical theology on home-grown jihadism is a bit more complex. The first question to ask here is whether a radical Islamic ideology is being propagated in both the United States and Europe. In regard to Europe, the answer is clearly "yes." Radical and violent Islamic teaching has run rampant in Europe, with the most prominent centers for extremist Islamic teaching being the Finsbury Park mosque in London, the Islamic Cultural Centre in Milan, and the al-Quds Mosque in Hamburg.⁴⁸

Radical Islamic teaching is also present in America, although the Pew Research Center reports that a more liberal form of Islam is predominant in the United States.⁴⁹ In spite of this, radical theology is still being disseminated. One example of this teaching that received national attention occurred during the Kuwait crisis in 1990-91, when Mohammad Al-Asi, the leader of a mosque in Washington, urged his followers to wage a war on America.⁵⁰ Numerous other individual examples of the spread of radical Islamic theology in the United States exist, but the single greatest propagator of jihadist ideology is the internet. Thanks to the internet, the radical jihadist message is omnipresent.

In light of the presence of radical Islamic theology in both the United States and Europe, a few important points can be made. First, if one was to assume that exposure to radical theology was the primary factor leading to radicalization and terrorism, one would expect home-grown jihadist activity in both the United States and Europe to be proportional to the number

of individuals being exposed to the radical doctrine in each location. Since this is not the case, theology must not play as powerful a deterministic role in radicalization as may have otherwise been suspected.

On the other hand, if it is assumed that radical theology has nothing to do with one's susceptibility to radicalization whatsoever – that the precipitating factors for terrorism are completely social in nature – then one would anticipate that various groups of differing ideological and theological convictions but similarly desperate social circumstances would have similar levels of susceptibility to terrorist activity. This point was first brought to my attention by Professor Farhad Khosrokhavar, who observed that African-Americans face many of the same social difficulties as European Muslims, but are not being actively radicalized by terrorist organizations.

Terrorism is a complex phenomenon, and any program or strategy designed to confront it must take into account its multifaceted nature if it is to have any hope of success.

Both African-Americans and European Muslims experience a much higher rate of poverty than that of their respective societies-at-large. For instance, in 2004, 12.7 percent of the U.S. population lived in poverty, but that number was 24.7 percent for the African-American community.⁵¹ African-Americans also experienced a median family income well below the national median (\$30,134 versus \$44,389),⁵² and – similar to European Muslims – African-Americans have an alarmingly high crime rate with African-American males over six times more likely than white males to be imprisoned at least once in the United States.⁵³

Yet, in spite of the socio-economic difficulties facing the African-American community, there is no apparent pattern of violent, ideological organizations recruiting young African-American men and carrying out attacks in a similar fashion to the Islamic terrorist groups that operate in Europe. Taking into consideration the differences between European Muslims and both Muslim Americans and African-Americans, it appears that both a radical ideology and social distress may be necessary components for a group to display a high vulnerability to radicalization.

Conclusions

This paper presented an overview of the current threat of Islamic terrorism, to discuss the different theories regarding its root causes, and scrutinized these theories in light of the behaviors of European Muslims and Muslim-Americans in order to discern which theories bear out in actual experience, the main question being whether the dominant conditions leading to terrorism are more sociological or ideological in nature. Having examined the differences between the two groups' social circumstances and behavior, it appears that social distress and radical ideology are both necessary conditions for home-grown jihadism to occur, but neither appears to be a sufficient condition in the absence of the other. There are certainly exceptions to the rule, but the patterns of jihadist activity suggest that individuals become susceptible to radicalization in situations where they are experiencing both social distress in the form of extreme poverty, social alienation or vicarious humiliation, and are exposed to a violent ideology. This being the case, a two-pronged approach to addressing the Islamic terrorism threat is needed, one in which combating violent ideology, supporting moderate interpretations of Islam and undermining claims that the West stands in opposition to the Islamic people is carried out in tandem with a campaign to address the social hardships of the most impoverished ethnic groups. Terrorism is a complex phenomenon, and any program or strategy designed to confront it must take into account its multifaceted nature if it is to have any hope of success. ■

-Indrani Saran served as lead editor for this article.

NOTES

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