

U.S. Must Work to Prevent Radicalization

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Articles & Testimony

In recent congressional testimony, Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair cited violent extremism -- largely perpetrated by Islamist terrorist groups -- as one of the most serious national security concerns confronting the U.S.

While the United States now clearly recognizes the scale and complexity of the problem it faces, developing an effective strategy to counter it has proved daunting. Today, the Obama administration has an opportunity to chart the path toward success by embracing a new plan.

Radicalization is a process with identifiable stages that can be interrupted. Yet U.S. policy until now has been defined by an approach that focuses only on violent extremism -- and combating it through primarily military means. Far too little has been done in the 7 1/2 years after Sept. 11 to counter the ideology and prevent the still-nonviolent recruit from taking the final step toward detonation.

To break the radicalization cycle, the United States and its allies must engage in a competition of ideas for the would-be "radicalizer." The likely target is al-Qaida, with its global propaganda efforts, or influential but independent extremist clerics, or low-level recruiters. As in Iraq, cultivating such alternatives will require empowering mainstream Muslims in their efforts to provide hopeful, practical alternatives to jihadist ideology. It also will require substantial investment in rejuvenating efforts to encourage prosperity, reform and democracy in Arab countries.

These democracy-promotion efforts must be delinked from counterterrorism policy, however. Connecting the two, as the Bush administration did, has the unintended implication of hurting the ability of both U.S. government and nongovernmental organizations to play an effective role on the ground in supporting democracy and reform efforts, as it raises suspicion that the real purpose of the efforts is regime change.

U.S. investment also can be leveraged more effectively in this effort by linking assistance to anti-corruption in the Middle East. Persistent corruption is the No. 1 frustration among Arab publics, a factor radical extremists exploit to challenge governmental legitimacy. Encouraging increased transparency would help the United States build bridges to a suspicious public and prevent al-Qaida's rhetorical punch.

Where terrorist groups provide social support and constituent services to their communities, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, the United States must work to empower alternatives to compete with them. In some cases, this will require helping governments to decentralize, relying on U.S. Agency for International Development, World Bank and other expertise to do so.

The U.S. also should work more aggressively to end government-only contacts within Muslim-majority countries and find new ways to empower or amplify voices competing with those of the radicalizer.

Finally, the Obama administration should fix the existing bureaucracy designed to confront these challenges by designating a single address for counter-radicalization strategy at the White House to oversee and advise the president on this effort.

Radicalization is an issue that strongly warrants the attention of policy-makers. With the right conceptual approach and concerted action, the Obama administration can set the United States on a course to undercutting al-Qaida's narrative and appeal; the sooner these changes are adopted, the safer we will be.

Tim Roemer, the president of the Center for National Policy, and Lorne Craner, the president of the International Republican Institute, were part of The Washington Institute's Presidential Task Force on Confronting the Ideology of Radical Extremism, which produced [Rewriting the Narrative: an Integrated Strategy for Counterradicalization](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=311) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=311>). ❖

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