

Jihadist Threats to the West, In the West

Sep 21, 2006



In-Depth Reports

On September 16, 2006, Frank Cilluffo, director of the Homeland Security Policy Institute at George Washington University, and Ronald Sandee, executive director of the Nine Eleven/Finding Answers Foundation, addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. Following is a brief summary of their remarks.

Throughout the discussion, both panelists focused on addressing problems facing the United States and Europe with regard to homegrown Islamism in Western countries. They offered a critique of U.S. and European understanding of the origins of terrorism and found common ground in suggesting ways that the West could strike at the root causes of radical Islamism and terrorism.

Frank Cilluffo's comments centered on a recent report issued by his institute regarding radicalization in the U.S. prison system. The report concluded that American jails are an incubator for radical Islamism. Although federal prisons are adequately regulated on this issue, 93 percent of the country's two million inmates are held in state and county jails, which have yet to implement standardized procedures for monitoring radical ideology and behavior. Given the lack of official imams in state prison systems, radical prisoners often take over religious leadership roles and use their positions to spread extremist ideas. Wardens often fail to recognize the threat, as their main concern is ensuring that prisoners do not escape. Islamist prisoners tend to keep a low profile, stay out of trouble, and appear to wardens as model inmates.

Cilluffo placed the failure to recognize this threat in a wider context: the general U.S. failure to recognize the evolution of homegrown terrorist threats since the September 11 attacks. He identified three types of terrorist groups. The first category, which he dubbed "al-Qaeda classic," describes large organizations with a clear hierarchy. "Franchising," the second category, describes smaller cells operating independently. The third, most decentralized category is "leaderless movements," which have virtually no centralization or structure. Instead of a hierarchy, potential members are radicalized by others in a chain and then become independent operators. According to Cilluffo, the second and third categories are where most of the current threat lies, but the first category still receives the most attention.

Ronald Sandee focused on problems facing European countries in the battle against domestic radicalism. The most significant of these problems stem from two issues: first, European governments' poor understanding of the fundamentalist teachings disseminated in mosques, and second, the longstanding failure to help moderate Muslims integrate their communities into the fabric of European society. He offered several proposals to overcome these problems.

In particular, he emphasized the need to foster knowledge of local languages within Muslim communities, going so far as to propose that such languages be required for mosque speeches. Although he recognized the potential constitutional problems such a measure would raise, he pointed out cases in which imams have spoken in tolerant terms publicly and been lauded by European politicians, only to later tell followers in Arabic that their public comments had been spoken disingenuously. He also suggested that European governments invite Muslim

communities to send official representatives. In addition to giving Muslims a sense of European respect for their communities, such an initiative could enable a productive dialogue.

Cilluffo and Sandee found common ground in defining solutions to problems found on both sides of the Atlantic. For example, they each tried to correct the impression that law enforcement should be the only tool used in the fight against terrorism. In what has become a battle of ideas, moderate Muslims and religious scholars can help combat terrorism early in its development, well before it reaches a critical stage. ❖

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