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Scope Note

This Primer is intended to be a reference for US policymakers, government officials, law enforcement officers, and academics. It focuses on radicalization inspired by al-Qa'ida and related groups that target US Muslims. The vast majority of US Muslims reject al-Qa'ida's ideology and terrorism. US Muslims are an extremely diverse group geographically, ethnically, and religiously, and we take that into account when we assess an individual's radicalization process. There are other types of extremists—such as white supremacists and ecoterrorists—who commit violence in this country and are of concern to law enforcement, but such extremists are not specifically addressed here.

Definitions of Key Terms

Several key terms guide how we understand and explain radicalization.

- **Radicalization** is the process by which individuals come to believe that their engagement in or facilitation of nonstate violence to achieve social and political change is necessary and justified.
- **Mobilization** is the process by which radicalized individuals take action to prepare for or engage in violence or material support for violence to advance their cause.
- **A Violent Extremist** is a person who advocates, is engaged in, or is preparing to engage in ideologically motivated terrorist activities (including providing support to terrorism) in furtherance of political or social objectives promoted by a *foreign* terrorist organization. This term includes violent extremists acting inside the United States.
- **A Homegrown Violent Extremist** is a US person who was once assimilated into, but who has rejected the cultural values, beliefs, and environment of the US in favor of a violent extremist ideology. He or she is “US-radicalized,” and intends to commit terrorism inside the US without direct support or direction from a *foreign* terrorist organization.
- **A Domestic Terrorist** is a person who engages in unlawful acts of violence to intimidate civilian populations or attempt to *influence domestic policy* (as opposed to furthering the aims of a foreign terrorist organization) without direction from or influence by a foreign actor. Examples of such terrorism include acts conducted by racist, supremacist, antigovernment, environmental, animal rights, or other single-issue extremist groups or movements. The Primer does not address this kind of terrorism.
- **A Group** is a small collection of individuals who have regular contact, frequently interact, and work together to achieve a common set of goals.
- **A Community** is a residential area—usually a neighborhood, small town, or city—where individuals share a common environment. We acknowledge that communities exist in cyberspace and can be as meaningful to individuals as those they physically live in.
- **Sociopolitical Factors**, such as longstanding societal grievances, current conflicts, global incidents, demographic changes, and the availability of interactive social media, have the potential to affect the attitudes and behaviors of large populations within and across nations.
- **Catalysts** are factors, such as the Internet, family networks, and personal relationships with other extremists, that enable or facilitate the mobilization of individuals by physically or virtually providing the space and opportunity to take action.
- **Inhibitors** are factors that can prevent or stall the progression of individuals committed to engage in violence, such as family members or law enforcement. Some factors can be both catalysts or inhibitor, and their categorization depends on the specific example being discussed.
- **A Credible Voice** is any influential figure who can undercut the appeal of violent extremists with a specific audience.

Fundamental Principles of Radicalization

This Primer goes beyond a linear process or static model to capture several aspects of the problem we have observed in radicalized individuals over the last several years.

- **Radicalization Tends to Enable Violence:** Becoming radicalized increases the likelihood that an individual will engage in terrorist violence.
- **Diversity of Factors:** Multiple factors are needed to explain why some individuals or groups choose to engage in terrorist violence.
- **Factors Interact:** Factors often interact; if examined independently they usually will fail to provide insight into the most likely causes of terrorist violence.
- **Factor Importance Can Vary Across Cases:** The factors will vary in importance depending on the circumstances or the individual. While one factor may be most relevant in one case, it may prove less useful in explaining someone else's violent trajectory.
- **Some Factors Serve as Catalysts for Other Factors:** Because radicalization is a process that develops over time, some factors may trigger a chain of events, even though they may not appear immediately relevant.
- **Diversity of Pathways:** Individuals follow different paths toward violence. While group engagement may dominate some individuals' road to extremism, lone offenders may follow a different trajectory. The different pathways may affect the length of the radicalization process and method of attack.

Radicalization and Mobilization Framework

Radicalization and mobilization are two processes that should be examined separately, as some individuals may become radicalized but never act on their beliefs or do not act violently until years later. Although most terrorists become radicalized before they act violently, far from all radicalized individuals become terrorists.

Radicalization Component

The complexity in the radicalization process of becoming a terrorist cannot be captured by a simple, linear explanation. A framework that examines radicalization using varying levels of analysis—**personal, group, community, sociopolitical**, and **ideological**—allows for the integration of separate and even contradictory sets of information, which aids in the development of flexible, adaptive, and robust strategies to deal with the spread of violent extremism. Each level of analysis contains key factors we have identified as important to increasing an individual's vulnerability to radicalization or facilitates the process.

- *Personal-level factors include:* psychological factors, demographic backgrounds, personal history.
- *Group-level factors include:* social networks, including family and peer groups, group dynamics.
- *Community-level factors include:* alienation, marginalization, diaspora relationships with home country.
- *Sociopolitical-level factors include:* collective grievances, foreign policy, external events.
- *Ideological-level factors include:* appeal of justifying narrative, charismatic ideologues.

We assess that **no single factor**—a person's need to belong or his or her isolation from society, for example—fully explains the radicalization process of any particular individual. Although some factors—such as grievances or an explanatory violent narrative—are common among the radicalization paths of most individuals, by themselves they do not explain why one individual turns to violence and another does not.

After an individual becomes radicalized, *catalysts* can shift him or her toward mobilization. Alternatively, *inhibitors* can blunt the move toward mobilization, which explains why some radicalized individuals do not ultimately engage in violence. Such forces can also serve to fuel or curtail the radicalization process itself.

- *Catalysts* include social media, familial and social networks.
- *Inhibitors* include law enforcement, community outreach, credible voices, family.

Radicalization and Mobilization Dynamics^a



^aAll specifics are examples and not exhaustive.

Mobilization Component

Radicalized individuals who come to actively support violence have undergone a mobilization process, which is distinct from the radicalization process and is driven by separate factors. Access to training, capability-building, individual competence and other preparatory type of activities dominate the mobilization process. The process entails four sets of factors:

- *Readiness To Act*: Individual motivation and intent that keeps the person engaged and moving toward his or her intended goal. Readiness to act can vary across time and be influenced by multiple factors—including personal will and competence, experiences while in training, and motivation gained or lost as a result of established relationships.
- *Opportunity*: Access to training and resources that provide individuals or groups the chance to take action. This can range from target practice at a local firing range to explosives training with terrorists overseas. Opportunity can also include having available time to engage in violent activities.
- *Capability*: Training that has prepared an individual to follow through on his or her intentions. The individual's capability also includes his or her educational training and skill set acquired through life experiences.
- *Targets*: Locations that the individual is familiar with because of where he lives or works or is interested in because of what they represent, such as supposed economic, political, or military dominance by the West.

All these factors work interactively to mobilize individuals and small groups toward violence. Countering the effect of any one of these may cause some to back away from violence. In other cases, however, it may result in individuals or groups modifying plans that change the nature of the target (for example, from a military base to a shopping mall) and type of training needed (for example, from explosives training to local target practice) to accomplish a given goal.

As this illustrates, a lack of access to some or all of these opportunities may be sufficient to demobilize individuals but not deradicalize them, leaving them in a radicalized but inactive state. This state can last for months or years, and individuals may move back and forth between the spheres of radicalization and mobilization before attempting to commit violence.

Factors Driving Radicalization

The following sections address in further detail the radicalization factors (personal, group, community, sociopolitical, and ideological) by highlighting elements at each level that contribute to the radicalization of individuals and groups. None of the descriptions are meant to be comprehensive, but they guide our thinking about how these factors contribute to the radicalization and mobilization of individuals.

Personal Factors

At the personal level, vulnerability to radicalization and the pursuit of violence depend on an interaction of personality traits—enduring individual characteristics, drivers, and needs—and the contextual and situational factors in a person's life.

Personal Needs. Some important motivational needs that may increase an individual's vulnerability to the allure of extremist activities include a sense of power and potency, achievement and productivity, affiliation, intimacy, a sense of belonging, a sense of personal significance and esteem, a sense of purpose and meaning, and moral integrity.

Not all individuals who become radicalized have unmet personal needs, but those who do are more vulnerable to radicalization. Some extremists are confident, well-adjusted, integrated, and productive members of society, while others come from destitute neighborhoods, may have family histories marked by poor or nonexistent parenting, or lack exposure to positive role models. Some are shy and reserved, while others are outgoing. Some are known as loners, others have many friends.

Personal Context. An individual's immediate surroundings—including family and friends—as well as demographic characteristics—such as education, age, social class—influence how he or she will experience and interpret events and increase vulnerability to life challenges.

- **Anxiety** can be caused by many factors, such as identity confusion, financial insecurity, threats of violence, competition, moral threats and dilemmas, and uncertainty. Accepting rigid externally imposed moral codes and finding enemies to blame is one way to relieve anxiety. Belonging to an extremist organization can meet needs and relieve unpleasant feelings of anxiety, identity confusion or moral threat.
- **Frustration** and discontent regarding perceived unfairness, social exclusion, and unmet needs can drive a person to participate in radical groups. Immersion into radical activities reduces the sense of meaninglessness and helplessness that results from frustration and allows the individual to gain a sense of accomplishing great things.
- **Developmental and life-history events** can include physical disabilities, loss of status, living in a violent environment, loss of people important to the individual, or loss of property. Such life events can predispose individuals to seek out an idealized past or compensate for a lost sense of self through participation in extremist activities.
- **Traumatic experiences**—such as physical, sexual or emotional abuse and neglect, witnessing abuse or violence against others, living in a conflict environment—can lead to lifelong physical and mental problems, hypervigilance and reactivity, loss of the sense of predictability and control, and changes in worldview. The active engagement of doing something offered by extremist groups can provide the individual a way to regain a sense of power or control and manage the anxiety resulting from trauma by acting upon others rather than being acted upon.

Triggering personal events—such as losing a job or perceived discrimination—can drive individuals to seek revenge out of a sense of personal humiliation against a perceived enemy. This is especially true if the individual has adopted a violent ideology that binds personal experiences to global crises affecting Muslims.

RADICALIZATION DYNAMICS: A PRIMER

Personal Needs Affecting Vulnerability to Radicalization

Personal Need	Description	How it Can Manifest in Radicalization
Sense of power and potency	Ability to exercise control over life circumstances and other people contributes to a sense of confidence and self esteem	Individuals lacking a sense of power may behave in meek, subservient ways or engage in persistent acts of domination or aggression of the sort encouraged by radical groups.
Achievement and productivity	Accomplishment, skill mastery, creative expression and productivity	Individuals who are unable to acquire and use meaningful skills and, thereby, lack recognition or a sense of being valued for their social contributions, may be more inclined to seek affirmation in outlets outside the mainstream, such as developing extremist content for others to use.
Affiliation, intimacy, sense of belonging	Interpersonal attachment and connection are critical to survival and emotional well being	In a quest to belong, individuals may seek out a sense of camaraderie in radical groups, actions, and settings.
Sense of personal significance and esteem	A positive opinion of oneself as competent and worthy of respect leads to a positive sense of self	Lack of self esteem may lead an individual to feel that he must assert his identity and prove himself through aggressive and, perhaps, extreme demands to be recognized and taken seriously.
Sense of purpose and meaning	The search for meaning is often met through religion and ideology, offering a conviction that one's activities have a higher purpose, providing a sense of importance and immortality	Sense of purposelessness may make individuals vulnerable and open to appeals promising a sense of purpose, higher meaning, divine mission, and rewards.
Moral integrity	The sense of being "right," of being a moral, spiritually acceptable person	A person who lacks confidence in his moral integrity, fears moral degradation from outside influences (such as the West), and feels threatened by those with alternative views of morality and sexual expression, leading him to feel it is a moral duty to fight such threats.

Group Factors

Group factors are a driving force in the radicalization and mobilization of most individuals who pursue terrorist violence. Extremist leaders and ideologues can generate sympathy and boost engagement with terrorist groups by arguing that local conflicts involving Muslims represent a war against Islam and thus an assault on all Muslims. Becoming part of a larger entity that shares a set of collective grievances helps lower individuals' thresholds for participation in extremist activities, to include—for some—the use of violence.

Group affiliations often evolve from preexisting relationships. Individuals usually engage with groups that build on childhood, social, and family ties, where bonds of trust form a foundation. Because most people have such relationships, the radicalizing component may be difficult to detect, even by family members who will be less suspicious of activities when their relatives are involved with known individuals.

- Academic studies examining the process of joining terrorist groups show that a substantial number of individuals—45 percent in one study and 75 percent in another—shared previous personal ties.

Groups emphasize collective identity. Identities that transcend country borders enable extremists to catch the attention of a broad Muslim community and mobilize it on behalf of their cause. Muslim extremists rarely talk in terms of “I” when speaking about perceived religious grievances; more often they say “we” and “our.”

- Many terrorist recruits report feeling a sense of connection to the worldwide community of Muslims before deciding to participate in terrorism, according to academic studies.

Groups create an echo chamber. By segregating themselves from society, extremist groups reinforce their preferred narrative, increase conformity and cohesion among members, and

create an environment where an individual's obligation to participate in violent jihad becomes an obvious and appropriate response.

- Violent extremists intentionally isolate potential members with like-minded others to ensure their immediate network of peers comprises only extremists. Radicalizers have used gatherings at private homes or mosques to target potential recruits and as venues where innocuous discussions about Islam turn to the war in Iraq and alleged Western atrocities committed against Muslims, according to academic studies.

Groups dehumanize opponents. Movement toward violence in extremist groups becomes more likely when members view their proposed response as moral, develop a vocabulary that dehumanizes their enemy, and minimize their role in perpetuating violence by diffusing responsibility for their actions across the group. An individual is less likely to feel responsible for the pain inflicted on others when the violent act requires the cooperation of several people, according to academic studies.

- Terrorists see their behavior as selfless acts by comparing them to widespread cruelties inflicted on Muslims. The more flagrantly the group characterizes the enemy's alleged inhumanity, the more likely the group's destructive conduct will appear benevolent to involved individuals, according to open-source reporting.

Those who leave extremist groups may remain dangerous. Although extremist groups provide a sense of belonging, common purpose, and validation of personal beliefs, there are instances where the group may stop meeting the needs of the individual. In some cases, increased militancy can lead particular individuals to splinter off in an attempt to fulfill the outcomes they believed would be achieved through the group. Such individuals may either form their own, more radical, groups or become lone offenders.

Community Factors

Selected characteristics of communities have been shown to encourage individuals and groups that support terrorism to emerge. These factors are especially salient in some diaspora communities whose members may experience socioeconomic pressures and discrimination in the broader society. When grievances, both real and perceived, are combined with insularity, isolation, and a lack of trust in societal and political institutions, they can create the conditions that encourage a small minority to adopt a radical and even violent ideology. The situation is often aggravated by charismatic ideologues who manipulate perceptions to exacerbate feelings of threat and encourage the development of a siege mentality.

Religious Discrimination. Feelings of victimization and discrimination, especially incidents of violence targeting Muslims and Islamic symbols, can lead to alienation and feelings of threat that foster radicalization. Direct personal experience with discrimination—such as having been denied a job, harassed by police or been “unfairly treated” because of religion—contributes to a sense of crisis and need for redress. Experience with religious discrimination affects expectations of future treatment, indicating a potential cycle of distrust that could prove difficult to break. The rising popularity of expressly anti-Islamic public voices and organizations in addition to anti-Muslim protests and demonstrations exacerbate disaffection.

- Although Muslim-Americans are more socioeconomically successful than their European counterparts, some perceive similar levels of intolerance and hostility in society and feel targeted by the government, according to a body of reporting.

Tensions With Law Enforcement. Perceptions of unfair policing also decrease the likelihood that the local community will cooperate with local officials.

Weak Civil Society, Mistrust of Government. Communities without a strong capacity for effective participation in political and civil society have difficulty resolving their grievances in a peaceful manner, which may encourage some individuals to turn toward violent solutions. Such communities may lack organizations to promote civil rights concerns, faith in political and societal institutions, and trust that they can resolve concerns about hostility and discrimination by working within the system.

- Faith in political institutions has been shown to be an important correlate of opposition to violence, according to Gallup surveys from 2005 to 2007 of Muslims in 26 countries, probably because it helps channel grievances into constructive solutions.

Insularity and Isolation. Isolated and insular enclave communities that rarely engage with the rest of society are more susceptible to violent radicalization than well-integrated ones. A lack of interaction and personal relationships with non-Muslims make it easier to demonize the West and accept appeals of jihadist caricatures of non-Muslims as enemies of Islam. Geographical separation—as observed in neighborhoods throughout Europe—makes it even more difficult for community members to have personal relationships with non-Muslims. Relationships with individuals from multiple identity groups dampen militancy and moderate social conflict, according to academic studies. Such relationships make it more difficult to stereotype, demonize, and create in-group/out-group distinctions that are common tools of radicalization and justifications for violence.

- A key radicalization driver in Europe has been the trend of Muslim communities—particularly those under pressure—to insulate themselves from the broader non-Muslim society, recreating institutions and lifestyles from their home countries. A perceived lack of acceptance of visible signs of Muslim identity may further encourage communities to avoid broader public interaction.

Unresponsive Mosques Create Openings for Radical Ideologues. In cases where youth believe that moderate religious institutions and leaders are unresponsive to their concerns or are unwilling or unable to communicate with them, charismatic extremist entrepreneurs can fill the vacuum. Radical ideologues often blame the difficulties Muslims face on a Western-led war against Islam and exploit harassment and crimes against Muslims in support of their narrative, acting as a force multiplier to spread violent extremist ideology within a community.

- Academic research has cited the failure of religious institutions and leaders to effectively engage Muslim youth as a factor in the radicalization of European Muslims. Specifically in the UK, charismatic firebrands influenced many of its homegrown extremists to travel abroad and engage in violent jihad.

Sociopolitical Factors

Political and societal level conditions, events, and grievances can help drive an individual to seek an ideological explanation or reinforce existing beliefs. Such factors come in a variety of forms and can be specific or nonspecific, for example, anger at US foreign policy toward a particular country or conflict or frustration with the political, economic, or conflict situation in their home country or primary ethnic group. Al-Qa'ida and like-minded groups seeking to radicalize US Muslims argue that events and situations far from their immediate environment should compel a person to come to the aid of fellow in-group members.

Broad Common Grievances. Al-Qa'ida and like-minded groups fan a number of common grievances and use them as a justification for violence, including perceptions of non-Muslim aggression against Muslims, Western economic exploitation, and attacks on Muslim values. Simply holding such beliefs does not mean someone is radicalized, which requires a commitment to violence as the primary means of addressing the individual/group grievances or achieving the individual/group goals.

Aggression Against and Oppression of Muslims by Non-Muslims. Extremist ideologues argue that Muslims as a people or Islam as a religion and way of life face an existential threat or humiliation from the US. Their arguments are bolstered by the inability or unwillingness of Muslim countries to resist Western and Israeli military actions.

- US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the very existence of Israel, Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, newspaper cartoons and films denigrating Islam or the Prophet Muhammad, Russian military action in Chechnya, the slaughter of Muslims in Bosnia, conflicts between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, and even the historical legacies of European colonialism, the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, and the Crusades of the Middle Ages are portrayed by al-Qa'ida and its sympathizers as efforts to eradicate or dominate Islam.
- Al-Qa'ida's adherents also accuse Muslim governments—especially those of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan—of apostasy for colluding with the US by forming or agreeing to political, economic, and military alliances. They cite state actions against what they perceive to be universal Islamic interests, such as Saudi restrictions on extremist scholars, Egypt's closing of the border with Gaza, and Pakistan's military operations in the tribal regions and the storming of the Red Mosque, as further proof of those governments' apostasy.

Western Economic Exploitation. Al-Qa'ida often publicly blames the weaknesses of Muslim governments and societies for the exploitation of Muslim wealth, such as Middle Eastern oil resources by the West and economic and political subversion by Western and Israeli conspirators. The group argues that such exploitation and subversion, which has strengthened the West, could not occur without collusion and assistance from apostate Muslim governments.

Western Attack on Islamic Values. Al-Qa'ida implicitly piggybacks on claims made mostly by nonextremists that Western values, individualism, cultural practices, and popular culture are designed to encourage vice and thereby undermine traditional Islamic values and identity. Al-Qa'ida senior leaders regularly assert that Western bribes, corruption by power, and moral permissiveness have swayed many Muslim leaders and unwitting ordinary Muslims to betray Islam.

Specific External Events

Actions that are perceived to be influenced by the West, even when the US is not directly involved, can serve as drivers of radicalization and mobilization.

- Cartoon depictions of the Prophet Muhammad by a Danish newspaper sparked outcry among Muslim groups and Muslims worldwide, eventually precipitating international protests. Similar occurrences have sparked parallel responses throughout the Muslim world, some generating violence against perceived perpetrators.
- Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia in December 2006—which ultimately drove the Union of Islamic Courts from power—stimulated nationalist sentiment among Somalis—including some in the US. Some individuals, in part because of a desire to defend their home country against invading forces, traveled to Somalia to fight, putting them in contact with terrorists in the region. Since then, Somalis from various locations have continued to travel to Somalia for a combination of nationalist and terrorist purposes. Since Ethiopia withdrew, al-Shabaab—the al-Qa'ida-affiliated terrorist group in Somalia—has continued to tie its insurgency to US involvement in Somali affairs, even though US involvement is now limited to support of UN peacekeeping efforts in the region.

Ideological Factors

Ideology provides individuals an interpretive framework for world and life events as well as a set of values, beliefs, and goals for a movement or social entity. It also establishes the rationale for individual and collective action.

- Ideology varies in importance to Sunni extremists. Some extremists adopt ideological tenets superficially as a marker of group identity, while others embrace and internalize an ideology more deeply.

Academic research has shown that ideology **diagnoses the problem** the movement or entity is obligated to resolve, **provides remedies**, and **provides motivation to act**.

Diagnosis. Radical ideology explains the wrongs that damage the Muslim world, who is to blame, and why these wrongs demand immediate response.

- Al-Qa'ida and other extremist leaders assert a global conspiracy of "Crusaders and Zionists" (Westerners and Jews)—waging a world war to destroy Islam, plunder Muslim wealth, and prevent Muslims from uniting to challenge Western hegemony. Al-Qa'ida and other extremist leaders interpret many world events, decisions, and alliances as proof that the war against Islam began centuries ago and is currently at its most threatening point.
- Extremists also argue that Western economic, political, and military relationships with Muslim majority countries are exploitative by design and necessitate co-opting local Muslim rulers. The "apostate governments" include their religious figures, media, police, and intelligence services. Moreover, radical ideologues assert that **ideologies** such as nationalism or democracy, **governing mechanisms** such as civilian legislatures, or **secular laws** that depart from their idealized depiction in early Islamic history constitute disobedience to God and a form of idolatry.

Role of Religion in Radicalization and Mobilization

Radicalization does not need to occur within the context of religion, but affiliation with a religious group can address many of the personal factors involved in radicalization. Membership in a religious group can offer clear answers to complex questions, a well-defined community, and textual authorities that can be used to justify sacred violence.

Religion may initially serve as a vehicle through which grievances are expressed and individuals become inspired. The injection of religious imagery and symbols into world conflicts can transform them into religious wars, even if this is done merely to convey or legitimize contemporary demands. Conflicts that take on religious connotations often become more protracted because absolute disputes—over good versus evil, truth versus untruth—make it difficult for those involved to compromise over values perceived as sacred.

- Actions or world events that are inconsistent with the assertions of extremist ideology—such as President Obama's outreach to Muslims—are dismissed by extremists as efforts to disguise the conspiracy's true machinations. Al-Qa'ida and other extremists argue that most Muslims are unaware of the reach and deviousness of the West because they have been deceived by the conspiracy's efforts.

Remedies. Violent ideology outlines what must be done to right these wrongs, provides a roadmap of necessary actions, and recommends how to achieve these goals.

- Al-Qa'ida senior leaders and other Sunni extremist groups assert that the West's onslaught against Islam can be countered by a mass popular uprising of Muslims led by a heroic vanguard of mujahidin that will drive Western influences from Muslim lands. Without Western support, extremist leaders argue, local apostate governments and Israel will lack the backing necessary to survive. Once they fall, true Muslims can then reclaim control of Muslim lands and set up states—*emirates*—governed through strict Islamic law with the eventual goal of uniting all Muslims under a *caliphate*, an Islamic hegemony capable of challenging the West.
- They also assert that if Western Muslims conduct attacks within the West—regardless of their affiliation with organized extremist groups—a reestablishment of the caliphate will happen more rapidly.

Motivation. Ideology provides prods to action and justifies the moral right to use violence. Motivational guidance helps potential recruits overcome apathy, fears such as capture or death, and aversion to violence.

- English-speaking extremist ideologues have been able to successfully mobilize many US persons predisposed to violent extremism to undertake immediate action in ways that foreign-language ideologues could not.
- Some individuals are more predisposed to violence while others need more persuasion that the costs of failing to engage in violence are too high and the benefits of doing so are worthwhile. Extremist statements often assert that those who engage in violence are braver than those who do not, that death in furtherance of the extremist cause admits one to heaven, and that the families of “martyrs” are proud of such actions and will be cared for by the group.

Catalysts and Inhibitors

Examining catalysts and inhibitors can provide a better understanding of where and how to intervene to prevent either a near-term or future evolution into mobilization to violent action. Families can be either catalysts or inhibitors, as they can influence the radicalization and mobilization of relatives toward good or away from bad. Traumatic experiences or dysfunction in the family system, along with sibling, parental, or other familial encouragement, can influence family members to participate in terrorist activities. In other cases, for example, family members can serve as deterrents by providing strong social support as well as creating obstacles for their children in their attempts to travel to conflict zones.

- In Minneapolis, Minnesota, community members contacted family members of Somali youth suspected of attempting to travel to Somalia to join al-Shaabab in attempts to interfere with their plans.

Catalysts

The Internet. We assess that the Internet and related information technologies—such as Web forums, blogs, social networking sites, and e-mail—that serve as platforms for extremist propaganda and discourse can enable and advance the radicalization process and help mobilize individuals who may not be geographically near key extremist figures or significant events. The Internet allows individuals to feel more closely tied to the sense of crisis and victimization being perpetuated by online extremists.

- Much of extremists' online audience appears to comprise individuals who are predisposed to the extremist message; online activities tend to advance a radicalization process that has already begun, rather than initiate the radicalization of an individual.

The Internet is probably taking on a greater role in radicalization and mobilization as prospective extremists develop more online relationships and more extremist ideologues realize the full potential of online social networking. The Internet can complement real-world social centers—such as mosques, community centers, and coffeehouses—by providing extremist groups the opportunity to reinforce ideological messages for a wide audience, according to open-source analysis and academic research.

- The Internet provides a comparatively risk-free and anonymous means for extremists to reach beyond a core group or across geographic boundaries to find potential radicals, according to academic research in 2008.
- Extremist ideologues exploit the insular nature of radical Web sites and chat rooms to create virtual echo chambers where like-minded individuals can share and find support for their radical views, according to academic research over the past two years.
- Potential extremists can access powerful images and supporting documents through the Internet that appear to substantiate their beliefs and those espoused by extremist groups, according to academic research.

Social Networks. Both physical and virtual connections to other extremists can be a potent force driving individuals toward terrorist violence. Social relationships, such as overseas family ties, can serve as vehicles for moving individuals into situations that make acceptance of violent extremism more likely. Extremist social networks provide access to training and indoctrination through established relationships with family members or others who can vouch for the credibility of the individual in question. Some individuals—although radicalized—may flounder because of a lack of access to individuals who can facilitate involvement in extremist activities, in particular, going abroad to fight in conflict zones.

Inhibitors

Community Engagement. Community outreach managed by various levels of government and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can counter radicalization by improving relations with law enforcement, providing an opportunity to address some grievances, and increasing public awareness of the dangers of radicalization.

- Outreach to religious leaders and groups by law enforcement can build a relationship of trust with local and national government. Relationships based on frequent contact and trust can help government officials design approaches less likely to be perceived as offensive and discriminatory.
- Increased awareness can help government and law enforcement officials address issues such as religious or ethnic discrimination and socioeconomic grievances that might otherwise contribute to radicalization.
- Such outreach can also encourage parents and religious organizations to alert law enforcement if they fear their young people are about to engage in violence or support to terrorism, as in late 2009 when the parents of the five young men from Virginia who secretly left for Pakistan expressed concern to law enforcement through a US religious organization.

Credible Voices. The most effective Muslim credible voices appeal to a broad range of Muslim audiences because of their religious credentials, charisma, use of modern media, perceived independence from foreign government institutions and leaders, and lack of association with the US Government.

- Credible voices can be familiar figures in local communities who exert influence through internet, video camera, and others, such as Muslim popular musicians or actors, may have mass appeal to younger audiences and can serve as vehicles to counter extremist messages.

Lone Offenders Serve as Their Own Catalysts, Remain Difficult To Identify, Detect

Some successful attacks illustrate how, in certain cases, personal drive and motivation, combined with a sense of obligation to act, can be enough to propel individuals to commit violent acts. Such lone offenders pose a particular challenge if they live alone or have very little contact with family or friends who may be able to assess signs of increased militancy. When an individual does not associate with other extremists it is more difficult for observers to differentiate between inflammatory personal rhetoric and commitment to violence.

