

Homegrown counterterrorism: Successful self-policing

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Terrorism has a homegrown dimension. Many of the terrorist plots uncovered since 9/11 have involved U.S.-born or naturalized U.S. citizens.

For example: A white American convert to Islam is suspected of plotting to attack U.S. military personnel in Virginia. A group of Somali-Americans from Minnesota were intercepted as they tried to join a radical Islamist group in Somalia. A Chicago man is accused of plotting the terrorist attack in Mumbai. Five Virginia men were taken into custody after they sought to contact al-Qaeda groups in Pakistan. An American-born, Palestinian-American army major is charged with the mass shooting at Fort Hood and is suspected of being radicalized at U.S. mosques.

Violent jihadist ideas not only circulate in this country, but occasionally take hold in the minds of Americans.

But a joint study by researchers at Duke and the University of North Carolina stresses that American Muslims are still less prone to extremism than Muslims in Europe and elsewhere. And the receptivity of U.S. society to Muslim immigrants serves as a bulwark against terrorism. One evidence of that, the study says, is the number of plots that have been thwarted with help of Muslim communities themselves.

The Duke-UNC study, which reports that 139 Muslim Americans were involved in terrorist plots over the past eight years, suggests that success in the fight against terrorism has depended on the self-policing of Muslim-American groups. Muslim officials speak out against terrorism, and in some cases monitor the content of sermons at mosques.

The study also argues that the emergence of robust Muslim-American communities, in which people feel strongly supported by social networks, is a source of stability, not a threat. The study stresses the importance of Muslims being involved in the

democratic process and says that the ability of Muslims to assert their Muslim identity in public helps undermine the roots of terrorism, for it is a prelude to greater participation in American life. Other immigrant groups, such as Irish Americans and Italian Americans, have had moments when they asserted their particular identity, and those efforts served as steps toward fuller public engagement.

Like other radical ideologies, notions of violent jihadism appeal to people who seek a simple, abstract, global explanation of their problems. It has less appeal to those engaged in day-to-day practical efforts to better their lives and the conditions of their own communities. The very openness of American society to those efforts is a powerful strategy, and in the end the best strategy of counterterrorism.