

Reversing the Tide of Radicalization

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Farah Pandith is the State Department's first-ever U.S. representative to Muslim communities and a veteran of Republican and Democratic administrations.



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On September 20, 2008, Colin Mellis, Maajid Nawaz, and Farah Pandith addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. Mr. Mellis is a policy advisor on radicalization to the City of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Mr. Nawaz is the founder and codirector of the Quilliam Foundation. Ms. Pandith is a senior advisor to the assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs.

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

Colin Mellis

Following the murder of film director Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam by a violent Islamist in 2004, the city's leaders recognized a policy gap between general preventive work -- official acts and institutions that promote mediation of disputes and social cohesion -- and the counterterrorism measures implemented by police, military, and intelligence officials. To close the gap, the City of Amsterdam developed a three-tiered approach to local security centered around general prevention, specific prevention, and direct intervention.

Most municipalities in the Netherlands include general preventive strategies in their local governance functions; such strategies take a long-term perspective and address grievances, real and perceived, that are prevalent in the community. Specific prevention seeks to avoid polarization between groups, particularly Muslims and non-Muslims, and focuses on vulnerable groups such as Muslim youth. In particular, specific prevention seeks to empower and mobilize the young voices of moderation within the Muslim community, particularly those who can help counter radicalism and provide ways for Muslim youth to resolve identity crises within a civic framework.

Direct intervention is the most novel -- and innovative -- among the Dutch local security strategies. It is designed for Muslim youth who have already internalized radical ideology but have not yet acted on it. As a central part of its direct intervention strategy, the City of Amsterdam established the Information House to build expertise on radical Islamist ideology, create formal and informal civic support networks throughout the city, and provide advice and other assistance on specific cases of urban political violence. The Information House receives calls from social workers, teachers, and others in the community who are concerned that particular individuals may be on the path toward violent radicalism, and its staff helps these callers determine whether there is a reason to be concerned --

that is, whether the individual is expressing radical or merely religious beliefs.

By establishing this program, the City of Amsterdam has been able to assuage fears and change misconceptions regarding Islam and radicalization. The initiative has strengthened key moderates in the Muslim community -- mainly, charismatic and well-informed young people who illustrate how to be a good Muslim and a good citizen simultaneously. In receiving such formal and informal official support, these individuals become empowered to mediate interventions and counter Islamist radicalism. The program's overall efficacy remains to be seen, as it is a relatively new program. Yet there have been visible improvements in the Muslim community.

Both the program and Dutch society in general still face several challenges, including resistance to religion entering into the public domain, misconceptions about Muslim radicalism and religious conservatism, and privacy issues. The wider identity crisis among Muslim youth in Western Europe is a factor as well. As the Netherlands attempts to define what it means to be Dutch, certain ethnic and cultural tropes may need to undergo redefinition or removal in order to fully and effectively integrate all communities within the country.

Maajid Nawaz

The UK-based Quilliam Foundation opposes both violence and the ideology of Islamism in general, the latter of which has four defining traits: Islam as a political ideology, not a faith; the propagation of Islamic law as state law; the belief that sharia is common to a global political community known as the umma; and the idea that the umma must be represented by an expansionist entity referred to as the caliphate.

These four ideas are shared and advocated by all Islamists -- an important consideration given that all jihadist movements have stemmed from Islamism. And although violence is not intrinsic to Islam, or even necessarily to Islamism, it is clearly a real problem among many Islamist groups. In this regard, it is important to note that the idea of a sharia-ruled country is not based on Islamic religious texts -- it is a modern invention. So, too, is the contemporary concept of the umma, which was once linked closely with religious identity but has recently been transformed under Islamism into an exclusive political identity. Accordingly, the Quilliam Foundation opposes Islamism, believing that this ideology poses a significant threat.

There are many legitimate grievances at work within many Muslim communities. Islamists manipulate these grievances to further the cause of their ideology, finding ways to tie individual grievances to broader ones. In many cases, recruiters try to appeal to young Muslims' sense of alienation by making them feel that they are part of a cause, convincing them that all Muslims are suffering because of the West's actions. For example, Islamists have portrayed the war in Iraq as a war against all Muslims. During Nawaz's years as a recruiter for the international Islamist group Hizb al-Tahrir, he used this technique as a means of bringing young Muslims into the ranks of Islamism.

Maajid Nawaz's time in prison was critical to his deradicalization. During his incarceration, he learned Arabic and was able to read sacred Islamic texts for himself. Another vital factor was Amnesty International's decision to work for him as a prisoner of conscience. By working to secure his release, the organization helped him realize that there were good non-Muslims.

Farah Pandith

From the U.S. perspective, Europe is one of the regions of greatest concern regarding radicalization, second only to Pakistan. The European concern is rooted in several factors: the freedom of movement across borders, the ease with which European citizens can acquire a U.S. visa, the easy access to technology, the broad freedoms accorded to individual expression, and the relatively high conversion rate to Islam. Viewed against the backdrop of the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, these factors taken together have a major impact on questions of identity among European Muslims, particularly youth.

The United States has begun to engage with Muslims across Western Europe in a wide variety of ways. Such a diversity of methods is important, because Europe has many communities of Muslims, not a single community. Muslim issues in one city may not be the same as those in another country, or even in a neighboring city. Therefore, we must focus on what is taking place at the local level as we develop official engagement policies and programs at the U.S. Department of State.

Our main goal at present is to amplify moderate Muslim voices, because Muslims themselves are the only remedy against violent Islamist ideology. In Europe, mainstream Muslim leaders usually lack the tools necessary to combat radicalization, and we have sought to provide them with those tools. Similarly, many of the moderate European Muslims who are willing to speak out against extremism are unaware of or unconnected to one another. Helping them develop a network is crucial; accordingly, the United States has opened up avenues of dialogue to facilitate trust building among Europe's Muslim communities.

The issue of youth and identity is another essential part of the deradicalization process. It is important to determine where youth are hearing about alternative ideologies. The United States hopes to illustrate how democracy and Islam can go hand in hand, and how to reconcile being Western and Muslim. We need to be savvy about this; we need to provide alternatives via technology and the internet, where young people are likely to encounter such ideological messages.

We also need the help of European imams. We are beginning to work on imam training, but it is difficult to apply the Christian model of theological training to another religion. Moreover, the fact that sermons are often in Arabic can alienate certain youths, leading them to seek answers elsewhere. Nevertheless, many young Muslims do consult with their imams, so it is crucial that these religious leaders help their parishioners reconcile being Muslims with living in a non-Muslim-majority country. ❖

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