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TESTIMONY

# Building an Army of Believers

## *Jihadist Radicalization and Recruitment*

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Testimony presented before the House Homeland Security Committee, Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing and Terrorism Risk Assessment on April 5, 2007

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# *Building an Army of Believers: Jihadist Radicalization and Recruitment*[2]

**Before the Committee on Homeland Security**
**Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing and Terrorism Risk Assessment**
**United States House of Representatives**

**April 5, 2007**

Madame Chair: I appreciate the opportunity to be here today where you have experienced homegrown terror firsthand to discuss the issues of radicalization and how to protect the homeland. Although the United States and its allies have achieved undeniable success in degrading the operational capabilities of jihadist terrorists worldwide, they have had less success in reducing the radicalization and recruitment that support the jihadist enterprise.

Nearly five years after 9/11, a 2006 National Intelligence Estimate concluded that "activists identifying themselves as jihadists … are increasing in both number and geographic dispersion." As a consequence, "the operational threat from self-radicalized cells will grow in importance to U.S. counterterrorism efforts, particularly abroad, but also in the Homeland."[3] In testimony before the Senate, FBI Director Robert Mueller indicated concern about extremist recruitment in prisons, schools, and universities "inside the United States."[4] In March of this year, Charles Allen, Assistant Secretary of Homeland Security, concurred that "radicalization will continue to expand within the United States over the long term."[5]

Recently, we have begun to focus more attention on what I refer to in my book as the "front end" of the jihadist cycle.[6] Growing concern has produced a growing volume of literature on the topic.[7] My testimony today will simply highlight a few areas for further discussion:

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[2] This testimony is available for free download at http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT278-1.
[3] U.S. Government, Declassified Key Judgments of the National Intelligence Estimate "Trends in Global Terrorism: Implications for the United States." April 2006.
[4] Testimony of Robert S. Mueller, III, Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation Before the Senate Committee on Intelligence, February 16, 2005.
[5] Testimony of Charles E. Allen, Assistant Secretary, Intelligence and Analysis, Chief Intelligence Officer, Department of Homeland Security Before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, March 7, 2007.
[6] Brian Michael Jenkins, *Unconquerable Nation: Knowing Our Enemy, Strengthening Ourselves,* Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2006. See specifically pp. 123-132.

- Building an army of believers—how the jihadists recruit
- Radicalization and recruitment in the United States
- How we might impede radicalization and recruitment, and
- Guiding principles for any actions we might consider.

These comments derive from my own study of terrorism over the years, and from a large body of research done by my colleagues at the RAND Corporation.[8]

**Building An Army Of Believers**

More than a military contest, the jihadist campaign is above all a missionary enterprise. Jihadist terrorist operations are intended to attract attention, demonstrate capability, and harm the jihadists' enemies, but they are also aimed at galvanizing the Muslim community and, above all, inciting and attracting recruits to the cause. Recruiting is not merely meant to fill operational needs. It is an end in itself: It aims at creating a new mindset.

At one time, al Qaeda dispatched recruiters, but the jihadists never created a central recruiting organization. Instead, they relied upon a loose network of like-minded extremists who constantly proselytized on behalf of jihad. Recruiting was always diffused, localized, and informal.

Self-radicalization was often the norm, even before the worldwide crackdown on al Qaeda and its jihadist allies forced them to decentralize and disperse. Those who arrived at jihadist training camps were already radicalized. At the camps, they bonded through shared beliefs and hardships, underwent advanced training, gained combat experience, and were selected by al Qaeda's planners for specific terrorist operations.

There is a distinction between radicalization and recruitment. Radicalization comprises internalizing a set of beliefs, a militant mindset that embraces violent jihad as the paramount test of one's conviction. It is the mental prerequisite to recruitment. Recruitment is turning others or

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[7] Edwin Bakker, *Jihadists in Europe—Their Characteristics and the Circumstances in which They Joined the Jihad: An Exploratory Study,* Clingendael: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2006. Paul K. Davis and Brian Michael Jenkins, *Deterrence and Influence in Counterterrorism: A Component of the War*

[8] See for example, Scott Gerwehr and Sara Daly, "Al-Qaida: Terrorist Selection and Recruitment," in David G. Kamien (ed.), *The McGraw-Hill Homeland Security Handbook,* New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005, pp. 73-89; William Rosenau, "Al Qaeda Recruitment in the United States: A Preliminary Assessment," *MIPT Yearbook 2004.* Oklahoma City: Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism, 2004, pp.23-31. See also Kim Cragin and Sara Daly, *The Dynamic Terrorist Threat: An Assessment of Group Motivations and Capabilities in a Changing World,* Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, MG-246-AF, and Angel Rabasa, et al, *The Muslim World After 9/11,* Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2004.

transforming oneself into a weapon of jihad. It means joining a terrorist organization or bonding with like-minded individuals to form an autonomous terrorist cell. It means going operational, seeking out the means and preparing for an actual terrorist operation—the ultimate step in jihad.

Worldwide, radicalization and recruiting vary from country to country. In some places, such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Chechnya, potential recruits are already members of a locally dominant culture and may be involved in an on-going conflict that seeks independence, autonomy, or nationwide adherence to a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. They draw on local tradition and, in some cases, family histories of resistance. The local population is sympathetic to their cause, although it may not always support their actions.[9]

In the core Arab countries, where potential jihadists may share the basic beliefs of the dominant national culture or a fundamentalist subculture, they confront hostility and oppression from the central political authorities and therefore must go abroad or operate underground.

The situation in the West is still different, and there are further differences between recruiting in Europe, where there are large and largely unassimilated Muslim immigrant populations, and recruiting in the United States, a nation with a long tradition of assimilating immigrants. Potential jihadist recruits in Western countries are part of a marginalized immigrant subculture or are themselves cut off even from family and friends within that community. The more vulnerable are those who are at a stage of life where they are seeking an identity, while looking for approval and validation. They are searching for causes that can be religiously and culturally justified, that provide them a way to identify who they are, and that provide a clear call for action.

The jihadist agenda is action-oriented, claims to be religiously justified, and appeals to this relatively young, action-oriented population. Self-radicalization begins the day that an individual seeks out jihadist websites. In the real world they seek support among local jihadist mentors and like-minded fanatics. This is the group that currently poses the biggest danger to the West.

Jihadists recruit one person at a time. The message from the global jihad is aimed directly at the individual. It argues that the Islamic community faces assault from aggressive infidels and their apostate allies; it is threatened by military attack, cultural corruption, social disintegration, and substandard zeal. The antidote to these threats is jihad, not as a spiritual quest, but as an armed defense. This is a religious obligation incumbent upon all true believers.

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[9] For an informative discussion of the different routes to radicalization, see Matenia Sirseloudi and Peter Waldman, “Where Does the Radicalization Lead? Radical Community, Radical Networks and Radical Subcultures,” forthcoming.

Al Qaeda's brand of jihad offers a comprehensive and uncomplicated solution—the possibility of adventure, a "legitimate" outlet for aggression, the lure of clandestinity, pride, camaraderie, an elixir to cure all ills, an antidote to anxiety, an achievable goal, a seemingly noble cause, a sense of direction and meaning in life, and the eventual promise of earthly pleasures in the hereafter. It is a message that is especially attractive to angry young men and frustrated, compliant individuals.

Becoming a jihadist is a gradual, multi-step process that can take months, even years, although since 9/11 the pace has accelerated. The journey may begin in a mosque where a radical Imam preaches, in informal congregations and prayer groups—some of which are clandestine—in schools, in prisons, on the Internet.

The process starts with incitement—a message that commands and legitimizes violent jihad—and it combines self-selection and persuasion by jihadist recruiters. Volunteers are recruited into a universe of belief, not a single destination. Eager acolytes may coalesce into an autonomous cell, as did the original Hamburg group that later carried out the 9/11 attack, or they may join an existing local group. Individuals may be moved along to training camps or be persuaded by jihadist exhortation to act on their own.

Becoming a jihadist may involve a series of invitations and proofs of commitment; it may also involve training abroad. Proceeding to the next step, ultimately to act, is always an individual decision. Volunteers move on by self-selection. There may be powerful peer pressure, but there is no coercion. Submission is voluntary. Not all recruits complete the journey. Commitment is constantly calibrated and re-recalibrated. Some drop out along the way. A component of our counter-recruiting strategy must be to always offer a safe way back from the edge.

Jihadist recruiting emphasizes various themes: Honor, dignity, and duty versus humiliation, shame, and guilt. Fighting is God's mandate, a religious duty—paradise is guaranteed to those who join jihad. Jihad provides an opportunity to demonstrate commitment, courage, prowess as a warrior, and although it is not explicit in the recruiting, jihad is a license for violence. At the very least, it provides vicarious participation in war through martial arts, paintball battles, reconnaissance of potential targets, and endless discussion of fantasy terrorist plans.

Short of preparing for a specific attack, it is hard to define the exact point at which one becomes a jihadist: Internalization of jihadist ideology? Bonding with brothers at a jihadist retreat? Downloading jihadist literature or bomb-making instructions from the Internet? Fantasizing about terrorist operations? Reconnoitering potential targets? Going to Pakistan? Signing a contract to

pray for the jihadists, collect money, or support operations? Taking an oath of loyalty to Osama bin Laden? The legal definition is broad.

Personal problems also play a role. Recruits often come from dysfunctional families, have experienced disruptive relocations, suffer identity crises, face uncertain futures, feel alienation; many are in trouble with authorities. Some of the problems are typical of the age group, and some come with immigration. Many recruits in the West are second- or third-generation immigrants. Others display the zeal typical of new converts. But jihadists also include sons of well-off families, people with promising careers, and individuals who are seemingly well-adjusted. There is no single psychological profile and no obvious indicator to permit targeted intervention.

While the jihadist message is widely and increasingly disseminated, the actual connection with the jihadist enterprise, outside of Middle Eastern and Asian madrassahs, appears random, depending on personal acquaintance, finding a radical mosque, or being spotted by a recruiter. That, in turn, suggests that the numbers are driven not merely by the appeal of the jihadist narrative, but also by the number of “retail outlets” where recruiters can meet potential recruits.

The recruiting process, therefore, seems to be not very efficient—the yield is low. However, only a few converts suffice to carry out terrorist operations. Nevertheless, this suggests that reducing the number of suspected recruiting venues would seriously impede jihadist recruiting.

**Radicalization And Recruiting In The United States**

Neither imported nor homegrown terrorism is new in the United States. Many immigrant groups have brought the quarrels of their homeland with them. Anti-Castro Cubans, Croatian separatists, Puerto Rican separatists, Armenian extremists, Taiwanese separatists, earlier cohorts of Islamist extremists have all carried on terrorist campaigns on U.S. soil, along with domestic ethnic groups, right-wing extremists, and ideologically driven fanatics.

A homegrown conspiracy (albeit with foreign assistance) was responsible for the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. Another homegrown conspiracy carried out the devastating 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City. The United States, over the years, has successfully suppressed these groups through domestic intelligence collection and law enforcement.
However, Europe faces different problems. With a population of 350 million, Europe is home to between 30 and 50 million Muslims—estimates vary. By 2025, one-third of all children born in Europe will be of the Muslim faith. In contrast, the United States, with a population of 300 million,

has approximately 4.7 million Muslims, most of them native Americans. Of the 3.5 million Arab-Americans in the United States, fewer than 25 percent are Muslim.

Large numbers of poor immigrants enter Europe legally and illegally from the Maghreb and Middle East, and assimilation is a problem. America, in contrast, is a distant destination for the Arab and Muslim masses; its recent Muslim immigrants tend to be better educated, better off, and more easily integrated. As a nation of immigrants, America does not demand cultural assimilation as a prerequisite to citizenship, and accented English is no barrier to achievement. These are inherent national strengths.

Since 9/11, U.S. authorities have uncovered a number of alleged individual terrorists and terrorist rings, including clusters in Lackawanna, Northern Virginia, Portland, New York City, and Lodi and Torrance, California. In all, several dozen persons have been convicted of providing material support to a terrorist organization, a crime that U.S. courts have interpreted broadly, or related crimes. Others, without demonstrable connections to terrorism, have been expelled for immigration offenses.

Most of those arrested have been young men of Middle Eastern or South Asian descent. They include both native and naturalized citizens, although almost all are citizens. Most were Muslims by birth, although some are converts. Most of them have been middle-class, with educations ranging from less than high school to postgraduate degrees. They represent diverse professions, and some are veterans of military service.

The Lackawanna, Northern Virginia, and Portland groups began to radicalize before 9/11, while the individuals in New York City, Lodi, and Torrance were more recent arrivals in the jihadist universe. The Northern Virginia and Portland groups planned to join jihadist groups abroad; those in New York City, Lodi, and Torrance contemplated action in the United States; the Lackawanna group had no apparent operational plans.

These arrests, along with intelligence operations, indicate that radicalization and recruiting are taking place in the United States, but there is no evidence of a significant cohort of terrorist operatives. We therefore worry most about terrorist attacks by very small conspiracies or individuals, which nonetheless could be equivalent to the London subway bombings or the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.

This suggests that efforts should be made to enhance the intelligence capabilities of local police, who through community policing, routine criminal investigations, or dedicated intelligence operations may be best positioned to uncover future terrorist plots.

Of these, continued intelligence operations are the most important. Radicalization makes little noise. It occurs in an area protected by the First and Fourth Amendments. It takes place over a long period of time. It therefore does not lend itself to a traditional criminal investigations approach.

**Impeding Radicalization And Recruitment**

How might we best impede radicalization and recruiting? Let me suggest several possible angles of approach. These are not recommendations; they are options aimed at provoking further discussion, and each raises a number of questions.

**Blocking The Message.** Is exhortation to violence free speech protected by the First Amendment, or does it fall into the category of conduct that can be legally prohibited? Can Internet content be controlled? European governments argue that it can be. Clearly, the Internet is a new battlefield in the jihadist campaign, and the U.S. Army is reportedly preparing an assault on jihadist websites.[10]

But does the United States need a new information service to wage an information war? A new United States Information Agency? If so, where should it be located within our government?

How can anti-jihadist messages be facilitated? Would distributing such messages violate rules against domestic propaganda? Current law does allow messages against drugs, drunk driving, smoking, domestic abuse, dropping out of school, and publicizing the identity of wanted gang leaders. Can we do the same with jihad?

**Removing The Inciters.** Should the United States, like the United Kingdom, seek to expel foreign-born clerics who incite hatred and violence? Should institutions that host those exhorting violence lose their tax-free status and face other restrictions? Can foreign contributions be blocked when they clearly support radicalization?

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[10] Jim Michaels, "Military Readies Internet Assault: Terrorist Activity Expands on Web," *USA Today,* March 28, 2007.

Are inciters legitimate targets of intelligence efforts? Should messages of hate and their authors be publicly exposed? How can alternative role models be publicized?

**Focusing On Recruiting Venues.** Recruiting for jihad takes place both inside and outside of identified radical mosques and other known venues. These "retail outlets" can be identified and monitored. Surveillance, real and imagined, of recruiting venues can inform authorities of possible terrorist plots and may discourage recruiting.

The 2004 Herald Square Case in New York City is a good example of the methods, patience, and persistence that are needed to identify, understand, and thwart a jihadist recruitment that would have resulted in a terrorist attack. In fact, the New York Police Department has developed a very sophisticated understanding of the radicalization process and, in my view, has made some of the greatest strides in addressing it.[11] Prisons are another recruiting venue that could be better controlled.

**Dissuading Potential Recruits.** Can the community offer attractive alternatives to potential recruits—national and community service, education and technical training, sports, etc.? Can at least some imprisoned jihadists be rehabilitated to counter the recruiting message? Imprisoned terrorists in Italy were offered reduced sentences in return for renunciations of violence and cooperation with the authorities. Current programs to rehabilitate imprisoned jihadists in Singapore and Yemen may also provide valuable experience.

**Enlisting The Broader Community.** Can we implement educational programs at mosques and community centers, as Singapore is also doing, to expose the nature of jihadist ideology?

The absence of significant terrorist attacks or even advanced terrorist plots in the United States since 9/11 is good news that cannot be entirely explained by increased intelligence and heightened security. It suggests that America's Muslim population may be less susceptible than the Muslim population in Europe, if not entirely immune to jihadist ideology; indeed, there appear to be countervailing voices within the American Muslim community. Conversely it may merely indicate that the American Muslim population has not yet been exposed to the degree, variety, of radicalization as that of its European counterparts. This "success," or temporary reprieve, whatever its explanation, suggests in turn that we move cautiously to fix what may not be broken while realizing that the threat from radicalization continues to grow.

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[11] An insightful analysis of radicalization and recruitment is provided by Arvin Bhatt and Mitchell Silber in "Radicalization in the West and the Homegrown Threat," forthcoming.

**Some Guiding Principles**

Society's purpose in this area is twofold: to deter vulnerable individuals from recruitment into destructive paths and to protect society itself against destruction—this may require preemptive intervention before manifest criminal behavior occurs.

However, the first principle must be to do no greater harm, to avoid misguided policies, needless hassles that only create enemies. A more permissive intelligence environment, society's demand to intervene before terrorist attacks occur will inevitably result in occasional errors. These should not be the basis for dismantling intelligence efforts or imposing unreasonable controls: Errors should produce prompt apologies. Systematic abuse should be punished.

Rules may be altered, but rules must prevail—assertions of extraordinary wartime authority or extrajudicial measures are unacceptable and dangerous. Domestic intelligence, surveillance, the rendering safe of dangerous ideologies are delicate undertakings that, as we already have seen, can slide into despotic behavior.

A nation of immigrants, America has been successful at integrating new arrivals without specific policies beyond guaranteeing equal opportunity and fairness to all, so long as they obey its laws. This success makes one wary of government programs aimed at specific ethic or émigré communities.

We owe immigrants nothing more than freedom, freedom from exploitation, freedom from prejudice, tolerance of different cultures and customs, and fair access to opportunity. In return, immigrants are not asked to abandon their faith or customs. They are required only to abide by the same laws and rules that govern our behavior.

Proposed measures must fit the magnitude of the threat. Isolated terrorist attacks can always occur, as they have in the past and almost certainly will in the future, but at present there is no significant jihadist underground in this country. Good domestic intelligence can discourage overreaction as well as contribute to deterrence.

Faith alone should cast no shadow of suspicion, but religion should provide no shield for subversion—society need not be shy about attacking hatred and exhortation to violence even when they are cloaked as religious belief. Protecting the freedom of religion may require enforced tolerance—that is, attacking exhortations to violence—in order to protect the freedom of all.

Incitement to violence, especially when there is an expectation that it will lead to action, is not protected by the First Amendment.

A sensible response requires a broad understanding of community structure and dynamics—innocent enterprises may at times be the subjects of official inquiry, if only to dismiss them from further scrutiny; intelligence activities should not imply suspicion.

Intervention measures should not isolate, alienate, stigmatize, or antagonize the communities in which recruiters look for quarry.

It is important to keep lines of communication open at all levels of government. This is community policing in its broadest sense, but the collection of intelligence and initiatives aimed at maintaining dialogue among communities and faiths are best handled at the local community level.

Whatever we do must be done with strict oversight and a sense of proportion to the threat. We should not, by our very efforts to protect society against terrorism, destroy what may be our best defense—a free and tolerant society.