United States Senate

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs

"Violent Islamist Extremism in Global Context"

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Chairman Lieberman; Senator Collins. Distinguished Members.

Violent extremism is a major problem in a number of contemporary societies; violent Islamist extremism has become a serious global threat, and could remain so during the next few decades. In order to more effectively thwart this threat, it is necessary to explore and better understand its roots. For this reason, I am grateful to you for inviting me to present my views regarding the ideological roots of violent Islamist extremism.

Because ideology is a major focus in this hearing, let me begin by clarifying my own ideological biases. Like hundreds of millions of other Muslims, my hope and goal is that Islamic societies, including those of the Near and Middle East, will become far more politically, culturally, and economically open in the future. The open, democratic Islamic society will be more peaceful, more productive, more affluent, more just, and better for the global economy.

To a significant degree, higher oil prices are the result of dictatorships, monopolies, corruption, a lack of open competition, and inefficiency.

But to achieve more open Islamic societies there are major obstacles to overcome, and violent Islamist extremism is one such major obstacle. In order to evaluate this particular obstacle, I find it instructive to review the letter of invitation I received, which states the purpose of the present Senate hearing to be "to explore the ideology that is the root source for the radicalization of potential followers of al-Qaeda and other Islamist terrorist organizations around the world". I believe it is useful to critically assess the assumption that an ideology is "the root source for the radicalization of potential followers of al-Qaeda and other Islamist terrorist organizations around the world".

An ideology does not arise in a vacuum, nor does it influence behavior in a vacuum. An ideology can only impact behavior under given conditions, when other necessary factors are present.

In the Georgetown University libraries, there are many books that espouse potentially dangerous ideologies. Why is it that young women and men at Georgetown are not influenced by the many dangerous books available, including works on fascism, anarchism, and various kinds of religious fundamentalism?   Why do they not turn to terrorism?   Clearly because the availability of a violent extremist ideology serves as a necessary, but is not a sufficient, cause for terrorist action.

We must ask, then, what are the factors that combine with a particular ideology to lead to violent Islamist extremism?   How does an ideology supportive of violent Islamist extremism come to influence individuals to support and commit acts of terrorism?   I have addressed this

question by adopting a 'big picture' approach[1], exploring radicalization and terrorism in the context of cultural evolution and globalization. In order to clarify my viewpoint, I have found it useful to adopt a staircase metaphor of radicalization and terrorism.

The Staircase To Terrorism

Consider a multi-story building with a winding staircase at its center. People are located on different floors of the building, but everyone begins on the ground floor; where there are about 1.2 billion Muslims. Thought and action on each floor is characterized by particular psychological processes. On the ground floor, the most important psychological processes influencing behavior are subjective interpretations of material conditions, perceptions of fairness, and adequacy of identity. Hundreds of millions of Muslims suffer collective (fraternal) relative deprivation and lack of adequate identity; they feel that they are not being treated fairly and are not receiving adequate material rewards. They feel dissatisfied with the way they are depicted by the international media and, most importantly, they do not want to become second-class copies of Western ideals.

I have argued that the Islamic population on the ground floor of the staircase to terrorism is experiencing a collective identity crisis, and that this crisis is particularly acute in the major dictatorships of the Near and Middle East. Muslims are faced with a choice between two inadequate identities. The first involves copying the West, and confronts what I have termed 'the

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[1] For example, see:
Moghaddam, F. M. (2008, September). *How globalization spurs terrorism*. Westport, CT.: Praeger Security International.
Moghaddam, F. M. (2006). *From the terrorists' point of view*. Westport, CT.: Praeger Security International

good copy problem'. By copying the West, Muslims can only hope to become 'good copies' of borrowed Western ideals, but not to achieve authentic identities. The second path open to Muslims for identity development is represented by various kinds of Islamic fundamentalism, which push for a return to 'pure' Islam in the form it is assumed to have existed 1,400 years ago. Why is there not a third alternative, a constructive secular third path?   The reason is that dictatorial, authoritarian forces continue to imprison, banish, or kill the secular opposition. In country after country in the Near and Middle East, as well as in parts of central and North Africa, Islamic fundamentalism is filling the enormous vacuum left open by the despotic repression of democratic movements.

This situation has resulted in a collective crisis of identity among Muslims. This identity crisis is especially acute because about 60% of the global Muslim population is below the age of 25, and because the psychological experiences of the young are characterized by a yearning for adequate identity.

However, on the ground floor, degrees of freedom are large relative to degrees of freedom[2] on the higher floors of the staircase to terrorism, and individual Muslims on the ground floor have a wider range of behavioral options. Only some individuals move up from the ground floor to the first floor, in search of ways to improve their life conditions. These individuals in no way see themselves as terrorists or even supportive of terrorist causes; they are simply attempting to improve the situation of themselves and their groups. On this floor they are particularly influenced by possibilities for individual mobility and voice. Extensive evidence has

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[2]For further clarification of 'degrees of freedom' and behavior, see Moghaddam, F. M. (2005). *Great Ideas in Psychology*. Oxford: Oneworld., and the distinction between 'performance capacity' and 'performance style' in Moghaddam, F. M. (2002). *The Individual and Society*. New York: Worth.

accumulated to show that when people feel their voice is listened to during the decision making process, they 'buy into' the system. However, when they feel they have no voice, they become more dissatisfied and detached. Some of these dissatisfied individuals climb up to the second floor of the staircase, where they come under the influence of persuasive messages telling them that the root cause of their problems is external enemies, particularly America and Israel. Individuals on the second floor are encouraged to displace aggression onto external targets.

Displacement of aggression is a well documented phenomenon in inter-group dynamics in both non-Western and Western societies. By focusing attention on so-called 'external enemies', those who oppose openness and democracy find it easier to:

*increase support for aggressive leadership

*silence internal critics and dissenting voices

*isolate and pressure minorities

*gain public support for trampling on civil liberties and human rights

Many of the individuals who climb up to the second floor of the staircase remain there, but some keep climbing up to reach the third floor where they adopt a morality supportive of terrorism. Gradually, those who have reached the third floor become divorced from the mainstream morality of their society, which generally condemns terrorism (this is also true in Islamic communities), and take on a morality supportive of an 'ends justify the means' approach. Those individuals who continue the climb up to the fourth floor adopt a more rigid style of categorical 'us versus them', 'good against evil' thinking. Their world is now unambiguously divided up into 'black and white', and it is seen as legitimate to attack 'the forces of evil' in any

and every way feasible. Some of these individuals move up to the fifth floor, where they take part in and directly support terrorist actions.

Individuals who reach the highest floors of the staircase become specialized in their activities in support of terrorism. Through an analysis of the available evidence, I identified nine different specialties involved in terrorist activities and networks. Both the research literature and the media typically focuses on the suicide bomber, a specialty that belongs to a category I have termed 'fodder'. The eight other specialties are: source of inspiration, strategist, networker, technical expert, cell manager, local agitator and guide, local cell member, and fund raiser. Some of these specialties are more involved with the production and dissemination of ideology, while others tend to be consumers of ideology.

The higher individuals move up the staircase to terrorism, the lower the degrees of freedom. In other words, the power of the context increases, and the behavioral options decrease, on the higher floors. After an individual has become part of a terrorist group or network and has reached the highest floor, the only options left open are to try to kill, or be killed or captured. Personality factors are less influential, and the context is all-powerful, on the highest floor. In contrast, on the lowest floors the degrees of freedom are greater, meaning that individuals have a wider variety of behavioral options, and personality factors play a larger role in determining who climbs up the staircase.

The varying nature of degrees of freedom is evident in all situations where terrorism has existed. Consider the context of Northen Ireland. When I visited Belfast to conduct interviews in the 1970s, it was like walking through a war zone. For example, the offices of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) were in a fortress building, surrounded by sandbags and barbed wire. There was tremendous pressure within both Catholic and Protestant groups to conform to

ingroup norms, and not only to maintain a distance from the outgroup but to condone acts of terrorism against the outgroup. This was a situation of low degrees of freedom. Northern Ireland in 2008 is a very different place, where the normative system opposes terrorism and degrees of freedom are far greater. In this transformed 21st century context, individual characteristics will be more influential in determining which individuals participate in and support terrorism.

The Distance-Traveled Hypothesis

I now turn my attention to Muslims in the United States and in Europe, to consider specifically the issue of 'home-grown' terrorism. Clearly, the relatively open nature of Western societies and the global reach of electronic technology and the world wide web means that the ideology of violent Islamist extremism is available to Muslims in the United States, as it is available in Europe. However, because of a variety of other factors, Islamic terrorism will be a greater threat in Europe, at least for the next few decades. The most important of these other factors are briefly discussed below.

*The 'distance-traveled hypothesis'[3] proposes that the distance immigrants have to travel in order to settle in a host country determines the (material, educational, and other) resources needed to succeed in the migration. Muslims need to have greater resources to move from the Middle East and North Africa to settle in the United States, than they do to settle in Europe. The greater resources of American Muslims in part explains the greater success of Muslims in the United States, particularly in terms of economic and educational attainment, relative to Muslims in Europe.

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[3]Discussed in Moghaddam, F. M. (2008, September). *How globalization spurs terrorism.* Westport, CT.: Praeger Security International.

*Muslims arriving in the United States have had the resources, including in terms of values, needed to integrate into a competitive, open market system. The openness of the American system and the 'American dream, anyone can make it here' belief system has worked well for Muslims in America. The only serious exception I see to this is the potential for violent Islamist extremism taking root in U.S. prisons, among individuals who become convinced they are being unjustly treated because of their group membership, they have no voice, and no hope for a better future.

*The situation of the approximately 20 million Muslims in Europe is more problematic. First, the largest groups of Muslims in Europe (South Asians in the UK, North Africans in France, Turks in Germany) have lower levels of important resources (income, educational attainment, and so on) compared to the local population. Second, these Muslims are geographically closer to major centers of violent Islamist extremist ideology (e.g., Pakistan). Third, the major European countries are confronted by enormous challenges integrating Muslims, who tend to live in collective segregation. Anyone who wants to confirm this only has to walk through South Asian neighborhoods in major cities in England, or North Africa neighborhoods in major cities in France, or Turkish neighborhoods in major cities in Germany. Fourth, European countries are experimenting with a muddled array of integration strategies, from extreme *assimilation*, the washing away of intergroup differences ("Immigrants must become French") to relativistic *multiculturalism,* the highlighting, strengthening, and celebration of intergroup differences ("Sharia law can be implemented in Muslim homes").

*In both North America and in Europe, more constructive policies must be developed to manage diversity. There are serious flaws in the current policies, both of the assimilation and

multiculturalism varieties.[4] The 'third way' alternative I advocate is *omniculturalism*, which involves using a foundation of psychological universals and human commonalities as a launching pad for valuing distinct identities. The end point of omniculturalism is a society whose members first recognize the importance of their common similarities and bonds, and on the basis of this 'common' foundation recognize and uphold the value of distinct local identities. In omniculturalism, the celebration of intergroup commonalities serve as a stepping stone to the celebration and sharing of intergroup differences.

*A policy of omniculturalism focuses particularly on transforming the economic, political, and cultural role of Muslim women, ensuring their equal progress and participation in the public sphere. Through the transformation of the role of Muslim women, relationships, roles, and socialization practices within the Muslim family will be changed to support open, democratic societies. The healthy family is the basis for the healthy society.

In exploring the ideological roots of violent Islamist extremism in the global context, it is vital to consider the active role Western societies should play.   In particular, the United States has global responsibilities that must not be neglected. The final part of my statement addresses this key issue.

The "New Global American Dilemma"[5]

In a study of race-relations in the United States published under the title of *An American*

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[4]Discussed in Moghaddam, F. M. (2008). *Multiculturalism and Intergroup Relations: Psychological Implications for Democracy in Global Context*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association Press.

[5]Discussed in Moghaddam, F. M. (2008, September). *How globalization spurs terrorism*. Westport, CT.: Praeger Security International.

Dilemma (1944),[6] the brilliant Swedish researcher Gunnar Myrdal (1898-1987) accurately

identified the first American dilemma. He pointed out that even after the official end of slavery

in the United States, there continued to be a contradiction between, on the one hand the

American rhetoric of freedom and liberty, and on the other hand the discriminatory mistreatment

of African Americans. As we know, this historic dilemma was eventually resolved in favor of

freedom and equality of opportunity through legislative and societal reform.   There now looms a

second historic dilemma confronting America, one that is global and demands a resolution.

The *new global American dilemma* arises out of the contradiction existing between

American support for, on the one hand, so-called 'friendly' dictatorships in the Near and Middle

East and, on the other hand, the right of all Muslims to live in open, democratic societies. The

new global American dilemma is not 'Democratic' or 'Republican' or 'Independent' in political

affiliation, it confronts all Americans and will have to be resolved through unified effort.

The rhetoric of "freedom, equality of opportunity, and democracy for all" emanating

from the White House over the last few decades has had a powerful impact on two groups in the

Near and Middle East. First, the vast majority of Muslims, and Muslim intellectuals in particular,

immediately recognized the basic contradiction between the 'democracy and freedom' rhetoric

of the United States, and the actual practice of continued support for certain dictatorships in the

region. The vast majority of Muslims recognize that it is through American support that certain

dictatorships in the Near and Middle East continue to crush secular opposition groups, and

prevent women and other minorities from gaining greater freedom and equality. A second group

influenced by the 'democracy and freedom' rhetoric of American political leaders are Islamic

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[6]Myrdal, G. (1944). *An American dilemma: The Negro problem and modern democracy*. (2 vols). New York: Harper and Bothers.

Fundamentalists, who are fearful of any change that gives greater freedom to ordinary people,

particularly women. Islamic fundamentalists have generally adopted an 'anti-progress,

anti-democracy' position.

But why, then, do Islamic fundamentalists manage to gain sympathy and on some issues

even some support from many Muslims, in both Western and non-Western societies?   Given the

moderate positions of most Muslims, why would they sympathize with fundamentalists at least

on some issues?   The new global American dilemma is at the heart of this puzzle. Four related

facts must be kept in mind. First, the U.S. and its allies continue to support certain corrupt

dictatorships in the Near and Middle East. Second, dictatorships in the Near and Middle East

refuse to allow the growth of secular, democratic opposition groups. Third, the only avenue open

for collective activism in the Near and Middle East is the mosque - no dictator has the power to

close mosques, although all dictators attempt to control what happens in mosques. Fourth,

fundamentalists use the mosque, and religious traditions broadly, to position themselves as the

vanguard of opposition to so-called 'pro-American' dictatorships. This is exactly what happened

in Iran in the late 1970s, and in Algeria in the 1980s, and in a number of Islamic countries more

recently. The threat of fundamentalist groups is real and imminent in Egypt, Pakistan, and some

other major Islamic societies.

Finally, as a psychologist I am aware that the new global American dilemma is increasing

cognitive tensions among Americans. The United States should not and will not shrink from its

global responsibilities. Increasing globalization means that the American public is becoming

more aware of the contradiction between American rhetorical support for freedom, equality of

opportunity, and democracy, and American practices in support of dictatorships in certain

Muslim countries. The history of American values will force a resolution to this dilemma,

inevitably in favor of support for democracy rather than dictatorship.

Just as democracy in America is different from democracy in the United Kingdom, which is different from democracy in France, which is different from democracy in Germany, and so on, democracy in Iraq will evolve to be different from democracy in Pakistan, which will be different from democracy in Saudi Arabia, which will be different from democracy in Egypt, and so on. *Contextualized democracy*[7] will eventually evolve in all Muslim countries, as it has in the West.

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[7]For a discussion of 'contextualized democracy' as a solution in Islamic societies, see Moghaddam, F. M. (2005). The staircase to terrorism. *American Psychologist*, *60*, 161-169, and ch. 10 in Moghaddam, F. M. (2006). *From the terrorists' point of view*. Westport, CT.: Praeger Security International