Pathways to Muslim Radicalization

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"There is no one path to radicalization" argued Professor Mohammed Hafez at a meeting of Capitol Hill staffers on September 21, 2007. According to Hafez, the common presumption that a principal root cause, whether economic deprivation, fundamentalist ideology, or authoritarian repression, can explain the growth of Islamic radicalism is simply wrong. Instead, "there are many pathways to radicalization," influenced by various entry points, variables, and personality types. Hafez, a visiting professor of political science at the University of Missouri and recent author of *Suicide Bombers in Iraq: The Strategy and Ideology of Martyrdom* (USIP, 2007) made his comments as part of the CSIS Congressional Forum on Islam, in a talk entitled "Pathways to Muslim Radicalization."

Hafez outlined three common types of radicals: idealists, true believers, and reformed sinners. The idealist is shocked by images of Muslim suffering or humiliation and identifies with the cause of jihad. True believers already believe in the cause of jihad and the use of violence, and they merely require a trigger to engage in jihad, such as the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Reformed sinners, mainly in Europe, have led secular lifestyles and seek instant redemption through jihad to atone for past sins.

The most visible path to radicalization is a top-down process by centralized organizations which use social services to promote a radical ideology, such as Hezbollah. Less visible is a bottom-up process in which individuals with grievances–commonly resulting from state repression, government corruption, or sectarian violence–seek out radical groups.

Within each model, Hafez sees both gradual and rapid radicalization. Gradual radicalization, the most common, is a step-by-step process of socialization which leads individuals to slowly cut their ties to the secular world. Practitioners often grow beards, attend radical mosques, and grow distant from their more moderate friends and families. Individuals may become involved in a radical support network before actually becoming part of an organization or cell, working in an administrative, fundraising, or weapons acquisition capacity. From a supporting role, the individual may be allowed to take a more active role in jihad. Many of the foreign fighters in Iraq appear to have gone through a more rapid process of radicalization, in which organizers capitalize on the moral outrage of young Muslims to enlist participation in jihad.

Cutting across these different profiles, ties of kinship and friendship often prompt people to join radical groups. For example, many of the foreign fighters in Iraq followed

some kind of associate there. Often groups of two to three individuals travel together, not only to assist each other but also in order to strengthen group commitment.

Once a person goes through the process of radicalization, ideology becomes an important factor in sustaining it. The leaders of al-Qaeda and the global jihad movement weave together a powerful yet simple narrative based on three themes: Muslims continue to endure global humiliation; Arab leaders are impotent and collaborators with the West; and that if Muslims sacrifice and actively wage jihad, then they will eventually succeed. Hafez remarked that this narrative relies on an uncomplicated "problem-cause-solution" paradigm similar to those of Marxist and fascist ideologies. Moreover, the presence of the solution component—what Hafez labels "self-efficacy"—is vital. Demonstrating through videos and other media that Muslims are winning and humiliating the West is essential to the entire enterprise.

Given this powerful narrative, Hafez asserted that the United States remains limited in its ability to counter Islamic radicalization throughout the Middle East. Al-Qaeda's ideology does not by itself radicalize people, but it helps sustain the radical course on which many have embarked. That ideology has remained largely intact, and the United States has been unable to construct a compelling counter narrative. Hafez argued that some U.S. actions can help blunt the power of al-Qaeda's propaganda. In Iraq, for example, U.S. efforts to improve the living standards of internally displaced persons, resettle refugees in neighboring countries with aid, and expand the number of Iraqis given U.S. visas can have a positive effect.

While U.S. efforts at public diplomacy have largely failed, Hafez affirmed that Muslims themselves can still present an ideological alternative to violent radicalism rooted in the language and traditions of Islam. This alternative must be perceived as authentic, dissociated from discredited elites and state-supported clerics, and must persuasively argue that the actions of jihadists kill more Muslims than Americans, violate Islamic law, and defy Islamic theology.

One of the main challenges in effectively countering the spread of radicalism is the fact that there is widespread support for violence among many Muslims. Yet Hafez made a distinction between those who have grievances and may support violent strategies and those who themselves perpetrate violence. The distinction is a critical point absent in much of the debate surrounding Islamic radicalism.

Hafez advocated framing a debate that correctly accounts for both non-violent and violent Islamic radicalism, a qualification he argued has stark implications on U.S. and Arab states' counterterrorism policies. By making such a distinction, the United States potentially broadens its available allies throughout the Islamic world by moving beyond what many consider delegitimized secular elites and encouraging political space for non-violent Islamic groups. These groups, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, are the most likely to effectively compete with the violent narrative espoused by al-Qaeda.