

Islamic Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat

CSIS Congressional Forum on Islam

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Looking at recent cases from across the United States and Europe, the NYPD has mapped out a pattern of radicalization that has transformed unremarkable young Muslims living in the West into violent threats. There are four stages in this process: pre-radicalization, self-identification, indoctrination, and jihadization. This process is happening faster than even a few years ago, and the entire cycle can now occur within weeks. While only a small minority of young Muslims become radicalized, understanding the drivers of the process of radicalization is vital to disrupting the radicalization process.

KEY POINTS

- Generally, the candidates for radicalization begin as unremarkable individuals: U.S.-born Muslim males, aged 15-35, middle class, and secular. Jihadis in the U.S. are generally not graduates of the madrassas that have gotten press attention; they are the graduates of U.S. high schools.
- A crisis, or “cognitive opening,” occurs that causes the individual to see the world in a different way and adopt orthodox customs. Often this entails frequent mosque attendance. For the vast majority, this new orthodoxy does not lead to radicalization.
- At some point, young Muslims are indoctrinated by radicals. They withdraw from the mosque and from their families, seeing them as being too compromising. For many in this phase, the Internet becomes an echo chamber for their radical beliefs. Literature in some mosques may play a role radicalizing young Muslims, as do charismatic individuals.
- At this point of relative isolation, radicals become operational. For a few, this has even involved training in Afghanistan or Pakistan. While young Western men are often liabilities in the battlefield there, they are assets in plots against the West.
- The first three phases of radicalization, including the indoctrination phase, do not necessarily include illegal activity.
- New York sees the most serious threat coming from people inside the U.S. but largely outside NYPD jurisdiction.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Preventing attacks requires intercepting threats before they reach the operational phase. This means disrupting the process of violent radicalization.
- Intelligence sharing is vital, both between federal and local authorities and between NYC officials and surrounding jurisdictions.
- Law enforcement must protect civil liberties and limit the number of “false positives,” i.e. law-abiding and pious Muslims who come under suspicion.

For more information about the series or to be included in future invitations, please contact Louis Lauter at llauter@csis.org or (202) 775-3186.

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