

# We Must Challenge the Ideology Driving Terrorism

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Articles & Testimony

**T**he recently foiled parcel bomb plot, tied to al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, demonstrates today's persistent terror threat from abroad.

Yet Western democracies face an equally serious threat from home-grown terrorists. In the past two weeks, the US government unsealed charges against six men accused of funnelling money to al-Shabab, the Somali terrorist organisation responsible for the July 11 World Cup attacks in Kampala, Uganda. Three of the men are from San Diego, California, and three are Somali, one of whom lives in Missouri, one in Minnesota and one who is thought to be in Kenya or Somalia.

These indictments follow just three months after charges against 14 Americans for providing financial support and recruits to Shabab. Unsealing the indictments, US Attorney-General Eric Holder highlighted the sharp increase in home-grown radicalisation: "We are seeing an increasing number of individuals -- including US citizens -- who have become captivated by extremist ideology and have taken steps to carry out terrorist objectives, either at home or abroad."

Admirably, the Obama administration's May national security strategy explicitly lists as one of its goals "empowering communities to counter radicalisation." But without identifying the ideology driving radicalisation, it will be difficult to build community resilience against radicalisers.

No standardised explanation can account for every case of radicalisation. Yet it is clear that improved integration of immigrant communities and a greater sense of national social cohesion are essential to redressing local grievances and can lower the susceptibility of these communities.

At the same time, it is necessary to challenge and defeat the extremist ideology being peddled by radicalisers: our ultimate adversaries are not those already radicalised but their extremist ideology that propels individuals to wage violent jihad.

The ideology being espoused -- radical Islamism -- is an extremist sociopolitical ideology separate from the religion of Islam. Failure to recognise its influence as a key driver that seeks to frame, motivate and justify violent extremism hampers efforts to intervene early in the radicalisation process.

Since 9/11, US efforts to counter radical Islamism have included varied community engagement, counter-radicalisation and tactical counter-terrorism initiatives. Programs have been expanded to advance global engagement and strategic communication abroad, and community engagement and town hall meetings with immigrant communities at home.

At the other end of the spectrum, counter-terrorism officials have concentrated not only on preventing plots from being hatched but on developing fissures among al-Qa'ida, affiliated terror groups and their supporters.

These efforts have borne fruit and the Obama administration is to be praised. Yet on their own they fall short. Engagement and counter-terrorism are critical, but the wide space between them must be addressed. Missing are

policies and programs that contest the extremist narrative of radicalisers, empower and network mainstream voices already countering extremism, promote the free exchange of ideas and publicly challenge extremist voices and ideas.

The reason for this gap is the administration's discomfort with admitting the connection between today's terrorist threat and radical Islamism. Effectively contesting violent extremism requires countering the radical Islamist narrative. This does not mean banning despicable -- but protected -- speech; rather, it means offering alternative narratives and fostering meaningful ideological debate to strengthen the moderate Muslim centre in the face of the Islamist threat.

The administration must complement the new national security strategy with a systemic, whole-of-government approach to countering violent extremism. Government agencies presently involved in countering violent extremism do not note systemic failures so much as the lack of a coherent policy. Without clear directives instructing the inter-agency how to distribute resources and co-ordinate aspects of the mission, individual and office-wide efforts are improvised. As a result, an inconsistent and haphazard approach to the force underlying today's terrorist threat is all but guaranteed.

For instance, the aftermath of the nearly successful Christmas Day bombing focused almost exclusively on the wrong questions. While it is important to learn how Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab got on the plane, it would be far more instructive if we understood why a young, wealthy, Western-educated Nigerian abandoned wealth, education and opportunity to wage violent jihad.

Counter-radicalisation is an essential complement to counterterrorism. The latter we do relatively well, the former we barely do at all. The result: middle class Muslim-Americans from Virginia videotape a militant message, leave for jihad at the urging of a Taliban recruiter and are arrested in the home of a known militant in Pakistan.

"We are not terrorists," one of them says as he enters a Pakistani courtroom. "We are jihadists and jihad is not terrorism."

All elements of national power should be used to counter this narrative and debunk the notion that Muslims have a religious duty to commit acts of terror. There are no guarantees that if the US had been fully engaged in this effort for the past 10 years these same boys would not have left for Pakistan. However, unless we accelerate and expand our efforts, we can be assured that others will follow in their footsteps.

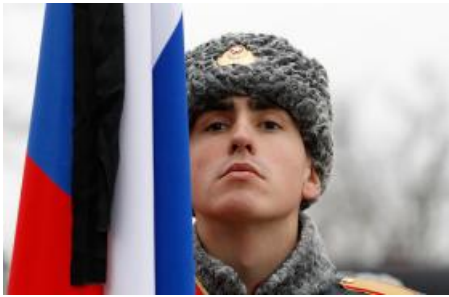
**[J. Scott Carpenter \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC10.php?CID=25\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC10.php?CID=25)** and **[Matthew Levitt \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC10.php?CID=5\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC10.php?CID=5)** are co-authors, with Steven Simon and Juan Zarate, of **[Fighting the Ideological Battle: The Missing Link in US Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism \(/templateC04.php?CID=332\)](#)**. Levitt visited Australia as a guest of the Australian Federal Police to advise on counter-radicalisation efforts. ❖

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