



A sensible debate about radical Islam

By David H. Schanzer

9:08 p.m. Thursday, February 10, 2011

The polarized debate taking place over U.S. Rep. Peter King's plans to conduct hearings on radicalization among Muslim-Americans is disturbing.

A coalition of Muslim, human rights and other religious organizations claims this is an illegitimate and discriminatory inquiry. I disagree.

Muslim-Americans comprise about 1 percent of the U.S population, but account for a far greater percentage of the violent extremism perpetrated inside our borders. Since 9/11, 161 Muslim-Americans have committed terrorist acts or been accused of terrorism crimes, according to a recent study by University of North Carolina sociologist Charles Kurzman. This is hardly a radical insurgency, but it is cause for concern for all Americans, including Muslims.

However, Muslim-Americans who have faced increasing prejudice over recent years are right to be angry about many of King's prior statements and the direction he has charted for these hearings.

King's claims that American mosques are hotbeds of radicalism and that Muslim-Americans don't cooperate with law enforcement are just plain wrong. A research project I led found just the opposite — Muslim-Americans uniformly reject violent extremism. And, since 9/11, Muslim-Americans have provided information leading to the arrest of 48 Muslim-Americans for terrorism crimes.

The proposed hearings, planned for March, can serve a useful purpose if King resets the tone, educates the public about the true nature of the domestic threat, and closely scrutinizes the government's strategy for countering violent extremism.

To establish the proper framework for this inquiry and his own credibility to lead it, King must acknowledge the difference between radical Islam that produces terrorism and the tolerant, peaceful Islam practiced by the vast majority of Muslim-Americans. This distinction is being lost in our public discourse. Wild accusations that Muslims are trying impose Shariah law in America have been stoking public animosity and leading to episodes like the Florida preacher who threatened to burn Qurans on the 9/11 anniversary.

As the chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, King needs to set the record straight. Most Muslim-Americans abhor violence in the name of Islam, they detest Muslim terrorists who have brought shame to their religion, and they want to solve this problem just as much, if not more, than other Americans.

Once the air is cleared, the hearings can get on to the key point: How do we stop the small number of Muslim-Americans who radicalize to the point of violence?

First, Muslim-American leaders and organizations must explain to both Congress and the American public what they are doing to prevent the spread of radical ideology within their communities. Our study found that Muslim-Americans are both preventing radicals from preaching and pointing out suspicious behavior to law enforcement.

These are important steps, but not enough.

Muslim-Americans must actively confront the concept of "jihadi cool" being shopped to young people over the Internet. Imams trained abroad and out of touch with American culture are ill-equipped to lead this effort. Muslim-American community leaders must take responsibility for crafting the message to their youth.

Muslim-American leaders must do more than condemn terrorist acts after the fact. We need Muslim-American voices speaking out and aggressively refuting bin Laden and al-Awakli's lies that Islam condones violence against civilians.

Every Muslim-American community in the country should establish a trusted channel of communication with law enforcement. Claims of government discrimination and civil rights abuses against Muslim-Americans have to be addressed. But Muslim-Americans must also accept that legal law enforcement tactics, used every day against organized crime and drug traffickers, can be used to detect potential radicalized terrorists as well.



The committee should also take this opportunity to ask tough questions about what the government is doing to address the threat of domestic radicalization. The terrorism threat has transformed in recent years from centralized, large-scale plots that leave a lot of clues, to smaller attacks by individuals who live in the shadows.

The best way to prevent these attacks is old-fashioned police work based on tips from the community, informants and surveillance and information-sharing between federal agencies and local authorities. The Bipartisan Policy Center has warned that no one is in charge of this sprawling effort. King's committee should try to fix this problem.

Striking the right tone for these hearings will be a delicate task. Hearings that educate the American public and improve counterterrorism policy would make an important contribution. Hearings that are accusatory and damage our national unity will surely make us less safe.

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