

# Preventing Radicalism

by Hedieh Mirahmadi, JD

Like most Muslims across America, I watched the news of the Ft Hood tragedy, holding my breath and praying that the crazed gunman was not a Muslim. As the days passed, we learned Major Malik Hasan was not only a Muslim; but that his actions were motivated in large part by a deviant, manipulated interpretation of Islamic law. The case of Malik Hasan and the slew of other “homegrown terrorists” take us to the larger crisis of confronting Islamist radicalism in our communities. Behind closed doors, in the privacy of our own mosques and community centers, the Muslim community can no longer deny it has a problem.

Ever since 9-11, Muslims have faced severe criticism, suspicion and sometimes even persecution. It has made our communities defensive and protective, creating a plethora of advocacy and civil rights groups, who vociferously defend the civil liberties of Muslims. Though these are important civil society institutions, there must be a corresponding internal dialogue to address the aggressive Islamist doctrines, which lead some to commit violence “in the name of Islam”. No matter how often the mainstream, traditional Muslim community clamors that “Islam” cannot and does not advocate violence, there remains a small minority sect that tirelessly preaches that, “yes, it does.” Our scholars and activists must confront and refute the extremist ideologies that fuel Islamist radicalism or the rest of us will constantly answer for the actions of a

few. (The term Islamist is used in this context to denote a theologically distinct interpretation of Islam, which seeks to unite Muslims as a political force and often advocates violence to achieve its aims.) If we cannot acknowledge that Islamist radicalism exists, we are abdicating the definition of Islam to the extremists because we fail to distinguish their Islam from ours.

An important obstacle to the Muslim community acknowledging the problem of Islamist-motivated violence is most people have never bothered to read the polemics of these radical preachers. To truly appreciate the dangers of what Islamist radicals are teaching – either in person, through books or over the internet – one should study what they say. It is hateful material and almost absurd, but it is well-cited and referenced to Quranic text and hadiths of both legitimate and questionable origins. For a vulnerable young adult

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who has no other background in Islamic knowledge, the material has the “air” of credibility. We cannot leave such material to go unchallenged.

Most people assume that since the Islam with which they are familiar possesses none of the bizarre condemnations of non-Muslims and claims to the enactment of military jihad that such a “version” of Islam simply doesn’t exist. This approach

ignores the root of the problem; denial is never a solution. In fact, the radical Islamist ideologues have very elaborate and sophisticated Islamic rulings that will continue to poison the mainstream Muslim community if those who are qualified to do so fail to respond.

As part of my professional research, I have been tracking Islamist radicals in the United States since the early 1990s. People may be surprised to learn that Ayman Zahwiri [Al Qaeda’s #2] was fundraising for military jihad in Northern California back in 1998 and Abdullah Azzam [Bin Laden’s mentor] was training young men for jihad in Colorado. In Boston, Al Qaeda was running combat operations under the name of “CARE International” where vulnerable young men were indoctrinated then sent off to fight in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya. I know this for a fact because I personally heard the stories of mothers and

families distraught over the onslaught of radicalism, which jeopardized their children. I heard from men who fought in those battles and came home. Since 9-11, such overt acts of Islamist militants have either disappeared or gone deep underground, but the seeds of their destructive influence remain.

When we realize that the distorted interpretations of Islam are widely read and available, combined with actual

cases of Muslims negatively impacted by such material, the burden is on the rest of us to respond.

Take for example the case of Major Hasan. Reports allege that he openly expressed his views about not wanting to participate in the U.S. military in a fight against Muslims. He sought the advice of a radical preacher, Anwar Awlaki, who affirmed for him that his concern was legitimate. Recently Awlaki even put out a statement that Hasan specifically asked him for a fatwa authorizing the killing of U.S. soldiers, which he issued.

However, Awlaki wasn't the only preacher from whom Hasan sought advice. If there was a conscientious policy of countering Islamist radicalism, the other mainstream preachers he encountered should have fought hard to "fix" his understanding of Islamic law on this issue. They could have explained to him that in every Muslim country in the world, the military is comprised of Muslims who at some point, may be in a situation where they fight other Muslims. Consider the government armies of Pakistan,

Somalia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Most battles they have fought in the last hundred years were against other Muslims. In such cases it is not the religion of the opponent that is being opposed; rather it is the obligation and loyalty to defend one's country when its very survival is at stake.

If vulnerable, faithful Muslims never receive counter-radical messages and teachings, cases of violence will only continue. In that scenario, the Muslim community will suffer increased persecution and isolation from the rest of American society and eventually will lose its ability to effectively respond. At the same time, the ongoing cries by Muslim organizations that "Islam is peaceful" and "these radicals don't represent us" will appear less and less sincere.

The time is now for a collective, outspoken initiative to build resilience against Islamist radicalism. It requires a broad financial, intellectual, and emotional commitment to reversing the damage and preventing further harm.

It is also important to realize that since the early days of Islam, some believers took an extreme approach to the faith and were therefore banned by the mainstream majority. The name "Khawârij" was applied to those who, in the time of the Companions to the Prophet, (one generation after Prophet Muhammad's lifetime), parted ways with other Muslims and declared them disbelievers, just as the extremists do today. The Khawârij or "Kharijis" were tens of thousands of Muslims mostly comprised of Qur'an memorizers and devoted worshippers who prayed and fasted far beyond the norm. Yet, they declared every one of the

Companions and all those associated with them to be apostate disbelievers and took up arms against them. The practices of

declaring Muslims apostate (takfir/tashrik) and taking armed action (baghî) against the central Muslim authority—the Caliphate — became, and continues to remain, the hallmark of the Khawârij.

In addition, the Khawârij altered the interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah, and used them to declare it lawful to kill and seize the property of Muslims, as do their modern extremist counterparts. In response, mainstream scholars, activists and community members made sure the ideas and actions of the Khawarij were categorically refuted so as not to infect the community at large. There is plenty of historical data on the intellectual and theological responses to the extremists of that time.

Some refer to the Islamist radicals today as simply the "Neo-Khawarij", giving the struggle against them an important historical and theological context.

However we view our current predicament, either as a new threat or revival of an old phenomenon, the call to action is clear. We should not be afraid of making public and responding to the distinctions between the beauty of traditional Islam and the radical ideas of a view — even going so far as holding public debates. Again, if we don't do it for ourselves, we risk losing more of our vulnerable youth and adults, as well as becoming an increasing social pariah.

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