

Addressing the Homegrown Terrorism Threat

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U.S. efforts to intervene with radicalized and at-risk individuals can only thrive if the federal government is willing to commit money, not just lip service.

The leaders of the House and Senate Intelligence committees recently said that global terrorists have actually gained ground in the past two years and that the United States is less safe than it was a year ago. This comes as quite a shock, considering the Obama administration's optimism that global terror would be dealt a definitive blow with the death of Osama bin Laden and drone strikes against al-Qaida's leadership.

Sadly, it seems that terrorism is here to stay and the best that we can do about it is to minimize its impact. While the U.S. government invests substantial amounts of money to combat terror abroad, it spends virtually nothing to address radicalization at home.

The State Department's Counterterrorism Bureau announced a \$200 million global fund to support foreign "Community Engagement and Resilience" projects that would counter violent extremism in foreign countries at the local level. Such a fund, if used correctly, can finally be the step many of us have called for to defeat the radical Islamist recruiters where they live and thrive, often uncontested.

But what about the homegrown extremists? Despite spending billions of taxpayers' dollars on counterterrorism, Washington still lacks an effective strategy to prevent vulnerable Americans from being radicalized in the first place. And this is not a hypothetical threat. Americans have been involved in terrorist activities from the Boston Marathon bombings to the attack on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, to the highest ranks of al-Qaida in the person of notorious propaganda chief Adam Gadahn. With the civil war in Syria offering a new and relatively accessible training ground for terrorists, this pool of American radicals may grow.

The U.S. government first outlined its plan to confront the homegrown threat in 2011, with the release of the White House "Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States." Though filled with helpful ideas about countering the threat within the United States, the plan is severely

limited by a lack of budgetary resources and other notable shortcomings.

While the White House plan recognizes the role communities can play in collaboration with law enforcement agencies to protect America, it does not specify how public officials should establish those relationships, nor does it include any benchmarks for partnership. The plan also does not provide guidelines for how law enforcement can refer radicalized individuals for interventions or how community groups might conduct interventions with radicalized or at-risk individuals.

Notwithstanding these challenges, there are some bright spots. In lieu of guidance from the federal government, several communities have proactively created robust partnerships with local law enforcement agencies. Former U.S. Attorney B. Todd Jones, for example, has helped reduce terrorist recruitment of young men within the Somali community in greater Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minn. The Los Angeles Police Department has one of the country's longest-standing community engagement programs, with officers dedicated exclusively to building trust between the police and the Muslim community. In Maryland's Montgomery County, the county executive recently established the Faith Community Working Group, which has a subcommittee dedicated to public safety and preventing violent extremism specifically.

The FCWG is the first community-led engagement with the local police designed specifically to reduce homegrown radicalization by creating public awareness about the risk factors and empowering the requisite experts to intervene with at-risk individuals. The association includes government officials, trauma-informed counselors, police officers, youth activists, faith leaders and violence prevention experts who are committed to reducing the precursors of violent extremism, such as social alienation, psychological disorders, political grievances and al-Qaida-inspired ideologies. In its August 2013 kickoff meeting, more than 70 members of various faith communities came together with county officials and the police to show their support for the collaborative effort.

Federal, state and local governments must intensify and expand local partnerships such as these across the nation. One by one, these efforts could provide communities and law enforcement with the resources necessary to carry out effective interventions for at-risk or radicalized individuals. Pursuing a dual track of empowering grass-roots organizations and bolstering the relationships between law enforcement and the faith community, the U.S. government can dramatically improve the capacity of communities to be a first line of defense against homegrown extremists. But they can only thrive and spread if the federal government is willing to commit money, not just lip service.

Hedieh Mirahmadi is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute and president of the World Organization for Resource Development and Education (WORDE), whose mission is to enhance understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in order to mitigate social and political conflict. ❖

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