**Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation
Project on U.S. Global Engagement**

Radicalization/De-radicalization:
Lessons for the Next U.S. President

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SUMMARY

In the third installment in a series of events on the presidential transition, Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation Director, Alistair Millar, moderated a panel discussion on "Radicalization/De-radicalization: Lessons for the Next U.S. President." The discussants included: Richard Barrett, Coordinator, UN Al-Qaida/Taliban Sanctions Monitoring Team and Co-Chair, UN Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force Working Group on "Addressing Radicalization and Extremism that lead to Terrorism"; Frank J. Cilluffo, Director, Homeland Security Policy Institute at The George Washington University; Daniel W. Sutherland, Officer for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, U.S. Department of Homeland Security; and Mona Yacoubian, Special Adviser, Muslim World Initiative, Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention, United States Institute of Peace. The discussion addressed what is perhaps the greatest strategic challenge in combating terrorism, countering the rising tide of radicalization among diverse populations of vulnerable youths from Southeast Asia, to the Maghreb, to Northern Europe. Coming at the issue of violent radicalization from different angles, the diverse panel of experts highlighted key successes and challenges in efforts by the United States and its partners to counter radicalization and key lessons learned for the next administration.

The workshop was conducted under the Chatham House Rule, i.e., all of the discussion was off the record and not for attribution. The following summary highlights some of the key themes identified during the meeting. It is not an official or complete record of the proceedings and does not necessarily reflect the views of the meeting sponsors or participants.

By way of introduction consideration was given to definitions of "radicalization" and "violent radicalization" which is defined in pending House legislation as "the process of adopting or promoting an extremist belief system for the purpose of facilitating ideologically based violence to advance political, religious, or social change." Discussants emphasized the important distinction between radical political or religious thoughts or beliefs and "violent radicalization" which denotes a transition from radical thought to violent action. It was observed that while great numbers of people may be radical in their opinions or beliefs and there is nothing illegal about holding such beliefs, few are ever compelled to violence. Participants noted that although the factors driving violent radicalization are deeply personal, should not be associated with any particular communities, and are difficult to generalize about, research does seem to

indicate that in most cases it is a process driven by group dynamics, rather than individual mental pathology.

A useful conceptual model that compares the spread of "Islamist militancy" to the transmission of a communicable disease was presented. In the epidemiological metaphor, the agent or disease is "Islamist militancy," the hosts are individuals and terrorist groups, and the environment is what are often called conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism (factors such as regional conflicts that contribute to the spread of terrorism). These different forces form a triad at the center of which are different vectors, such as the internet, prisons, madrasahs, etc., through which the agent is transmitted. More information on the model, which provides useful insights into the interaction between these different forces and various entry points for combating the spread of Islamist militancy, are available at:
http://www.usip.org/specialists/bios/documents/stares_yacoubian_threat.pdf

Of these different "vectors," particular attention was given to the issue of prison radicalization. European countries are facing a situation where convicted terrorists in many cases will be coming out more radical and likely more dangerous than when they went into prison. One challenge for prison authorities, therefore, is whether to keep these individuals in the general prisoner population where they may contribute to the radicalization of other inmates or to hold them separately which can facilitate collaboration among terrorists.

The discussion also touched on the notion of "homegrown" radicalization, which it was argued is somewhat of a misnomer as the issues surrounding violent radicalization, particularly in the case of al Qaeda, are inherently transnational in nature. It was noted, however, that the term "homegrown" terrorism is used in Europe to differentiate terrorism carried out by European groups from that directed against Europe by groups from North Africa. It was emphasized that these broader transnational issues have been exploited by al Qaeda to develop a compelling narrative which portrays Islam as under siege and is at the heart of the group's appeal.

It was argued that what has been lacking from counterterrorism efforts to date is an effective and strategic effort to counter the narrative of al Qaeda. While acknowledging the need for tactical military and law enforcement efforts, it was pointed out that without a strategic effort to target the narrative and address the milieu in which terrorism thrives, the United States risks being reactive, tactical, and potentially simply reinforcing and playing into al Qaeda's narrative.

At the same time, however, it was argued that this is precisely the area where Western governments, and the United States in particular, are least capable of credible or effective action. Al Qaeda and like-minded groups can only be discredited within Muslim communities from the bottom up. The best advice for the United States was to behave in a manner consistent with its ideals; to "do no harm," and let al Qaeda collapse under the weight of its bankrupt ideology.

There was agreement, however, that there is great capacity for the United States to affect the debate negatively, for example, by committing human rights abuses in the name of counterterrorism or by associating terrorism with Islam. It was also noted that

Arab/Muslim prejudice in the United States, such as that exhibited during the presidential campaign where the suggestion that Barack Obama was Muslim was treated as a smear, is incredibly damaging to U.S. public diplomacy efforts.

To the extent that the United States and Western governments can influence the debate positively, one participant suggested focusing less on terrorists and more on the victims, citing the role that the 2005 Amman bombings played in undermining support for Al Qaeda in Iraq. It was proposed that the United Nations is particularly well suited to highlighting the human toll of terrorism.

The discussants also emphasized the importance of not lumping Islamist terrorist groups together but rather emphasizing and exploiting the differences among them. Since 2001, it was argued that the trend has been for those distinctions to become increasingly blurred. The attacks in Mumbai and the apparent targeting of Westerners by Lashkar-e-Taiba, which had previously been focused on conflicts with/in India and Afghanistan, was cited as yet more evidence of local/regional Islamist terrorist groups buying into the al Qaeda vision of global jihad. It was recommended that efforts be made to disaggregate terrorist groups with limited local and regional agendas from the more messianic and global agenda of al Qaeda and that genuine efforts be made to address the conditions which drive local/regionally focused groups.

The discussants highlighted the impact that former terrorists can have when they speak out against violence. It was suggested that Dr. Fadl, the founder of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, by recanting the theological basis for Islamist terrorism which he had help to lay, has been far more significant in undermining support for groups like al Qaeda than anything the United States or the United Kingdom can do or have done. The discussants, therefore, emphasized the importance or facilitating an exit from terrorism, highlighting the importance of deradicalization programs in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Indonesia, which, though imperfect, were discussed as possible models.

With regard to U.S. efforts to counter violent radicalization, discussion focused on the role of the Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Since 11 September 2001 that office has shifted from primarily responding to and dealing with discrimination complaints by Arab and Muslim Americans to engaging more proactively with these communities. Among other things, DHS has reached out to Arab and Muslim American community leaders to learn about their concerns, facilitate engagement in the political process, help liaise between them and other Muslim communities, and communicate and share information with them on relevant matters *e.g.* in advance of the release of Dutch parliamentarian, Geert Wilders' controversial movie *Fitna*. It was emphasized that engagement with Arab and Muslim communities cannot be based on narrow counterterrorism objectives but should be framed in the context of civil rights and promoting political engagement.

At the international level, discussion focused on the role of the United Nations. It was observed that the emergence of al Qaeda and the attacks of 11 September 2001 really raised the issue of terrorism to the international level and prompted the United Nations' involvement. Since then the United States has driven much of the United Nations' work in this regard, using the UN Security Council to operationalize the UN system against terrorism. While the Security Council was an expedient mechanism

through which to mandate action, it has been somewhat controversial. It was also pointed out that much of the United Nations, which sees its mission as development/human rights orientated, is ill at ease with and not a natural partner in counterterrorism.

Nevertheless, a number of important comparative advantages of the United Nations were cited. It provides a forum that can help neutralize the often poisonous politics of counterterrorism. It can and has worked to synthesize and facilitate the sharing of national best practices on dealing with violent radicalization and deradicalization programs. It was also noted that a lot of what the United Nations does in terms of development, human rights, and education work can reap dividends in countering radicalization. It was point out, however, that these efforts are important in their own right and do not benefit from being associated with the international counterterrorism agenda.

Among the key recommendations to emerge from the discussion was first, to continue to improve engagement with the U.S. Muslim community within the framework of civil rights and promoting political engagement (not on counterterrorism or countering radicalization).

Second, counterterrorism experts should avoid generalizations. Threats stemming from radical groups are not limited to Islamist groups but will continue to come from radical environmentalists, neo-Nazis, and other extremists.

Third, the next administration should employ a more holistic approach to combating terrorism that addresses conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism and ensures that U.S. actions are consistent with its rhetoric. The next administration will need to marry up U.S. actions with its rhetoric by renouncing torture and closing Guantanamo Bay.

Fourth, the United States and it allies should be more creative in responding to the threat of radicalization. Terrorism is a dynamic, unconventional phenomenon. Consideration should be given to more creative responses, *e.g.*, viral marketing.

Fifth, the next administration should employ a truly whole of government approach to counterterrorism. Things have improved since 2001 in this regard, but more needs to be done to join up U.S. government efforts and improve its analytical capacity. Also, more should be done to improve coordination and cooperation at the international level both bilaterally and through multilateral fora.

Sixth, the United States and its partners should do more to promote creative bottom up/grass roots approaches to dealing with radicalization and highlight the victims of terrorism and their stories.

Seventh, the next administration should take pains to avoid any association of terrorism with any particular religion or community and instead simply highlight its criminality. The United States also needs to take care to avoid actions that play into or reinforce the narrative or the purported religious legitimacy of al Qaeda and like minded groups, such as abusing human rights in the name of countering terrorism.

Finally, it was emphasized that the next administration needs to ensure that counterterrorism methods are credible and proportionate to the threat.