

Delegitimizing Terrorism: A better way to counter radicalization and recruitment in the West

Alex Wilner, PhD
AIMS Fellow in Security and Defence Policy
Senior Researcher, ETH Zurich

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Global terrorism trends suggest that Islamist radicalization is a transatlantic and international concern threatening Canada and its G8 and NATO allies. Since 2001, many, if not all, cases of Islamist terrorism in Europe, North American, and Australia have had Westerner perpetrators. Of the high-profile terrorist attacks since 9/11 – including the two shoe bombers (Richard Reid and Saajid Badat), Theo van Gogh's 2004 murder in Amsterdam, the twin attacks on London's Underground in 2005, the foiled 2006 liquid-bomb/airline attacks, the 2007 car bombing of Glasgow's International Airport and foiled London car bombing, the March 2004 Madrid bombings (and foiled April 2004 train attack), and the 2009 mass shooting at Fort Hood, Texas – were all carried out with the assistance and participation of naturalized immigrants, residents, and/or citizens of the countries targeted.

Countless other Westerners from over a dozen countries have also been arrested (and jailed) for orchestrating terrorism. In Canada, Mohammad Momin Khawaja and seven of the eighteen men

arrested near Toronto in 2006 are currently serving prison terms. In the United States, an unprecedented eleven terrorism plots were foiled in 2009 alone, including would-be attacks on New York City's subway system and a local Synagogue and on an Illinois Courthouse.¹ Other Americans were arrested on terrorism charges in 2002 (the *Lackawanna Six*), 2005 (California's *Jam'iyat Ul-Islam Is-Saheeh*), 2006 (the Chicago Sears Tower plot), 2007 (the Fort Dix and JFK Airport plot), and most recently in 2010 (the Time Square bombing attempt). Australians were arrested on terrorism charges in 2005 and 2009 for preparing attacks in Sydney and Melbourne. In Spain, authorities foiled the *Martyrs of Morocco's* 2004 plot to bomb the national criminal court. British Muslim converts, Andrew (Isa) Ibrahim and Nicky Reilly were both arrested in 2008, respectively, for constructing a "suicide vest" to attack shoppers with in Bristol and after detonating a homemade bomb in an Exeter restaurant. In neighboring Ireland, seven

¹ Scott Shane, "A year of Terror Plots, Through a Second Prism", *New York Times*, (12 January 2010).

individuals were apprehended in connection to a 2010 assassination plot of a Swedish political cartoonist. Between 2000 and 2007, France foiled five terrorist plots and Denmark another three. In Germany, four members of the so-called “Sauerland Cell”, including two German converts to Islam and one naturalized Turkish immigrant, were jailed in 2010 for preparing car bombs. In Italy, police disrupted a 2004 plot against Milan’s subway and unearthed a recruitment ring in 2007. And in Belgium, the so-called *Asparagus 18* was rounded up in 2004 as were other citizens following a 2007 attempt to free an al Qaeda operative jailed in a Belgium prison. All of these terrorist attempts involved Westerners who actively sought to kill and injure their fellow nationals.

However, not all Islamist terrorism in the West has been autonomously organized. Foreign terrorist organizations have begun active recruitment and training of Westerners for use in domestic attacks. In the past, al Qaeda, Hezbollah, the Tamil Tigers, and many other international terrorist organizations relied on Westerners and diaspora communities for financial and structural support. And while Westerners have long traveled overseas to join these organizations in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Bosnia, Chechnya, Gaza, Iraq, and elsewhere in order to participate in regional conflicts, emerging trends reveal a reversing relationship. International terrorist organizations have gone from merely seeking assistance from Western citizens to actively *recruiting* Westerners, *facilitating* their travel to foreign training camps, and *preparing* them to conduct terrorism overseas and at home. In this process, radicalized Westerners go from facilitating international terrorism to actively participating in terrorism in Europe, North America, and Australia on the behest of foreign groups.

The difference is subtle but significant. Instead of supporting foreign engagements, these Western radicals are trained and dispatched to conduct attacks back home. For example, the two visiting students responsible for the failed 2006 train bombing in Germany were acting on al Qaeda’s behalf.² Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the man who tried to blow up a plane with explosives hidden in the seam of his underwear over the skies of Detroit in 2009, was approached and recruited by al Qaeda while

² Andreas Ulrich, “Failed Bomb Plot Seen as Al-Qaida Initiation Test”, *Der Spiegel*, April 9, 2007.

studying and living in London, England and sent to Yemen for training.³ Or consider Najibullah Zazi, a permanent American resident of Afghan origin. He pled guilty in February 2010 to plotting to bomb New York City’s subway system. He received terrorism training in Pakistan and al Qaeda specifically dispatched him to the United States to carry out the attacks.⁴ Also in the US, as many as 30 American citizens are thought to have travelled to Somalia to train with al Shabaab since 2007. Some have died fighting, including Shirwa Ahmed, who became the first American to carry out a suicide attack in Africa, and Troy Kastigar, a Caucasian Muslim convert.⁵ What worries American officials now, is that others may be returning home to conduct attacks. This is exactly what seems to have occurred in Australia. In 2009, several Australian citizens were arrested for planning attacks, included two suspects who are thought to have received training at al Shabaab camps.⁶ It should be noted that Canada, too, has citizens fighting and dying alongside al Shabaab.⁷

Combating Islamist radicalization, recruitment, and terrorism in the West will require a multifaceted and multinational approach. Canada, working through the G8, can play a prominent role in developing an international platform for combating Islamist terrorism in the West. That approach must interweave three related strategies: delegitimize al Qaeda’s violent ideology; contain and reverse Islamist radicalization in the West; and track and destroy foreign terrorist recruitment systems.

³ David Frum, “England Made Abdulmutallab”, *National Post*, January 9, 2010.

⁴ A.G. Sulzberger and William Rashbaum, “Guilty Plea made in Plot to Bomb New York Subway”, *New York Times*, February 22, 2010.

⁵ Dina Temple-Raston, “FBI Sheds Light on Missing Somali-Americans”, *National Public Radio*, March 11, 2009; *National Public Radio*, “Somalis Missing from Minn. May Have Returned”, March 27, 2009.

⁶ Meraiah Foley, “Australia Police Hold Four in Terror Plot”, *New York Times*, August 3, 2009.

⁷ Stewart Bell, “Canadian Insurgent, Killed in Somalia, Would not Surrender”, *National Post*, July 4, 2008; Stewart Bell, “Canadian Arrested in Somalia Allegedly Member of Islamist Militia”, *National Post*, April 7, 2009; Stewart Bell, “Back from Front Lines With a Warning”, *National Post*, March 19, 2010.

Delegitimizing Terrorism

The G8 has repeatedly reaffirmed its condemnation of and commitment to combat terrorism. In its 2009 *Summit Declaration on Counter Terrorism*, the G8 reiterates that all acts of terrorism, regardless of their motivation and the identity of their perpetrators, are “criminal, inhumane, unjustifiable ... and repugnant.”⁸ Vociferously condemning terrorism in all its forms and wherever it occurs makes good policy sense. Doing so helps stake an irrefutable claim around which global counterterrorism policy can be constructed, allows different states from the G8 and beyond to unite behind a common policy goal, and reaffirms the G8’s position as a leading multilateral platform to coordinate international counterterrorism strategy.

However, declarations like these serve another even more important (though perhaps less understood) role: they help solidify global anti-terrorism norms that delegitimize the use of indiscriminate violence against civilians. Combating terrorism effectively requires combing interrelated tactics and strategies. Counterterrorism is as much about degrading terrorist military capabilities as it is about degrading the ideas that motivates the violence. The first part of this grand strategy relies on military force, diplomatic, developmental, and law enforcement efforts, and counterterrorism capacity building (CTCB) strategies that assist fragile and failing states. In its brief on *International Crime and Terrorism*, Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada suggests that customs and immigration, transportation, justice, and finance are also part of that solution.⁹ Where the G8, the United Nations, and their individual member-states have yet to properly focus their energies, however, is in conducting the second half of the strategy. As Germany’s Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière recently wrote, “an important task in the next years ahead will be to erode the foundations of

terrorism.”¹⁰ We need a counterterrorism plan that actively debates and criticises the legitimizers of terrorism, incubates, promotes, and disseminates counter-narratives, and develops and applies deterrence by delegitimization.¹¹ The G8 and its member-states and international partners need to fight the war of ideas as if it is a real war.¹²

While it may seem self-evident, as David Lake writes, that “terrorists lack moral strictures against the use of violence”, this is only half the story.¹³ All but the most nihilistic of terrorists fail to base their activities and behaviors on some set of basic principles. Ideology and socio-religious beliefs are guiding structures that inform terrorist behavior and shape their goals. The use of suicide terrorism by al Qaeda, al Shabaab, the Taliban and others, for example, is legitimized by relying on religious decrees that justify and sanitize the taking of one’s own life. Of importance, however, is that suicide is an otherwise blasphemous act under Islamic jurisprudence and its use in terrorism is refuted and rejected by a vast majority of those who share the Islamic faith. This suggests that there is room to actively manipulate the logic underpinning and shaping some manifestations of global terrorism by exploiting and contradicting its ideological rationales. Combating the scourge of terrorism will require that the G8 and other like-minded institutions and states make a coordinated and concerted effort to delegitimize terrorism that goes well beyond simply denouncing its occurrence. It is time to take concrete steps to actually fight for hearts and minds.

Fortunately, prominent Muslim leaders and organizations have lit the path ahead.

⁸ *G8 Statement on Counterterrorism*, G8 Summit - From La Maddalena to L’Aquila, (July 8, 2009).

⁹ *International Crime and Terrorism*, Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, accessed March 10, 2010, <http://www.international.gc.ca/crime/terrorism-terrorisme.aspx?lang=eng>

¹⁰ Thomas de Maizière, “Only a European re-think can Tackle Home-grown terrorism”, *Europe’s World*, No. 14 (Spring 2010), 35.

¹¹ Alex Wilner, “Deterring the Undeterrable: Coercion, Denial, and Delegitimization in Counterterrorism”, *Journal of Strategic Studies* (Forthcoming, 2010).

¹² J. Michael Waller, *Fighting the War of Ideas Like a Real War*, (Washington: The Institute of World Politics Press, 2007).

¹³ David Lake, “Rational Extremism: Understanding Terrorism in the Twenty-first Century”, *Dialog-IO* (2002), 17.

Islamic scholars have begun denouncing the type of violence condoned and supported by al Qaeda and its followers. Unlike G8 and UN anti-terrorism declarations, many of these condemnations double as religious decrees – they are essentially anti-terrorism *fatwas* based on religious jurisprudence. Notable examples include Tahir ul-Qadri’s 600 page religious rejection of Islamist violence (2010), the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group’s (LIFG) lengthy recantation of terrorism (2009), Sayyid Imam Sharif’s (aka Dr. Fadl) treatise shunning certain forms of violence (2007/8), Sheikh Su’ud al-Rushud’s and Sheikh al-Askar’s condemnation of suicide attacks (2007), and former Jemaah Islamiyah leader Nasir Abas’ total rejection of religious violence (2005).¹⁴ Debating and delegitimizing violent Islamist ideology will require Muslim assistance. It is in the best interest of all Western states, and the G8 in particular, to find ways to coordinate efforts to ensure anti-terrorism *fatwas* like these reach the widest possible audience.

There are a number of tactics and policies that should be developed and pursued. The G8 and its members should:

- Reiterate and publicize the personal and community-level consequences and general human costs that result from terrorism;
- Promote and expand anti-terrorism norms developed from within the Muslim community with structural and financial assistance;
- Promote ideological competition and dissension within the jihadist community by advocating anti-terrorism voices;

¹⁴ See, Dominic Casciani “Islamic Scholar Tahir ul-Qadri Issues Terrorism Fatwa”, *BBC*, March 2, 2010; *A Selected Translation of the LIFG Recantation Document*, Translated by Mohammed Ali Musawi, (London: Quilliam Foundation, 2009); Asaf Maliach, “Saudi Religious Scholars come out Against Al-Qaeda’s use of Religious Edicts Permitting Suicide Attacks against Muslims”, *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism* (July 2007); Scott Atran, “The Moral Logic and Growth of Suicide Terrorism”, *Washington Quarterly* 29:2 (2006), 142; and Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, “The Unravelling: The Jihadist Revolt against bin Laden”, *The New Republic*, 11 June 2008.

- Actively disseminate *Fatwas*, recantations, and rejections of terrorism within the G8 community and beyond;
- Coax Western media outlets into more thoroughly covering the Muslim anti-terrorism movement;
- Encourage the production of opinion pieces, editorials, and blog posts discussing the anti-terrorism movement;
- Ensure related information is easily accessible online;
- Support anti-terrorism think tanks and institutions (like the UK’s *Quilliam Foundation*) and academic research on the subject.

Containing Radicalization

Islamist radicalization is the lynchpin to homegrown terrorism in the West. Radicalization is a personal process in which individuals adopt extreme political, social, and/or religious ideals and aspirations whereby the attainment of particular goals justifies the use of indiscriminate violence, including terrorism. At its core, radicalization involves the internalization of a set of beliefs, worldviews, and assumptions that embraces violence in the name of a given cause.¹⁵ All Western citizens, nationals, and residents involved in orchestrating terrorism against their fellow citizens and home and host countries in the name of al Qaeda, first come to accept the legitimacy of al Qaeda’s violent ideology. From there, it is far easier to later condone and participate in terrorism. Delegitimizing al Qaeda is arguably a critical first step in preventing violent radicalization in the West, but other practical strategies can help reverse the phenomenon as well. Given the scope and severity of these threats, every G8 member has an incentive to coordinate efforts to combat Islamist radicalization in their communities. It is clear a multilateral strategy is needed.

¹⁵ Alex Wilner and Claire-Jehanne Dubouloz, “Homegrown Terrorism and Transformative Learning: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Understanding Radicalization” *Global Change, Peace & Security* 22:1 (2010).

To effectively counter Islamist radicalization, the G8 must:

- Support nationally-based research on Islamist radicalization in each G8 member-state and beyond;
- Build a multilateral research community where independent research on radicalization can be shared, compared, and contrasted;
- Identify and construct community-level partnerships with anti-radicalization Muslim leaders, groups, and communities;
- Identify best practices in detecting, disrupting, and deterring radicalization;
- Compare and contrast national experiences in deradicalization, civic engagement, and socio-political integration and establish best practices for each;
- Improve knowledge of radicalization and terrorist recruitment in prison;
- Train local police forces to recognize radicalization when and where it occurs.

Preventing Recruitment

Some international terrorist organizations actively recruit Westerners, facilitate their travel to foreign training camps and staging grounds, and prepare them to conduct terrorist operations in the West. Al Qaeda in particular has recently shifted its strategy from passively influencing Western radicals to directly motivating, inspiring, and training Western Islamists to carry out attacks in Europe and North America. According to one assessment, a “growing portion” of al Qaeda’s internet-based propaganda is now in English, tailored specifically to resonate with Anglo-Saxon audiences.¹⁶ Attracting, recruiting, and training Westerners to conduct acts of terrorism in the countries in which they retain citizenship would be a coup for al Qaeda. Not only do these recruits have “clean passports” – bona fide travel documents that are easily overlooked by security officials – but they

know precisely how to blend into the society and avoid detection. “You can’t take someone from the slums of Mogadishu,” explains Bruce Hoffman, “and take them on [a] suicide mission to Rome, Paris, New York.”¹⁷ It is more effective to train radicalized Italians, Frenchmen, and Americans and send them on their way. Developments like these represent an important crossroad in which Western radicals are actively given assistance by foreign terrorist groups to carry out attacks. Meeting this challenge will require an international response that begins with delegitimization and deradicalization, but goes much further to include practical strategies to impede terrorist recruitment as well. The G8 offers an ideal platform for constructing multilateral strategies and policies for tracking, disrupting, and destroying foreign terrorism recruitment processes.

To help curb terrorism recruitment in the West, the G8 should:

- Coordinate national efforts to track and stem the flow of Westerners travelling to international terrorist locales (with special attention paid to Somalia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iraq);
- Coordinate efforts to train Western operatives to infiltrate international terrorism recruitment rings and share the Human Intelligence (HUMINT) these operations will generate;
- Identify ways to locate, arrest, and prosecute foreign terrorist recruiters active in G8 member-states;
- Ensure intelligence-sharing processes and police/investigative partnerships are functioning effectively;
- Tailor counter-terrorism capacity building (CTCB) exercises in fragile, weak, and failing states to include training in identifying and arresting foreign (Western) fighters;
- Ensure Westerners captured in foreign battlefields are treated in accordance to international humanitarian law, are promptly

¹⁶ Ted Gistaro, Speech delivered to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy (Washington, D.C., 2008).

¹⁷ Amy Forliti, “Somali Militants Use Many Tactics to Woo Americans”, *Associated Press*, August 25, 2009.

returned to their native/resident countries, and stand open and fair trials;

- Build and strengthen cooperative engagements with less-traditional allies from the Arab/Muslim world, notably, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the Maghreb Countries, and Iraq.

Conclusions

Turning popular outrage and disgust with terrorism into a coordinated, multilateral foreign policy platform that delegitimizes terrorism is no easy task. Yet Western successes in delegitimizing fascism in the 1930/40s and Communism during the Cold War represent important precedents for combating Islamist violence today. Al Qaeda and its followers are astutely aware that their war is deeply unpopular with a vast majority of those with whom they share religious beliefs and in whose name they purport to act. Broadly communicating the cruelty of terrorism, condemning its use along international norms and principles, and assisting Muslim leaders to issue religious decrees that contradict religious violence will help delegitimize particular forms of modern terrorism. For the G8 and its member-states, the overarching policy goal should be to turn anti-terrorism condemnation into a social movement that compels communities and individuals to reject terrorism. If terrorists perceive their war as just, moral, and defensive, promoting and communicating views and norms that contend otherwise will influence the behavior of would-be supporters.

When Islamist terrorist organizations lose their religious justification and popular patronage, the violence they facilitate resembles mere thuggery, their objectives become suspect, and their support is eliminated. An important outcome of delegitimizing terrorism is the impediment of Western Islamist radicalization. When terrorism and political violence becomes socially and religiously unacceptable, fewer Western citizens will consider it a justifiable and valid form of behavior to address real or perceived socio-political grievances. By combining delegitimization with other multilateral strategies that try to understand why some individuals and communities radicalize and participate in terrorism, Western radicalization can be contained and reversed. When that happens, foreign terrorists will have a

harder time locating and recruiting Western citizens. Success in counter-radicalization necessarily leads to other successes in combating terrorism recruitment.

Alex Wilner is the Research Fellow in Security and Defence Policy at the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies. He is a Senior Researcher at the Center for Security Studies at the ETH Zurich (Swiss Federal Institute of Technology). He joined the CSS in October 2008 as part of the Transatlantic Post-Doc Fellowship for International Relations and Security (TAPIR). Born in Montreal, Alex completed his doctorate in 2008 at Dalhousie University and holds a Master's degree, also from Dalhousie, and a Bachelor's degree from McGill University. His dissertation, "Deterring the Undeterrable: The Theory and Practice of Coercing Terrorists", and doctoral research were awarded Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC, 2007/2008) and Canadian Department of National Defence Dr. Ronald Baker Doctoral Scholarships (2006/2007, 2007/2008).

Alex has published his work in a number of academic journals, including, *Studies in Terrorism & Conflict*, *Journal of Strategic Studies* (forthcoming), *International Journal, Global Change, Peace & Security*, *Canadian Naval Review*, *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, and the *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* and appears regularly in the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*. He is currently co-editing a volume and preparing a manuscript on the subject of applying deterrence theory to counterterrorism. Alex is a Research Fellow with the Centre for Foreign Policy Studies.



Atlantic Institute for Market Studies

2000 Barrington St., Ste. 1302 Cogswell Tower,
Halifax NS B3J 3K1
phone: (902) 429-1143 fax: (902) 425-1393
E-Mail: aims@aims.ca <http://www.aims.ca>