# Jihadist Radicalization:

## Coming to a Theater Near You?

by Soner Cagaptay **(/experts/soner-cagaptay)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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On October 17, 2009, Myriam Benraad, Soner Cagaptay, and Mary Habeck addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. Myriam Benraad is a Keston Family scholar at The Washington Institute's **Project Fikra (templateI02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms)** , focusing on radicalization in the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and the United States. Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the **Turkish Research Program (templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms)** at The Washington Institute. Mary Habeck is an associate professor of strategic studies at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies and taught previously at Yale University.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Myriam Benraad

To truly understand jihadist radicalization -- from its multiple, complex patterns to its proliferation of homegrown forms -- we must first clearly define the phenomenon. The term is typically used to describe the processes through which individuals and groups follow the path of "holy war" into active militancy. The global radicalization phenomenon is not homogenous -- it encompasses different political, cultural, and economic environments, as well as different doctrinal currents. Radical jihadists fall into two main categories: "nationalist" mujahedin who focus on defensive jihad, and Salafists who view jihad as a global offensive. Individual "selfradicalization" is also becoming more common, though group dynamics remain an important factor in pulling people along this path. As deviant ideologies and value systems develop and fester within such groups, they create momentum toward more radical forms of action.

At a time of growing threats, the United States must focus on defining and implementing effective counterradicalization policies on the home front. The first step in doing so is to examine the strategies that have already been implemented in the Middle East and Europe and to evaluate their successes and failures. In order to improve its ability to prevent terrorist attacks, the U.S. government must couple military measures and other repressive tactics with a greater focus on intelligence and robust legal provisions. Moreover, structural, social, and economic reforms must be reprioritized in those societies where radical ideology is still spreading. Pioneering approaches such as rehabilitation and reeducation of redeemed jihadists should also be considered. These types of programs have already been employed in countries such as Indonesia and India, where former radicals now partner with police and intelligence services to combat radicalization. Such partnerships have proven particularly valuable when it comes to engaging in dialogue with jihadists.

The United States can also learn from Saudi Arabia's recent counter-radicalization experiences. For example, the Saudi government's "Sakinah" campaign has focused on countering radical ideology and recruitment online by using Muslim scholars to interact and debate with jihadist recruiters and recruits alike. In addition, the kingdom has put some former terrorists and extremists on television to publicly issue recantations. Such efforts have had an impact on the ground, with various communities increasingly rejecting violence.

France and the United Kingdom offer useful models as well. In Britain, one of the four pillars of the government's "CONTEST" counter-radicalization strategy is prevention. Under this framework, the government has gathered several Muslim organizations dedicated to articulating a mainstream understanding of Islam for young British Muslims. Such measures are aimed at undermining jihadist narratives. For its part, France has addressed homegrown radicalization through a mix of repressive instruments, domestic intelligence, and sophisticated and robust legal structures to prosecute jihadists. The French have separate institutions to handle these types of cases, including judges and courts specializing in terrorism as well as trained prosecutors and Muslim chaplains. The United States could also learn from France's handling of Islamist radicalization in prisons -- a growing problem highlighted by recent incidents in North Carolina and elsewhere. For instance, the French government has monitored radical material in prisons for years, and it provides specially trained Muslim chaplains for such institutions.

Soner Cagaptay

Although Turkey has never had a reputation for radicalization, this trend is changing under the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Ankara's foreign policy

is moving away from the West, especially Israel, while becoming more friendly toward Iran. The AKP is also building links with Hamas and Hizballah. These and other anti-Western trends are the first steps toward radicalization.

Perhaps more important, Turkish public attitudes toward the West have soured after seven years of AKP rule. Today, most Turks oppose European Union accession, many hate America, and few if any look favorably on Israel. Young Turks in particular are increasingly adopting anti-Western mindsets, due to both internal Turkish dynamics and foreign developments such as the September 11 attacks. The ultimate goal of those attacks was not merely to hurt America, it seems, but to rally Muslims worldwide around a politically charged concept: that the Muslim world is in perpetual conflict with Israel, the United States, and the West. This perception is becoming more widespread in Turkey.

The shift in public attitudes is a big problem. Although Ankara may be persuaded to change its foreign policy, the "us vs. them" dichotomy promoted by Islamists in the post-September 11 world makes it almost impossible to reverse public opinion once it has gone anti-Western.

Fortunately, Turkey has not yet reached the apogee in its swing away from the West -- it is still on an outward trajectory. In this regard, it is essential that Washington adopt a zero-tolerance policy toward anti-American, anti-Western, anti-Israeli, or anti-Semitic rhetoric emanating from Turkey. The aim of such an approach is to eradicate homegrown radicalization by preventing radicals from indoctrinating others. Another important step is to ask the Turkish government to cease funding anti-Western propaganda. In its efforts to manipulate domestic politics, the AKP continues to encourage radicalization, and Washington would be wise to highlight this problem.

As for specific tactics, the United States should emphasize that those who are disseminating radical propaganda in Turkey are anti-Islamic -- that they are giving the faith a bad name. U.S. policymakers should also acknowledge that technology is a key facilitator in the radicalization process. The internet is a particularly important and dangerous instrument in this regard, and its impact should be taken very seriously.

There is hope in Turkey so long as the country is a democracy. Therefore, maintaining an independent media is crucial. If the Turkish press ceases to be free, democratic continuity and public discourse on radicalization and other topics will be jeopardized.

Mary Habeck

Views on radicalization are rapidly changing, in large part because the phenomenon can be looked at through a number of different lenses. According to one school of thought, individuals are driven toward radical change due to a "push" within their own lives, such as economic conditions, a poor political situation, or a personal issue. This push must also be accompanied by a "pull" from outside -- a vision such as the one offered by al-Qaeda and affiliated groups.

The al-Qaeda narrative has four main components. First, the group claims that Muslims have fallen away from true Islam, and that al-Qaeda and its sympathizers are the only true believers. Second, the rest of the world is controlled by unbelievers who are hostile to Muslims and seek the destruction of Islam. Third, because these hostile unbelievers declared war on Islam first, waging war against them is justified -- in other words, the true believers are fighting a defensive campaign. This view allows al-Qaeda to argue that even in the case of the September 11 attacks, the group was simply responding defensively to the war being waged against it by unbelievers. Fourth, an Islamic state is necessary not only to implement sharia, but also to carry on the war against the hostile unbelievers.

These narrative elements are mirrored by four concepts that al-Qaeda typically uses to help pull outsiders toward radicalization. The first is jihad fi'l sabil Allah; that is, fighting to defend one's community from attacks by unbelievers while washing away one's own sins. In Europe, for example, many of the young men attracted to al-Qaeda have previously been convicted of petty crimes; they may see the group's struggle as a way to atone for their sins and avoid hell. Second, al-Qaeda often encourages potential recruits to see themselves as saviors of their communities -- as heroes who are avenging wrongs (such as those committed in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq). Third, the group tells recruits that they can help build a new society by "promoting virtue and preventing vice." In al-Qaeda's view, this Quranic phrase means taking direct action in one's own neighborhood, forcing other Muslims to follow a radical version of Islamic law. Finally, al-Qaeda tells recruits that they are helping to build a utopia on earth, a caliphate where righteousness will reign and virtue will be rewarded. Together, these four concepts act as the strongest pull toward radicalization -- a potent vision for young men who are hoping to make a difference in the world and dedicate their lives to a cause. ❖


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