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How to Contain Radical Islam: Lessons from South Asia

BY TABEREZ AHMED NEYAZI

During a March 2007 hearing, the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee observed that while “homegrown terrorism” presents a real and serious challenge, the United States is fortunate that radicalization seems to have less appeal here than in other parts of the world. Confronted with recent evidence of radicalized Muslim Americans, however, such confidence in America’s “homegrown” Muslim population seems to be misplaced. A recent increase in terrorism-related incidents involving Muslim Americans has sent an alarming signal across the American political establishment. It has also brought into question the level of integration of Muslim Americans into mainstream society and this minority’s odds of being swayed by radical ideology.

Taberez Ahmed Neyazi, formerly Visiting Fellow at the East-West Center in Hawai‘i, notes that “[c]onfronted with recent evidence of radicalized Muslim Americans, however, confidence in America’s ‘homegrown’ Muslim population seems to be misplaced. A recent increase in terrorism-related incidents involving Muslim Americans has sent an alarming signal across the American political establishment.”

What is striking about all these recent acts of terrorism is that they were orchestrated by Muslim Americans who have received secular education in their youth. Without access to true theological understanding of Islam, these young Muslim Americans become easy targets at the hands of terrorists who sway them with false interpretations of religious texts. This practice shows the need to get religious organizations involved in assisting with counter-radicalization strategies as has been done in South Asia. India, despite housing the second-largest Muslim population after Indonesia, has not reported any instance of Muslim Indian involvement in international acts of terrorism. Is there anything for the United States to learn from the efforts of India’s Muslim organizations to stem the rise of radical Islamist ideology?

Many religious organizations and scholars in India have been working at the civil-society level to counter the growing threat of terrorism in their societies. Darul Uloom Deoband, an influential Indian institution of Islamic learning situated in Uttar Pradesh and considered in the Islamic world next in standing only to Cairo’s Al-Azhar, has been at the forefront of this effort. For instance, in May 2008, it issued a fatwa declaring terrorism as un-Islamic. Ever since, Deoband and its sister organization Jamiat Ulema-i-Hind, a socio-religious organization working for the betterment of Muslim Indians, have regularly organized meetings and conferences to denounce and to build a movement against terrorism.

The fatwa by Deoband was a watershed moment, as it had been accused of influencing the Taliban movement, although there was no evidence of a direct link between Deoband and the Taliban. By issuing the far-reaching fatwa against terrorism, Deoband had not only disapproved of terrorism but also set an example how Muslims and religious organizations in other parts of the world can play a role in checking the radicalization of Muslim youth.

A similar development took place in Pakistan recently. On March 2, 2010, Muhammad Tahir ul-Qadri, an influential religious leader and prominent scholar in



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Pakistan, issued a 600-page fatwa in London declaring that terrorists and suicide bombers are unbelievers. Qadri has effectively used electronic technology such as cassettes, videos, CDs, DVDs, and television channels to reach out to the masses. Through his influential organization, Minhaj-ul-Quran International (MQI), with a presence in 90 countries including Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States, Qadri has attempted to present an alternative, moderate face of Islam before the world.

Such attempts by Muslim organizations and scholars to stop the radicalization of Muslim youth in South Asia have yielded positive results. The approach of Deoband has been widely welcomed across different sections of society in India including the government, political parties and religious leaders from both Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Similarly, the fatwa issued by Qadri was endorsed by the British government, while the event, at which Qadri issued the fatwa, was attended by Members of Parliament and representatives of London's Metropolitan Police. However, it will take time before one sees the impact of Qadri's fatwa.

Might one expect a similar role from Muslim religious organizations and scholars in the United States? The United States certainly provides space for different civil society organizations and minorities to propagate their viewpoints. Yet unlike the case in South Asia, where civil society organizations take initiatives on their own for any cause, the United States, through the Department of Homeland Security and law enforcement agencies, needs to encourage and promote such initiatives in Muslim American communities.

For example, the state of Hawai'i passed legislation last year declaring the twelfth day of Rabi ul-Awwal, which fell on September 24, 2009, according to the Islamic lunar calendar, as Islam Day. This day marks the day when the Prophet Muhammad marched from Mecca to Medina and thus signifies the beginning of Islam. The purpose of the legislation is to recognize “the rich religious, scientific, cultural and artistic contributions” that Islam and the Islamic world have made. It does not sanction any spending or organized celebration of Islam Day. Despite drawing criticism from a few lawmakers as honoring a religion connected to 9/11, Hawai'i went ahead with the legislation. This is a significant step and can go a long way in further integrating Muslims within American society.

There is an urgent need to encourage a greater engagement and outreach to Muslim American communities. The 2009 arrest of five young Muslim Americans in Pakistan who are accused of plotting a terrorist attack shows how imperative this outreach is. A possible terrorist attack was averted because concerned parents of these young individuals contacted the U.S. government. A counter-terrorism strategy that includes the Muslim American community will certainly help in identifying potential terrorists and avoiding future catastrophe.

Therefore, besides providing legal support by passing legislation, the United States can play a role by encouraging American Muslim religious organizations and scholars to spread the core values of Islam among their followers through meetings, programs, and other media. Muslim organizations, such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the Arab American Action Network, and the Muslim Public Affairs Council, can play a proactive role in checking extremism among Muslim Americans. These mainstream organizations can spread the true message of Islam and help in publicizing religious injunctions against terrorism issued by influential Muslim organizations and scholars, such as Darul Uloom Deoband and Tahir ul-Qadri.