

# The Rise of Radicalization: Is the U.S. Government Failing to Counter International and Domestic Terrorism?

Prepared statement by

**Farah Pandith**

*Adjunct Senior Fellow*

*Council on Foreign Relations*

Before the

**Committee on Homeland Security**

*United States House of Representatives*

*1<sup>st</sup> Session, 114<sup>th</sup> Congress*

Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the committee:

Thank you for inviting me to share my perspective and experience. My name is Farah Pandith, and for eleven years I served as a political appointee for Presidents George W. Bush and Barack H. Obama, most recently as our government's former first-ever Special Representative to Muslim Communities. I felt deeply honored to serve our nation at the highest levels in a post 9/11 environment and to work on an issue that is, in my opinion, one of this century's most serious and misunderstood.

I left government in January 2014 to continue my work on countering violent extremism. I greatly respect both administrations in which I have served, but given what I have seen in more than 80 countries as Special Representative, as well as in 55 cities and 19 countries across western Europe as Senior Advisor to the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs focusing specifically on countering violent extremism (CVE), I felt it was important to re-join the nongovernment sector so as to speak openly, clearly and pointedly about the threat we are facing. I also wanted to help convince America and the world to do more to confront extremist ideology. (Let me be clear: Many kinds of extremist ideologies exist on our planet today. I'm referring to extremists whose vile and corrupt narrative claims religion for a specific political and ideological end.)

I come before you with neither a partisan agenda nor any purpose other than to give my honest views on this vital issue. As of February 2014, I have been affiliated with Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government where I

maintain an affiliation. As of December 2014, I have been at the Council on Foreign Relations. The opinions I am expressing in both my written and verbal testimony are my own. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the issue of the Rise of Radicalization: Is the US Government Failing to Counter International and Domestic Terrorism?

## **WHAT THREAT DO WE FACE?**

### **War of Ideas: the ideology of the *extremists versus everyone else***

Extremist ideology is an insidious and contagious virus that has successfully moved across our planet, specifically targeting Muslim millennials. Although extremism is not a new threat, it has infected every region of the globe and continues to morph, taking on different forms in different places. Yet the result is always the same: massive loss of life, destruction of modern cities and ancient sites, the seizure of territory, the erasure of existing borders, the targeted culling of minorities, the destabilization of entire regions, and the eradication of human rights.

The War of Ideas today is far more deadly than it was in the years after 9/11 because the recruits—mainly Muslim millennials under the age of thirty—are vulnerable to persuasion, purpose and passion. More youth are becoming radicalized globally, enticed to join both virtual and physical armies. The extremists are outpacing and outmaneuvering us in the ideological space. To stop them, we must take courageous and intelligent action, applying known methods and deploying all of our tools, both hard and soft power. Unless we act decisively, surpassing what we've done since 9/11 to inoculate communities from Denver to Dhaka, we will face an even more serious situation globally. We are currently “just” primarily seeing the crisis the Middle East but one can imagine a terrifying situation where this kind of war is being fought in other theatres at the same time as well as an expanded and more frequent series of attacks from Stockholm to Sidney.

### **Vulnerable Communities: Listening to what the grassroots have to say**

The extremists – whether Al Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Al Shabaab, the Taliban or Boko Haram – understand that in order to gain recruits, they must cater to their target demographic. The extremists are winning recruits because right now their narratives are louder and reach more youth than any other. At the core, extremist narratives are answering the key questions millennial Muslims are asking about themselves and their purpose.

As Special Representative to Muslim Communities, I met with thousands of Muslims over five years. I engaged with communities from Brazil to China, heard stories, and developed a new perspective on trends relating to Muslim youth. I had done this in Europe for two years right after the Danish Cartoon Crisis, talking with members of communities from Norway to Sicily and thinking that what I heard was unique to Muslims living as a minority (I was wrong). These two roles gave me unprecedented grassroots access in places senior US Government rarely went. They provided me with an extraordinary ability to make connections and spot trends across a demographic rather than just a region, and to do so irrespective of who was in the Oval Office. (Again, I did this in both the Bush and Obama Administrations).

The realities I encountered flew in the face of all the theories and seemingly logical explanations then circulating about extremism. Experts cited the so-called Arab Spring, the lack of jobs and education, our foreign policy, our domestic policies, our immigrant narrative, our separation of church and state. Yet what young Muslim men and women were confronting—and still are confronting--was different and more unwieldy. Since 9/11, *Muslim youth have experienced a profound identity crisis unlike any in modern history. They have craved answers, seeking purpose and belonging.*

Nearly every day since September 12, 2001, Muslim Millennials have seen the word “Islam” or “Muslim” on the front pages of papers on and offline. They have grown up scrutinized because of their religion, and much of this attention is not positive. As a result, they are asking questions like: What does it mean to be modern and Muslim? What is the difference between culture and religion? Who speaks for my generation? While members of earlier generations might have turned to close-knit families and communities for help answering such questions, Millennials are tuning in to unsavory figures encountered on the Internet and in other venues. Extremists prey on young Muslims and offer ready-made answers designed specifically to appeal to this generation. They market their ideas with savvy and alarming expertise—from magazines to apps, YouTube sermons to Hip Hop and poetry.

That is by no means all that’s going on. Some Muslim women are becoming far more conservative across the planet, rejecting established, local traditions of dress and society. They are “veiling” when their mothers and grandmothers did not. They are listening to radical sermons on satellite TV beamed from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. They are downloading music, poetry, and blogs that celebrate isolation and hatred of the “other.” They are keeping their children away from people who are not “like them.” And most recently, some are joining the armies of ISIL. Because a mother is a child’s first teacher, and because some women now wish join the fight, young women are in a position to make or break their succeeding generation.

For the first time since 9/11, we are re-awakening emphatically to the growing threat posed by extremists. At the moment, we are rightfully concerned about the potential of radicalized youth returning from battlefields to conduct terrorist actions. But in addition to the short-term impacts on public safety, we should be concerned about the long-term ability of battle-hardened extremists to build new terrorist networks at home and extend existing ones by preying on youth. There is a critical ideological battle to be waged here. Extremists remain radicalized once they return. They are technologically savvy and understand how to use emotions to attract recruits. They also might command heightened and growing legitimacy in Muslim communities. Hard power responses such as retrieving passports are a start, but we need to do much more to prevent recruitment of new terrorists.

Fortunately for us, the extremists possess a hidden vulnerability. Credible voices—those liked and trusted by Muslim youth—can win youth over with narratives that counter extremist messages. Who are these credible voices? They are not those of the United States government. No government on earth – ours or any other – is credible among Muslim youth. Like any other kids on the planet, Muslim youth listen to their peers, are persuaded by popular ideas, and are passionate about belonging to something that seems real to them. To prevent recruitment of new terrorists, we must find new, innovative ways of boosting credible voices, helping them to drown out the extremists in the global marketplace of ideas.

If we clamp down on recruitment, then before too long, ISIL and others will not have armies. Given that the radicalization of an individual takes place gradually, why haven’t we done more to intercede proactively during the initial stages of ideological persuasion? Why are we only interceding much later by attempting to stop extremists as they seek to cross national borders? Recruitment is a relatively new phenomenon, but we certainly possess enough information fourteen years after 9/11 to address the issue and scale up counter-measures at the local level, both in our country and around the world. We must decide if our goal is merely to stop an immediate threat, or to stop recruitment from happening in the first place.

## ***WHAT HAVE WE DONE?***

### **9/11 to Today: Setting up our defenses on soft power**

The U.S. government has struggled since 9/11 to wage a “war of ideas.” After 9/11, we attempted to engage in such a war against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Seeking to thwart their recruitment efforts, we focused on countering their

---

narratives of “us” versus “them.” These efforts took place under the umbrella of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), a concept that has become fashionable as of late but that actually dates from the Bush Administration. Back then, it was an upward struggle to get the inter-agency to buy into CVE. Most policy makers in our country and abroad couldn’t envision how we could develop organic voices on the ground that could push back against Al Qaeda’s ideology.

Still, several visionaries did understand that although the US Government did not have street cred with average Muslim youth, we did have the power to build platforms to raise up voices and build movements of credible voices. Thanks to the commitment and open-mindedness of these visionaries, we seeded initiatives that allowed us to launch new efforts on the ground and created a road map of what was possible. We took risks and experimented. (During this time, very few European governments felt comfortable getting into an ideological battle, even though their communities were doing just that at micro levels. European governments were trying to find voices that had legitimacy and credibility, but as in our country, politics often prevented risk taking at the grassroots.)

During the two years that I served as senior advisor in the EUR Bureau (2007-2009), we helped start many soft power initiatives and networks, demonstrating a proof of concept. Initiatives like Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) were designed in the image of Mothers Against Drunk Driving to be grassroots, local, and responsive. Recognizing that European Muslim youth needed positive role models, we created the first pan-European professional network that activated a new narrative and inspired others. By partnering with individuals and community groups across Europe, we managed to lift up voices of Muslims who had both influence within local neighborhoods and communities, establishing the basis for an empowering a grassroots countermovement in opposition of extremist manifestations and counter-extremist messages to share. We joined former extremists, victims of terrorism, entrepreneurs, bloggers and women into layered networks dedicated to combatting the allure of the extremist narrative and ideology.

When Secretary Clinton learned of our accomplishments in Europe as conveners, facilitators and intellectual partners, she asked me to take our activities global. As Special Representative to Muslim Communities (2009-2014), I used the same approach I did in the Bush Administration to mobilize Muslim youth. I worked with our embassies to create first of a kind global networks like Generation Change, a network of Muslim change makers who were committed to pushing back extremist ideology. I listened to what youth were saying about the changing nature of extremists’ appeal and tactics and focused on helping connect social entrepreneurs, activists, and other organic voices. We also launched efforts like Viral Peace, a program to train credible voices to push back against extremists online. Further, we identified “black holes” where we knew more work had to be done, including the increasing phenomenon of the radicalization of women.

What I was asked to do at State during the Bush Administration was unique. At the time, forward-thinking policy-makers understood that America had to proactively engage with Muslim communities in Europe. You might remember the intense days after the Danish Cartoon Crisis when everyone—our nation, as well as our European allies—was caught off-guard by the realization that something happening in Copenhagen could affect lives in Kabul. Sadly, we have seen this phenomenon play out all too often. A false rumor, a video, a preacher threatening to burn the Quran can all unleash unrest as well as violence in faraway places.

What I was asked to do at State in the Obama Administration was also unique and gave me a chance to work closely with my State colleagues to build out micro scaled prototypes. It cemented my belief that the most innovative opportunities we have to defeat the spread of this ideology involve partnering with those *outside* of government.

We must now dramatically “scale up” innovative, entrepreneurial CVE programs if we are to prevail. I’m not talking about engaging in a messaging war on Twitter. I’m talking about getting credible, local voices to inoculate their

communities against extremist techniques and appeal. I'm talking about helping parents to understand extremist tactics so that they can educate their children about this threat. I'm talking about supporting the hundreds of grassroots ideas and initiatives in our country and around the world that reject extremist ideology. I'm talking about working closely with mental health professionals to understand the adolescent mind and to develop programs that can help stop radicalization. Ultimately, we need to monopolize the marketplace of ideas online and offline, spawning credible voices that give new agency and purpose to this generation.

One lesson I have learned is that these local ideas don't require large budgets. They do, however, require support and a certain mindset from those at the top. We must allow for creativity, understand that not everything we try is going to bloom, and accept that we do not have to put the American flag on everything we do. When it comes to countering violent extremism, one size *doesn't* fit all. We have to listen to what communities are saying is going to make a difference and be flexible and inventive enough to help them do it. It is not ideas from Washington that can make a difference in Tashkent or Toronto.

Make no mistake, CVE efforts are still very much in their infancy. Though our government has tried to counter extremist narratives through formal channels, very, very little attention has been paid overall to CVE. We haven't approached the ideological war with the same resources or respect we did the physical war, devoting ourselves to an integrated strategy of hard and soft power. We did not ask the kinds of questions around the ideology that would have informed us of things to come and the global appeal, and we did not restructure ourselves to get ahead of the extremists. As a result, the extremist ideology has spread, leaving us where we are today: Facing a virtual army of recruits not just from other countries, but from our own.

## WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

### *ISIS and beyond: Going All In*

This year began with the attack on Charlie Hebdo, and just recently we watched the massacre in Tunisia. We have become all too familiar with gruesome images of beheadings and other atrocities, the destruction of human heritage, and the warnings of attacks on the homeland. Yet still we remain locked into thinking that we can deal with the extremist threat primarily through hard power alone. While we have seen an increase in the interagency conversation around the ideological war, and "CVE" is the currency everyone is floating, our overall strategy to defeat the extremists does not contain a sufficient soft power dimension.

We can't create an ideological countermovement on the backs of a few isolated government-funded programs. It requires much broader commitment and focus. *Our strategy must be a cohesive, integrated and comprehensive approach to the threat we face. We must wage a battle on all fronts with money, accountability and experienced personnel.* We must look at this like we would any other contagion, rooting out its hosts globally and destroying its defenses. The extremists seem all powerful, but they are not. We have yet to unleash the full power of our skills in the soft power space. When we truly go "all in," we'll see how vulnerable the extremists really are.

Principles for future action should include the following:

- Investing significantly in soft power the way we did during the Cold War. We must give soft power as much credibility as we do hard power.
- Focusing on millennials globally, as this is the demographic from which the extremists recruit.

- Creating a comprehensive, coordinated strategy that does not skirt the ideological threat and that mobilizes all available levers of power (again, as we did during the Cold War). Such a strategy should incorporate lessons we've learned from the ground up, and it should invest in local answers.
- Adopting helpful and appropriate goals. The point here is not to win a popularity contest—to “win hearts and minds.” Rather, it's to get voices online and offline to push back against extremist messages. It's to flood the marketplace of ideas with online and offline counter-narratives articulated by Muslims themselves. We need to act as convener, facilitator, and intellectual partner to Muslim youth, bringing together their great ideas and seeding them. This approach will hold far more credibility in Muslim communities.
- Publicly condemning countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and others that are igniting extremist ideology in a variety of ways—through textbooks, radical preachers, and mosques that promote hate and reject the diversity of Muslims around the world (not to speak of other faiths).
- Attacking extremist recruiting proactively rather than relying on reactive and exponentially costlier “hard power” interventions once military threats have already materialized. Remember, without recruits, there are no troops.
- Ramping up initiatives and knowledge about the radicalization of women, and developing new approaches to mobilize them against radicalism.
- Creating awareness campaigns about radicalization the way we do for diseases like AIDS or breast cancer.
- Normalizing the conversation about extremism so that more private-sector money flows into soft power initiatives. Government can do this by sharing information about what we are seeing and convening helpful players outside of government.
- Anticipating extremist ideological attacks, and keeping an arsenal of strong counter-actions at the ready. In this field, there are few real surprises. We can easily predict the kind of tools extremists will use against us. We ought to be ready with swift responses, not wait days and weeks to react.
- Creating senior level positions across government at home and abroad to focus on CVE, making the individuals in these positions accountable to Congress.
- Producing a strategy that not only has short, medium and long-term goals but identifies the layers of elements in the ecosystem that allows the ideology to grow.
- Including the mental health components as well as millennial data into our assessments and strategy.

The extremists are both evil and intelligent. They are doing everything they can from all angles to re-make the world according to their apocalyptic vision. We understand this, but we're not doing enough to neutralize their methods. As a CVE pioneer, I took part in policy conversations at the highest level, and I also engaged at the grassroots with the most vulnerable of communities. I know first hand what we can and cannot do. As I watch this horrific era of ISIL, I am convinced that we can and must do more.

In the years since 9/11, a great deal of politicking has taken place around the issue of radicalization, and unfortunately this has impeded an honest assessment of how to mobilize communities themselves to prevent young Americans

from being seduced. Critics of CVE bemoan a lack of science supporting measures that might fight extremist ideology. They want proof that counter-narratives work and they want any approach to stemming the appeal to produce measurable results. But are we supposed to do nothing and let the extremists blast the marketplace online and offline with their poison, waiting for a crisis to respond? Efforts to mobilize credible voices on and offline offer us hope. In the case of online recruitment, data exists that can help us evaluate the effectiveness of counter-measures. To evaluate offline CVE measures, we can seek out anecdotes confirming whether one on one interactions or specific programs have moved kids from interest in extremism to rejection of it. The science may not be perfect, but doing nothing is not an option and we need to be more proactive not less. We can take action without infringing on civil rights and civil liberties, and we can partner with coalitions whose members understand that the predators trying to win over our youth are a problem for all of America, not a specific community.

Our efforts to deal with the ideological threat have of course evolved since 9/11. The trajectory of US government thinking has gone from “winning hearts and minds” and a Rapid Response Unit to hashtags and a Global Strategic Communication Center. And yet, we continue to come up short. Formerly many didn’t accept CVE, but now they make the mistake of calling *everything* CVE. We have tried to bracket the threat around terrorist groups and regions, building out coordination in artificial ways. We have never given real money, real strategic importance or real personnel a chance to do all we are capable of doing to win this ideological war. In some ways, are having the same conversations we did right after 9/11 – they seem new to many because we have not shared expertise and background, and new personnel insist there is nothing to be learned from those who worked on this before them. It is astounding that even in the aftermath of the President’s Summit on CVE, an important convening and re-energized moment, we are still locked into an inter-agency that is uncoordinated and under-resourced. Very little innovation exists around the “how” of building initiatives or what those initiatives might be. Further, we are insisting that this is a messaging war when it is much more than that.

We stand today at a crossroads. We possess a great deal of information about how people get radicalized, why they get radicalized, and what can prevent them from getting radicalized. We can either continue to do CVE in an episodic way without accountability or imagination, or we can put all the pieces together – the ecosystem, the new counter-narratives and tools, and the specific demographic – into a cohesive global strategy that mobilizes both hard and soft power.

## **WHAT’S COMING?**

The ideological threat from extremists will impact us in several ways in the years ahead. First, we know that the extremists are already recruiting among the 4 million refugees (including a large number of youth) who have fled fighting in Syria and Iraq. We can not yet know the numbers or the impact that such recruitment will have on that region or other parts of the globe, but clearly this represents a dangerous and compelling threat.

Second, while governments are still trying to understand the extremists’ recruitment of women, we are learning of children already training to be ISIS warriors. Referred to as “cubs,” these children, once grown, will comprise a massive untested demographic. What do we know of adults that have been brainwashed to be violent when only seven or eight years old?

Third, the *New York Times* recently highlighted a story of a young American girl from rural Washington state who was seduced by the ideology of an ISIS recruiter. Her story shocked and alarmed many Americans. Similarly, the parents of an American teen raised in the suburbs of Chicago were shocked to learn that their son had been recruited by ISIS. These stories are not isolated incidents. We are seeing a more robust conversation from Massachusetts to California around the radicalization of Americans, but importantly, we are also seeing a more open conversation about how to

stop it on the home front. As we look at the next chapter of the extremist threat, we know home grown radicalization along with so called lone wolf attacks on the Homeland will constitute a serious threat.

Fourth, as we have seen in the last couple of years, the extremists are changing and combining allegiances. This may continue, and we may also see new groups emerge as technology gets more sophisticated, extremists get even smarter in their recruitment efforts, and their target demographic grows larger. What will this mean for policy makers as we build out our strategy and understand the threat we face?

Finally, there has been much discussion around foreign fighters returning. We do not currently know what the impact will be on their ability to recruit and the aftermath of their particular journeys.

This hearing seeks to determine whether the US government is failing to counter the growing threat of the extremists. I believe we have learned a lot since 9/11 and in both the Bush and Obama Administrations we have seen leadership on and commitment to this issue. However, fourteen years after 9/11, we should not feel content with the pace of our efforts. At the same time, I leave you with a positive message. We *can* destroy the extremists' ability to recruit young Muslims. We can beat extremists at their own game, ending their exploitation of the Muslim identity crisis. Doing so won't cost a fraction of traditional hard power solutions, but it will require that we take a more entrepreneurial and innovative approach to policymaking. We must stop playing catch-up and get ahead of trends. We must take a broader view and not look at specific conflicts or extremist groups as if they are "one-offs." As a nation, we must move swiftly, like nimbler start-ups. We defeated communist ideology during the Cold War by mustering creativity and full-on dedication. We can and must do this again. The time to act is now. So what are we waiting for?