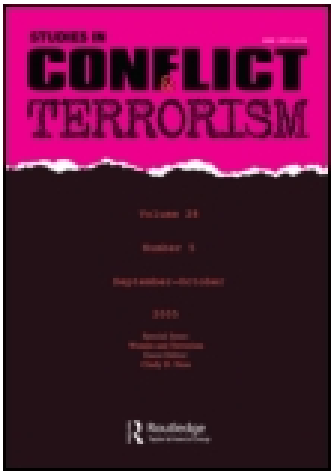

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Radicalization of Homegrown Sunni Militants in the United States: Comparing Converts and Non-Converts

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Are the mechanisms and processes that lead to radicalization different for Muslim converts and non-converts in the United States? While many scholars attempt to explain why people violently radicalize, the theories are diverse and most treat converts and non-converts the same. This study answers this question by categorizing the many radicalization theories into three levels of analysis so that cases of radicalization can be analyzed across and within disciplines. Out of 83 cases studies, individual-level factors are more prevalent among converts than non-converts. Group-level processes similarly affect both groups. Mass-level mechanisms are not significant factors in radicalization.

Faisal Shahzad was born in northwest Pakistan in 1979 in a region where many Afghan refugees settled as a result of the Afghan–Soviet war and that is now a target of CIA drone strikes. Although he was raised as a Muslim and attended Islamic boarding school, his family was "not particularly religious."[1] In 1998, Shahzad moved to the United States to attend university, earning a bachelor's degree in computer science and an MBA. He married, began working in the financial sector, and bought a house in the Connecticut suburbs of New York City. In 2007, Shahzad became a U.S. citizen. His neighbors described him as a normal man who wore a suit to work and liked to tend to his yard. By most accounts, Shahzad was well adjusted to life in America. However, the 2008 financial crisis seemed to affect Shahzad and soon after he began to change. After losing his house through foreclosure, Shahzad's friends noticed that he became more interested in Islam and politics. He expressed particular anger over drone attacks in Pakistan. With childhood ties to friends involved in militancy in the Afghanistan/Pakistan border region, Shahzad traveled to Pakistan for several months in 2009 where he met and trained with the Pakistani Taliban. While in Pakistan, Shahzad asked his father for permission to fight with the mujahidin in Afghanistan, but his father refused.[2]

In contrast, Zachary Chesser grew up in Fairfax County, Virginia. Like other kids his age in the affluent suburb of Washington, DC, Chesser played basketball, football, and rowed crew. In middle school Chesser became interested in the "Goth" sub-culture. He

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grew his hair long, was into "hardcore industrial music," and other students knew him for drawing satanic pictures. In high school, Chesser traded his Gothic style for a deep curiosity in Asian youth culture. He was enthused by Japanese anime, the Japanese language, and break dancing.[3] A feature in Chesser's high school yearbook explained that he was the only non-Asian in the school break dancing club.[4] While dating a Muslim girl his senior year of high school, Chesser developed an interest in Islam and converted to the religion in 2008. Almost immediately he became obsessed with or by fundamentalist Islam. He condemned his friends for their Western habits and began visiting radical Islamist websites such as Anwar Awlaki's. By 2009, Chesser, who by now went by the name Abu Tallah al-Amriki, began working with the Web-based Islamist group Revolution Muslim and posting blogs and videos including a 7,000-word treatise on the obligation to wage *jihad* against infidels.[5]

By the spring of 2010, both Shahzad and Chesser had evolved from everyday Americans into violent Islamist radicals. In April of that year, Shahzad bought an SUV and supplies to construct a car bomb, which he attempted to detonate in New York City's Times Square. The bomb failed to explode, and the FBI arrested Shahzad before he could flee to Pakistan.[6] The same month, Chesser condemned the cartoon series "South Park" for an episode in which the Prophet Muhammad wore an animal costume. Chesser warned that the creators would likely be killed over the episode. A few months later the FBI arrested Chesser trying to travel to Somalia to fight with militants of the Al Qaeda–linked Al Shaabab movement.[7]

The stories of Shahzad and Chesser are significant because they represent a major gap in understanding the radicalization of Sunni Muslims in the United States. Both men transformed from seemingly nonviolent citizens into violent Islamist militants in only a few years, but their paths toward radicalization appear to be different. External social and economic forces seem to have catalyzed Shahzad's radicalization. Chesser, however, had a history of experimenting with one extreme identity after another, suggesting that his radicalization came from within. Why did different forces radicalize these two men to similar ideologies? The most obvious difference between these men—and a detail that might hold the answer to this question—is that Shahzad was born and raised a Muslim while Chesser converted to Islam. This difference is important to note because of the 46 known Sunni militant terrorist plots in the United States since 11 September 2001, 19 of them have involved converts to Islam.[8] Yet, researchers have largely treated converts and non-converts the same when attempting to understand radicalization. Therefore, it is not known if these two groups radicalize differently. This study explores this gap in the understanding of radicalization by asking: Do the mechanisms or processes of radicalization differ between converts and non-converts?

After exploring the mechanisms and processes of radicalization, this study finds that there is a difference in the factors that lead to radicalization in convert and non-convert homegrown Sunni militants. Individual or internal forces, such as identity issues or cognitive function and style, play a much greater role in radicalizing converts than they do for those raised as Muslims. For both converts and non-converts, radicalization is largely the result of recruitment by militant movements or radical friends and family. Internal mechanisms alone are not sufficient for radicalization.

Theoretical Foundations of Radicalization

Scholars and policy analysts have published numerous theories and studies that attempt to explain radicalization. These theories range from individual psychological mechanisms to mass societal strains. Psychological and cognitive theories claim that radicalization is the result of individual psychologies, personalities, and choices. For instance, rational choice

theories contend that people choose terrorism because it is the best available option to affect change. Others argue that joining a terrorist movement offers an "identity stabilizer" for people with low self-esteem or for those who, as excluded minorities, are searching for belonging as a way to consolidate and defend their identity. Still others attempt to generalize from prior research, which finds that cognitive function controls violent behavior and cognitive style influences aggressive behavior among political figures. Therefore, some peoples' cognitive functions may make them more likely to sympathize with violent terrorist groups when pursuing social or political agendas. Another cognitive theory states that terrorists are novelty seekers and are attracted to terrorism for the thrill of action.[9]

By contrast, sociological theories argue that societal forces are radicalizing mechanisms. For example, Albert Bandura's social learning theory argues that people who live in violent regions and who witness terrorism regularly may seek to imitate terrorists or learn from a culture that glorifies terrorists. National cultural theory suggests that national cultures are either "collectivist" or "individualist." Collectivists divide the world into in-groups and out-groups and are more likely to attack "outsiders" to defend the in-group, while individualists are more likely to attack their own people. Relative deprivation and oppression theories contend that people who are politically and economically oppressed turn to violence for change.[10]

Other sociological theories contend that radicalization is facilitated through social networks and active recruitment by terrorist movements. Social movement theory explains that terrorist movements adapt to political opportunities and constraints and mobilize resources to frame the group's ideology or narrative in a way that will attract new followers. Strategic propaganda on the Internet and charismatic recruiters convince people that the movement has solutions to society's problems. Social network theory similarly contends that radicalization is a group process where extremist individuals radicalize other people within their social networks.[11]

This broad array of theories suggests that any one theory is unlikely to explain why people violently radicalize. Rather, there is good reason to argue that many of the above theories together may affect radicalization in the United States, while some may not at all. Walter Laqueur eloquently explained this concept best when he said: "Many terrorisms exist, and their character has changed over time and from country to country. The endeavor to find a "general theory" of terrorism, one overall explanation of its roots, is a futile and misguided enterprise."[12]

Therefore, testing these theories individually to determine if radicalization differs between converts and non-converts would probably find as many results as there are theories. Most of these theories fit within three broad categories: (1) *individual-level*, those that address internal forces which only directly affect the person who is radicalizing; (2) *group-level*, which include top-down social movement and horizontal social-network recruitment; and (3) *mass-level*, which argue that societal forces or strains that affect large populations are radicalizing mechanisms.[13] Categorizing radicalization theories in this manner allows for comparisons within and across disciplines.[14]

Methodology

This study specifically focuses on the violent radicalization of homegrown convert and non-convert Sunni militant terrorists in the United States from 11 September 2001, a watershed in Sunni militant terrorism, to 31 December 2010. The aim of this research is to identify which of the three levels of analysis—individual, group, and mass, or any combination thereof—has the most explanatory power for why some Sunni Muslims in the United

States violently radicalize and if there is any noticeable difference between converts and non-converts.

Within the time frame of this study there are 124 possible cases of radicalization among Sunni Muslims in the United States.[15] From this population, the study includes a sample of 83 cases. The cases were coded for the presence of "convert" and "non-convert" and "individual-level," "group-level," and "mass-level" factors or processes of radicalization. In some cases, more than one level applied to a single case.

Conducting research on radicalization presents many obstacles and any study of the subject has significant limitations. Active militants are by necessity clandestine and dangerous, limiting access to primary source data from interviews. Interviewing members of the Muslim community about terrorism is also challenging because they may be reluctant to speak with researchers due to the sensitive nature of terrorism and radical Islam. Moreover, detailed biographical information about terrorists and their organizations gleaned from intelligence and court cases is very limited. Accordingly, all of the factors that led to radicalization are not visible in most cases. Furthermore, using radical behavior and rhetoric from terrorists as empirical evidence of radicalization endangers research results because the researcher may be selecting evidence on the dependent variable. These facts, paired with the relatively small number of known terrorists, limit research sample sizes. Finally, there is no representative control group for comparison with the results of this study.

A significant amount of data for this study comes from primary and secondary-source documents. Primary sources like court documents, blogs, websites, and videos offer detailed evidence of the radicalization process. In many cases, however, only media accounts exist, forming the majority of the secondary source material for this study. Yet, these secondary sources can be helpful, because they often include interviews of people who knew the radicalized person before he or she became radicalized. Such accounts may be less subject to the biased justifications and rationalizations of the radical person. Terrorism expert Daveed Gartenstein-Ross collected the data for cases of homegrown terrorism in the United States from 2001 until 2009 for his own research and kindly offered his data to this study. While Gartenstein-Ross used the data to identify, "concrete manifestations of radicalization," as explained earlier, this study uses the same data to examine causes of radicalization.[16]

The 2010 Congressional Research Service (CRS) report *American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat* provides a list of radicalized people as cases for this study.[17] From this population, some cases are excluded because there is not sufficient data for analysis. The cases are further filtered based on two criteria. First, the person must have spent most of his or her life in the United States or radicalization must have occurred in the United States. For instance, there are charges against Abdul Kadir, Kareem Ibrahim, and Abdel Nur for plotting to bomb a fuel line at John F. Kennedy Airport, but they are foreign citizens and spent much of their lives in Guyana or Trinidad and Tobago. Similarly, Richard Reid and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the "shoe" and "underwear" bombers, respectively, are not included in this study because they are international terrorists, rather than U.S. homegrown.[18]

The second criterion is that the person must have been involved in terrorism. When possible, criminal charges and convictions for terrorism-related offenses provided evidence that a person was complicit in terrorism. However, for some cases there is no conviction, but it is clear that the case involves terrorism due to details of the investigation. Therefore, despite being charged in the Times Square plot, Mohammad Younes and Aftab Younes are not relevant to this study because there is no evidence that they were aware that they were involved in a terrorist plot. Rather, their charges stem from other crimes discovered during the investigation of Faisal Shahzad.[19]

Definitions

Studying terrorism requires using a number of ambiguous and often politically charged words, such as radical, terrorism, Sunni militant, and homegrown that deserve clarification in order to provide a more useful analysis. For instance, to explore how people radicalize, it is imperative to understand what it means to be radical. David Mandel explains, "To be radical is to be extreme relative to something that is defined or accepted as normative, traditional, or valued as the status quo."[20] Therefore, extremism is inherent in radicalism. Randy Borum further explains that "nearly all terrorists are extremists, but most extremists are not terrorists."[21] The distinction, Borum continues "is whether the focus is more on promotion of the 'cause' or destruction of those who oppose it."[22] This concept is helpful in understanding the difference between Islamist groups such as the Egyptian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood—which aims to make extreme political changes by peacefully replacing democracies with theocratic governments—and Al Qaeda, which has the same ultimate goal, but vows to violently destroy anyone who stands in its way.

In some cases, people transition from "promotion-oriented" extremism to "destruction-oriented"[23] extremism. Mandel argues that:

> A tendency to see one's own perspective representing the absolute truth and pure virtue, while other perspectives represent falsehoods and/or evils can free one to believe that any sort of action that supports the dominance of that perspective within society is itself a virtuous act.[24]

At this stage, radicals become violent radicals. This transition or process from promoting radical ideas to destroying those who oppose them is *violent* radicalization. In this context, terrorism expert Peter Neumann writes that violent radicalization is a process of "changes in attitude that lead towards sanctioning and, ultimately, the involvement in the use of violence for a political aim."[25]

There are a wide variety of violent radicals, from Eco-terrorists, Marxist terrorists, and right-wing terrorists to Islamist terrorists. This study focuses on Sunni militant terrorism. This group of violent radicals includes a wide array of Sunni Muslim groups, persons, or movements which subscribe to or support violent Al Qaeda, *Salafi-Jihadi*, *Wahabbi-Jihadi*, *takfiri*, or other similar ideologies. Furthermore, homegrown Sunni militant terrorists are those American citizens or U.S. residents whose radicalization occurred within the United States."[26]

A Muslim convert is a person who has newly adopted the beliefs of Islam as a religion. A non-convert is a person who was born into a Muslim family and grew up practicing Islam. While it is difficult to fully know the depth of a person's religious conviction or if and when someone has truly embraced religious conversion, this study avoids the dilemma by mostly relying on data from the CRS report on radicalization. Based on biographical information, the report identifies which of the known homegrown "jihadist terrorists" in the United States are Muslim converts.[27]

Like radicalism, many different actions and motives can define terrorism. However, for the purpose of this study, terrorism is "the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives."[28] Therefore, a terrorist is a person, who has participated in, plotted, conspired, or provided material support for the activities described above as terrorism.

Levels of Analysis

Convert and Non-Convert Sunni Militant Radicalization

Between 2001 and 2010 there have been approximately 46 homegrown Sunni militant terrorist plots in the United States, involving over 124 radicalized people.[29] Of those people, 36 are Muslim converts. While nearly all of the others were born and raised as Muslims, a few are non-Muslim criminals.[30] At some point, each of these people began to radicalize and transition from non-radicals to violent terrorists. Identifying the processes or mechanisms of radicalization requires pinpointing the start of this transition and understanding what the radicalization process looks like as it develops.

Two studies—*Homegrown Terrorists in the U.S. and U.K.* by Gartenstein-Ross and Laura Grossman and a New York Police Department (NYPD) radicalization study by Michell Silber and Arvin Bhatt—offer metrics or benchmarks that help to identify the transition from non-radical to radical.[31] From these two studies one can synthesize the stages and manifestations of radicalization and identify two important points in the radicalization process. The first point is the divide between the pre-radicalization and self-identification stage, where the person begins to exhibit the outward manifestations of radicalization. Biographical data and behavior before this point may offer evidence for individual or mass-level mechanisms. However, once a person begins to develop legalistic interpretations of Islam, behaviors and sayings from the person will likely be the result of radicalization and no longer reliable evidence as factors of radicalization. For instance, post-radical rants by a terrorist about the treatment of Muslims by the West are not sufficient evidence for a radicalizing mass-level mechanism. The second point is the divide between the indoctrination and jihadization stages. After a person has crossed this threshold from radical thinking and rhetoric to preparing for violence, he or she is fully violently radicalized. Therefore, associations and social networks are no longer evidence for group-level radicalization. For example, a person who travels to Pakistan to attend a terrorist camp was already radical when he or she made the decision to go to Pakistan.[32]

Individual-Level Radicalization

The individual level of radicalization focuses on internal forces innate to the person radicalizing. While these internal forces may be the result of external experiences in life, they are internalized during development and manifest in the individual's psychology, personality, or cognitive function rather than being immediate responses to external experiences. They are usually not a response to a single incident or event.[33]

Psychoanalytical and cognitive theories are good examples of individual-level radicalization of militant Sunni radicalization in the United States. While these theories may not capture all radicalization that occurs at the individual level, what is important to note is that internal mechanisms made the person vulnerable to radicalization rather than external sociological pressures.[34]

One psychoanalytical approach argues that radicalization may result from attempts to consolidate or stabilize one's identity.[35] Randy Borum explains that identities form during adolescence. A crisis during this stage may damage a person's identity, leaving them with a severely damaged self-esteem. For someone in this state, adopting the identity of a movement or subculture, or joining a group may give the person a sense of belonging, self-worth, personal meaning, and consolidate their identity.[36] For example, becoming a Sunni militant to fight against non-believers may help someone with low self-esteem feel

that they are doing something important. Shunning Western dress and beliefs in exchange for an extreme Sunni militant identity may also consolidate the identity of a person stuck between a Muslim and Western identity.

Cognitive function and style may also lead to radicalization. These mechanisms are mental functions that affect how a person follows rules and calculates risk; they determine what factors a person emphasizes in decision making. These functions include the "capacity to control impulses and comport one's behavior to social expectations."[37] Victoroff explains that there is good evidence that cognitive functions also control violent behavior. Similarly, cognitive flexibility measures a person's tolerance for ambiguity. Low cognitive flexibility is associated with the "need for certainty and uniformity, but also racism and ethnocentrism."[38] This dichotomous way of thinking may lead to the "tendency to see one's own perspective as the absolute truth and virtue" that Mandel describes.[39]

Radicalization might also be the product of temperament, another cognitive function. According to Victoroff, having an aggressive personality has been discredited as a trait of terrorists, but thrill-seeking personalities may be associated with violent radicalization. Training to use weapons, clandestine meetings, and fighting are romantic and thrilling activities that captured terrorists have themselves described as particularly enjoyable. For a person with a thrill seeking personality, involvement in Sunni militant terrorism may fulfill their desire for exciting stimulus and risk.[40]

This author is not qualified to diagnose psychological disorders and generally avoids any such diagnosis. However, when assessing case studies for individual-level mechanisms of radicalization, this study looks for reports of a psychological disorder from family members or court records. Where this evidence was not available, this study looks for cases that stand out above others as having of obvious signs of traumatic life events, experiences, and a history of continued behavior as described above prior to radicalization. Some behavioral indicators include: self-loathing; multiple or desperate attempts to remake identity or associate with different sub-cultures; multiple or desperate attempts to pursue self-worth though social or political causes before radicalization; history of extreme low tolerance for different opinions or behaviors that often lead to arguments; or obsessive or desperate need to take risks and seek attention. While this list is not definitive, these behaviors should offer guidelines for identifying cases of individual radicalization.

As the aforementioned theories suggest, people who radicalized in part for internal reasons may be seeking self-worth or identity stabilization via attachment to a group or subculture. Religious conversion may offer such fulfillment. While converting to Islam by no measure equals radicalization, a convert with absolutist thinking may be attracted to the extremist ideology of Sunni militant movements. Similarly, a convert desperately seeking to belong or boost self-esteem might be an easy target for the same militant movements that claim to be an elite and enlightened vanguard of Islam. Therefore, it may be logical to conclude:

H_1: *Individual-level mechanisms or processes are more likely to affect the radicalization of Muslim converts than non-converts involved in Sunni militant terrorism.*

Group-Level Radicalization

The group level of radicalization focuses on the external social forces on a person. Rather than particular factors acting as catalysts for radicalization, group-level radicalization is a process of socialization. Social movement theory best describes radicalization at this level. Social movement theory can been viewed from two similar perspectives—a

top-down approach, which sees radicalization as a result of active recruitment from terrorist groups, and a horizontal approach, which views radical friends or family members within a person's social network as responsible for radicalizing the person.[41]

At the group-level, radicalization may occur when Sunni militant movements rationally and actively mobilize materials and supporters to sustain collective action.[42] These movements may build their own organizational capacity by radicalizing otherwise non-radical people or appropriating existing pools of supporters.[43] In the latter case, Sunni militant recruiters may attempt to violently radicalize Sunni Muslims who are already "extremists" in thinking, but not yet militant in action.[44]

To radicalize people, Sunni militant movements attach meanings to problems and offer solutions for change. Movements use "framing" to construct and propagate meanings for grievances, and show their capacity to successfully offer solutions for change.[45] "'Frames refer to an individual's world view or 'schemata of interpretation,' consisting of values and beliefs about the world, attributes of things, and mechanisms of causation."[46] The goal of the movement is "frame alignment"—to link the movement's grievances, goals, and ideology to the individual, so that the two worldviews are congruent.[47]

Once frame alignment occurs, Sunni militant movements socialize the person to the movement's culture and identity. The "[socialization] process alters the person's values so that self-interest is defined in accordance with the goals and ideology of the movement."[48] As recruits learn more about the movement and continue the socialization process, they adopt the group's ideology as their own identity.[49]

In practice, there may be a number of indicators which suggest that a person radicalized at the group level: contact with a radical charismatic leader or recruiter; association with a radical clique at a mosque or other hangout with ties to a Sunni militant movement; a radical friend or family member with ties to a Sunni militant movement; or connection to Sunni militants on the Internet. This list of indicators is not conclusive, but similar relationships and behavior may point to radicalization at the group level.

The common denominator in group-level radicalization is that there must be some social connection with someone else who is radical. It requires a radical member of the community or mosque, a friend or a family member, an associate online, or a terrorist recruiter who operates in these social networks to frame the movement's narrative. It seems logical that a non-convert would have many more connections within Muslim social networks, and therefore a greater chance of meeting a radical Muslim, than a convert who may be new to the community and is not likely to have many Muslim friends or family members. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that:

H_2: *Group-level radicalization is more likely to affect non-converts than converts.*

Mass-Level Radicalization

Mass-level radicalization mechanisms are external forces on society. In this level, radicalization is the direct result of real or perceived experiences. Oppression is one mass-level factor that may lead to radicalization. Victoroff notes that many militants "cite injustices of their treatment by governments that rob them of their identity, dignity, security and freedoms as their motive for joining a terrorist group."[50] In the United States, racism, police brutality, and discrimination or increased scrutiny of Muslims under the guise of counterterrorism may evoke such feelings and drive radicalization.[51]

The grievances associated with mass-level theories are largely held to be necessary but insufficient drivers of radicalization;[52] however, this category of theories is important for

the study because the research design shows which other levels of analysis, in conjunction with mass-level factors, explain radicalization.

While freedom from oppression is much greater in the United States than in other countries, discrimination, racism, and law enforcement profiling and brutality still occur. Given the increased sense of fear and suspicion of Muslims in the United States following 9/11, people who appear to be from the Middle East, South Asia, or other areas in the Muslim world may experience more real or perceived discrimination than other groups. Therefore it may be logical to conclude that:

H_3: *Mass-level radicalization has more explanatory power for radicalization of non-converts than converts.*

Findings

While the primary objective of this study is to compare the radicalization of converts and non-converts, it also explores the causes of radicalization for homegrown Sunni terrorists in the United States overall. This section first presents the general findings for each level of analysis before offering findings that compare the mechanisms and processes of radicalization between converts and non-converts.

Individual-Level

Individual-level mechanisms and processes appear to be important for radicalization of homegrown Sunni militants in the United States. Out of the sample of 83 Sunni militants, 24 people or 29 percent of the cases displayed characteristics of individual-level radicalization. Individual mechanisms varied by case. Some radicals were clinically diagnosed with mental health disorders, many had histories of abuse and neglect resulting in significant self-esteem and identity issues, and others exhibited dichotomous thinking. A few had only minor signs of revenge seeking or narcissism.[53]

These findings support and expand on earlier findings from Quintan Wiktorowicz's 2005 study of homegrown radicalization in the United Kingdom. Wiktorowicz finds that many people who joined the radical Islamist group Al Muhajiroun experienced "cognitive openings" prior to radicalization. Wiktorowicz explains that traumatic personal experiences, such as an illness or the death of a close family member set into motion an introspective period of "religious seeking." When a person's "identity is tied in part to religion or he or she desired religious meaning, a cognitive opening may lead to religious seeking,"[54] which can make the person vulnerable to radicalization. However, the findings of this study expand on Wiktorowicz's in that it is not usually one particular incident that made a person susceptible to radicalization. Rather, it is often histories of many traumatic life experiences or mental or behavioral health issues prior to radicalization.[55]

For instance, Jamie Paulin-Ramirez, who planned to assassinate a Swedish cartoonist, seems to have turned to radical Islam to escape the reality of her troubled life. Paulin-Ramirez's mother explains that Jamie was "the kid in the class everyone picked on and made fun of."[56] Another family friend notes: "She's a lady that appears to have had a very sad and troubled life."[57] After three husbands, one an illegal Mexican immigrant who was deported and another who beat and abused her, her mother explained that Jamie was very lonely, had withdrawn from friends and family, and had become addicted to the Internet. She began visiting radical Islamist websites, talking about *Jihad*, and eventually converted to Islam. Through the Internet, Jamie met and married an Algerian man living in Ireland.

Irish authorities arrested Pauline-Ramirez for the assassination plot after moving to Ireland to live with her husband.[58]

Similarly, radical Islam appears to have filled a void in Michael Finton's low self-esteem. Finton lived a rough life, growing up in foster care and spending five years in prison for aggravated robbery and assault. Despite being well liked by others, he said that he hated himself and thought of himself as a "moron and a freak."[59] A Muslim man who knew Finton notes that after he converted to Islam, Finton became eager to discuss religion and "made exuberant efforts to form a bond" with people who he thought were Muslim.[60] After returning from a trip to Saudi Arabia, Finton began talking about how much he hated "permissive" American society and voice his desire to become a martyr. FBI agents later arrested Finton for planning to bomb a federal building.[61]

In other cases, individual-level mechanisms are present, but are less pronounced and may have less to do with radicalization. For example, after Daniel Boyd's father, a career U.S. Marine Corps officer, left his family, Boyd along with his mother and siblings lived in destitution. Years later, Boyd led a group of radicals to plan an attack on the U.S. Marine base in Quantico, VA.[62] One might speculate that Boyd's radicalization is the result of revenge seeking against the Marines for his father's absence. Mohammad Reza,[i] who attempted to run over students at the University of North Carolina, is known as a "loner" and has a history of attention seeking.[63] He constantly argued with teachers, liked to show off and take extreme risks by recklessly driving his car in front of others.[64] After his arrest, Reza sent over 30 letters to the university newspaper explaining his attacks on the students. Reza's behavior may suggest that he has a desperate need for attention or risk taking.[65]

This study's findings on individual-level radicalization also appear to contrast with firmly held beliefs about the rationality of the terrorist mind-set. Attempting to debunk the popularly held belief that terrorists are crazy or lunatic, terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman writes: "The terrorist is fundamentally a *violent intellectual*, prepared to use and indeed committed to using force in the attainment of his goals."[66] Victoroff further explains that several studies of terrorists, including left-wing German organizations, Algerian nationalists, Irish Republicans, and Hezbollah, show that terrorists do not usually exhibit Axis I or Axis II psychiatric disorders (Schizophrenia or Anti-social Personality disorder [APD]).[67]

While international terrorists, as Hoffman and others have argued, may be intelligent, rational, and calculated, many homegrown Sunni militants in the United States have psychological disorders or are of low intelligence. James Elshafay was rejected from the U.S. Army for being "disturbed;"[68] Jose Padilla's psychologist testified that he suffers from a personality disorder;[69] Hosam Smadi is a schizophrenic with dissociative personality disorder;[70] Laguerre Payen is a schizophrenic known to keep jars of urine around his house;[71] Mohamad Alessa, who has seen a psychiatrist since he was six years old for uncontrollable violent behavior, has an unidentified psychological disorder;[72] and Matin Siraj has an IQ of 78 and has "significantly limited analytical skills."[73] This group, representing seven percent of homegrown Sunni militants in the study, is not the epitome of rational political activists or violent intellectuals seeking idealism. Rather, these people, along with several others who are not diagnosed with disorders, but are suicidal or known for their dull intellect, may be pursuing pathological behavior or causes that they cannot understand or control.[74]

Again, while this author makes no attempt to diagnose the mental health of any of the cases in this study, it is interesting to note that similar personal behavior exhibited by homegrown Sunni militants in the United States is experienced at a much lower rate among the

[i]Although Reza is reported to be Shiite, he is included in this study because he appears to have adopted a Sunni militant ideology.

general population. For instance, Borderline Personality Disorder, "characterized by pervasive instability in moods, interpersonal relationships, self-image, and behavior . . . [which] often disrupts family and work life, long-term planning, and the individual's sense of self-identity," only affects about 2 percent of adults.[75] Similarly, anti-social personality disorder and schizophrenia only occurs in about 1–3 percent of the general population.[76]

Group-Level Radicalization

Group-level processes are the most significant mechanism for radicalization of both convert and non-convert homegrown Sunni militants in the United States. This study finds that 77 of 83 Sunni militants or 93 percent of the cases display indications of group-level radicalization. The cases indicate three types of group radicalization: top-down radicalization via movement recruiters, top-down by online intermediaries, and horizontal radicalization through social networks.

Top-down recruitment via movement recruiters refers to instances where someone with ties to a Sunni militant organization actively seeks to meet and violently radicalize people. There are 33 cases of this type of group radicalization, but at least five examples stand out as significant because of the number of people radicalized.

In two cases recruitment appears to have started online. In 2009, a Taliban recruiter known only as "Saifullah" contacted one of five young men from Northern Virginia after Ahmed Abdullah Minni began posting radical comments on YouTube.[77] Apparently, based on this connection, the men traveled to Pakistan and were arrested at a house connected to the Al Qaeda–linked Jaish-e-Muhammad. The five men planned attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan.[78] Similarly, Syed Haris Ahmed and Ehsanul Islam Sadequee initially appear to have made contact with known terrorists online—including the known Sunni Militant propagandist Younis Tsouli (Irhabbi007)—before traveling to Canada to meet with two other known terrorists in person. After the meeting, Ahmed explained, "He became 'inspired' by others who wanted to launch attacks." While these men are clearly radical in thinking, recruiters appear to have enticed them to take the next step into violent action by traveling to meet other terrorists.[79]

In the other three cases, Sunni militant recruiters met people in person, often through a mosque, and slowly radicalized them together. In the case of the Virginia Jihad Network, Ali al-Timimi, who studied under one of Osama bin Laden's spiritual leaders in Saudi Arabia, met 11 men at the Dar al-Arqam mosque in Falls Church, Virginia. Al-Timimi encouraged the men to train and fight *Jihad*. With al-Timimi's urging, several of the men traveled to Pakistan to train with Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT).[80] Similarly, Kemal Derwish, a *mujahidin* fighter in Afghanistan, began preaching *Jihad* in at his apartment in Lakawana, New York. Through his teachings, Derwish radicalized and mobilized six men to attend terrorist training camps in Afghanistan.[81] Finally, in the Portland Seven case, Jordanian *jihadist* Habis Abdulla Al Saoub appears to have directed the group toward terrorism.[82]

These findings also support earlier social movement theory radicalization studies in two important ways. First, Jyett Klausen finds in a study of radicalization in the United Kingdom that 80 percent "of the 350 in the U.K. dataset belonged to a shared network that can be traced to one or more of four sheiks."[83] Similarly, the five recruiters described above represent over 30 percent of the radicalized people in the sample of 83 Sunni militants. Second, Donatella Della Porta and Quintan Wiktorowicz note the importance of social connections to a movement and a charismatic and credible leader in reaching "frame alignment" and ultimately radicalization in studies of other populations.[84] In several cases in this study friends and family introduced people to radical movements. Moreover, reports of

al-Timimi and Derwish suggest that their reputation for knowledge of Islam and charismatic personalities were very attractive to their recruits.[85]

Top-down radicalization also occurs via Internet intermediaries.[86] These cases, where people seek the teachings of radical clerics or militant propagandists online, are the least prevalent mode of radicalization with only 11 cases. In most cases, interaction between the person radicalizing and the cleric is minimal. Usually the radicalizing person only visits the website to download videos, audios, or writings. Therefore, this type of radicalization is often called "self-radicalization" due to the passive nature of the cleric's role in the radicalization. However passive the transfer of radical beliefs and knowledge, the radical websites are ultimately the result of active propaganda efforts by militant movements. Anwar al-Awlaki is one example of an influential intermediary for this type of radicalization among homegrown Sunni militants in the United States.[87] While some of his followers later made face-to-face contacts with other militants, others like Paul and Nadia Rockwood, Zachary Chesser, and Hassan Nidal had few other outside influences in their radicalization.

Horizontal radicalization is also a significant mechanism for both converts and non-converts. In 35 cases, people were radicalized by groups of friends, family members, or other social contacts. In this study horizontal radicalization usually works hand-in-hand with other forms of group radicalization. Often one person in the social network has a connection to an outside radical or online radical intermediary prior to radicalizing his or her friends or family members. The Jamiyyat Ul-Islam Is-Saheeh (JIS) and the Newburgh Four are two cases where groups radicalized together with little outside influence.[88]

Mass-Level Radicalization

Mass-level mechanisms do not affect radicalization to any noticeable degree. While many militants in this study cited mass-level factors such as oppression of Muslims around the world, this study disregarded most as post-radical rhetoric. Mass-level factors only appear in seven cases pre-radicalization. Only one person is solely affected by mass-level factors. Six cases involve perceived feelings of racism, and in one case, a man claims he is affected by CIA drone strikes in his ancestral home in Pakistan.[89]

Hasan Akbar and Hasan Nidal appear to be the most affected by mass-level factors. After 9/11 both men felt extreme oppression as Arab or African-American Muslims in the U.S. military.[90] Akbar kept a computer journal for 13 years in which he ranted about racial oppression in the military and his plans to kill soldiers as a result.[91]

A lack of mass-level radicalizing factors suggests that there are differences between radicalization in the United States and Europe. Wiktorowicz notes that feelings of social alienation due to racism, blocked social mobility, or economic hardship are important factors in creating cognitive openings in his study in the United Kingdom.[92] Yet very few cases of radicalization in the United States appear to involve such external pressures despite Gallup polls that find over 40 percent of Americans hold prejudices against Muslims[93] and nearly 60 percent of Americans believe that racism against African Americans is pervasive.[94]

Multiple Levels of Radicalization

In nearly all cases where individual-level mechanisms are present in radicalization, group-level processes are also evident (19 of 24). This phenomenon suggests that individual-level factors alone are not sufficient mechanisms for radicalization. Again, this finding fits with Wiktorowicz's study of Al-Muhajiroun, which argues that both a "cognitive opening" (an individual-level factor) and framing/socialization (group-level processes) are required for

radicalization. In other words, a person with a life crisis leading to a cognitive opening is not likely to radicalize unless other radicals introduce him or her to radical messages.[95]

There are only four cases of individual-level radicalization without the presence of group-level factors. Interestingly, in two such cases both people—Kevin James and Daniel Boyd—were leaders who horizontally radicalized others within their group. Additionally, the individual-level factors present in both Boyd and James are not severe. Boyd may to be driven by revenge while James has some narcissistic tendencies. In the other two cases, Hosam Smadi and Mohammad Reza are known to be loners. Smadi also had severe clinically diagnosed psychological disorders.

Convert versus Non-Convert

The mechanisms and processes for radicalization of Muslim converts and non-converts do appear to differ. The most significant difference is at the individual level. From the sample of 83 radicalized Sunni militants, 32 are Muslim converts. While 19 of the 32 converts display individual-level mechanisms of radicalization, only five non-converts are affected by individual-level radicalization. In other words, radicalization is at least in part due to individual-level factors in 59 percent of converts as compared to only 10 percent of non-converts.

One explanation for this large difference is that the data may be biased. Media reporting on converts more often focuses on the person's life prior to radicalization. Family and friends of converts may be more available to talk with the media because they likely live in the United States. Conversely, friends and family of non-converts may live outside of the United States. Terrorism and radicalization is also very sensitive in the Muslim-American community. Therefore, non-converts may be less willing to speak with the media and not as much of the radicalized person's life is known. Yet, even granting a wide margin of error, the difference between converts and non-converts is still evident.

There is no significant discrepancy between converts and non-converts regarding the presence of group-level processes of radicalization. About 90 percent of converts and 94 percent of non-converts experience group-level radicalization. This finding suggests that for non-converts, group-level processes are both necessary and sufficient for radicalization.

Converts and non-converts also experience mass-level mechanisms differently. Mass-level issues affected five non-converts and only two converts. While all almost instances of mass-level factors involve racism, Randal Royer, a convert, is the only person of European descent to be affected by mass-level radicalization. Royer converted to Islam in 1992 after the Rodney King incident noting that Islam was attractive because it did not consider race or nationality. His perceptions of racism increased after his conversion due to his Muslim dress.[96] Yet, mass-level factors do not wholly matter for either case, because they are additionally affected by group-level radicalization.

Policy Implications and Lessons

The results of this study are both good and bad news for thwarting homegrown terrorism in the United States. The finding that convert homegrown Sunni militants in the United States are largely driven by a wide range of internal mechanisms does not leave many options for policymakers to address the radicalization of this group. At the same time, understanding that radicalization for both converts and non-converts is for the most part the result of recruitment by movements or radical friends and family members makes it possible to be addressed through law enforcement, intelligence, and community policies.

The combating of violent radicalization in the United States faces a number of challenges. Most difficult is that violent radicalization appears to be the end result of a longer process of ideological radicalization. In other words, a person's ideas radicalize before their actions. Therefore, the U.S. Constitution protects a large portion of the radicalization process. Moreover, very few people who have radical ideas or speak radical words will continue on to commit violent acts. Many people walk the line between violent speech and actions. Watching videos of terrorist attacks and expressing ideological support for such violence is not illegal in the United States. Therefore, law enforcement and intelligence agencies must learn if and when a person will cross the line from radical ideas to violence if they are to proactively counter terrorism.[97]

There may not be many policy options to prevent converts from attempting to join radical movements or groups. Their desire to fit in or feel self-worth seems to predispose some to seek out radicalization. However, as the results of this study show, individual motivators are only part of the radicalization equation and are not themselves sufficient mechanisms of radicalization. The other more important factor of radicalization—group processes—offers many more opportunities to interdict the radicalization process.

Promising, proactive policies are being pursued in the area of increased cooperation and engagement between law enforcement and the Muslim community. One model is the Muslim Community Affairs unit of the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department. This program offers outreach to the Muslim community, including training on hate crimes and youth gangs, as well as a group which seeks to address issues of concern among Muslim youth in Los Angeles.[98]

Engagement programs might help to mend ties with the Muslim community, which may be suspicious of law enforcement. Through such community outreach programs, law enforcement can educate members of the community on the signs and indicators of radicalization or the presence of an outside recruiter and how the community can cooperate with law enforcement on these issues.[99]

There are several other programs in which U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies work with leaders in the Muslim community to share information. Based on these relationships, some Muslim leaders have regularly denounced terrorism and reported suspicious activity to law enforcement. According to Attorney General Eric Holder, as of May 2010, sixteen terrorist plots were disrupted due to the help of the Muslim-American community.[100]

Building relationships between government agencies and the Muslim community is especially important for disrupting group-level radicalization. Local Muslim leaders know their communities well and may recognize signs of group radicalization or the presence of terrorist recruiters and can alert authorities. As Neumann and Rogers explain, self-policing and counternarratives from moderate Muslim community leaders has helped to keep terrorist recruiters out of some communities. Therefore, authoritative figures in the Muslim community may be able to offer effective counternarratives against extremism.[101]

Most importantly, community outreach programs are inexpensive and uncontroversial. Unlike de-radicalization or counterideology programs, which may require large numbers of highly trained experts and may be suspected as ideological re-education, community outreach programs only involve a few law enforcement officers developing trusting relationships in the community—an activity that should already be part of normal police–community relations.

The realization that mass-level factors play very little role in radicalization in the United States also has significant policy implications. Overall, poverty, perceived oppression, or social alienation are not driving factors in radicalization in the United States. Therefore,

while equality, professional policing, and the reduction of poverty may be good policies for society as a whole, programs that target such factors may not be effective to prevent radicalization. Rather, money may be better spent on targeted law enforcement and intelligence operations or community outreach as a tool to collect intelligence and inoculate people against recruiters and radical networks.

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Appendix A
US homegrown Sunni militants

Name	Convert	Individual	Group	Mass
Mohamud, Mohamed Osman	no		yes	
Ahmed Farooque, Ahmed	no		yes	
Shehadeh, Abdel Hameed	no		yes	
Hammami, Omar	yes	yes	yes	
Masri, Shaker	no	yes	yes	
Chesser, Zachary	yes	yes	yes	
Rockwood, Paul	yes		yes	
Alessa, Mohamed	no	yes	yes	
Almonte, Carlos	yes	yes	yes	
Shahzad, Faisal	no		yes	yes
Larose, Colleen	yes	yes	yes	
Paulin-Ramirez, Jamie	yes	yes	yes	
Chaudhry, Uman	no		yes	
Zamzam, Ramy	no		yes	
Minni, Ammad A.	no		yes	
Khan, Waqar	no		yes	
Yemer, Aman Hassan	no		yes	
Ahmed, Shirwa	no		yes	
Hasan, Nidal Malik	no		yes	yes
Maldonado, Daniel	yes	yes	yes	
Smadi, Hosam	no	yes		
Finton, Michael	yes	yes	yes	
Zazi, Najibulla	no		yes	
Ahmedzay, Zarein	no		yes	
El Shurijuma, Adnan	no		yes	
Boyd, Daniel Patrick	yes	yes		
Sherifi, Hysen	no		yes	
Subasic, Anes	no		yes	
Boyd, Zachariya	no		yes	
Hasan, Mohammad Omar Aly	no		yes	
Yagi, Zyad	no		yes	
Abdulhakim, Mohammad	yes		yes	
Cromite, James	yes	yes	yes	
Williams, David	yes	yes	yes	
Williams, Onta	yes	yes	yes	
Payen, Laguerre	yes	yes	yes	
Vinas, Neal Bryant	yes	yes	yes	
Shnewer, Mohamad Ibrahim	no		yes	
Duka, Dritan	no		yes	
Duka, Eljvir	no		yes	
Duka, Shain	no		yes	
Tartar, Serdar	no		yes	

(Continued on next page)

Appendix A *(Continued)*

Name	Convert	Individual	Group	Mass
Shareef, Derrick	yes		yes	yes
Williams, Kobie Diallo	yes		yes	
Batiste, Narseal	yes	yes		
Abraham, Patrick	yes		yes	
Phanor, Stanley Grant	yes		yes	
Augustin, Burson	yes		yes	
Augustine, Rotschild	yes		yes	
Sadequee, Ehsanul Islam	no		yes	
Ahmed, Syed Haris	no		yes	
Taheri-Azar, Mohammed Reza	no	yes		
James, Kevin	yes	yes		
Washington, Levar	yes	yes	yes	
Patterson, Gregory	yes		yes	
Samana, Hammad	no		yes	
Hayat, Umer	no		yes	
Hayat, Hamid	no		yes	
Siraj, Shahawar Matin	no	yes	yes	yes
Elshafay, James	yes	yes	yes	
Faris, Iyman	no		yes	
Abu Ali, Ahmed Omar	no		yes	
al-Timimi, Ali	no		yes	yes
Chandia, Ali Asad	no		yes	
Khan, Masaud	no		yes	
Chapman, Seifullah	yes		yes	
Royer, Randall	yes		yes	yes
Hasan, Khwaja Mahmood	no		yes	
Abdur-Raheem, Hammad	no		yes	
Akbar, Hasan	no			yes
Alwan, Sahim	no		yes	
Goba, Yahya	no		yes	
Mosed, Shafal	no		yes	
Taher, Yasein	no		yes	
Galab, Faysal	no		yes	
al-Bakri, Mukhtar	no		yes	
Padilla, Jose	yes	yes	yes	
Ford, Patrice Lumumba	yes		yes	
Bilal, Ahmed Ibrahim	no		yes	
Bilal, Muhammad Ibrahim	no		yes	
Battle, Jeffrey Leon	yes	yes	yes	
Hawash, Maher	no		yes	
Lewis, October Martinique	yes		yes	