

# Radicalization: Social Media and the Rise of Terrorism

Walter Purdy

October 28, 2015

Testimony presented before the House Committee on Oversight and  
Government Reform's Subcommittee on National Security

**Walter Purdy  
Terrorism Research Center Inc.**

**Radicalization: Social Media and the Rise of Terrorism**

**Before the Subcommittee on National Security  
United States House of Representatives**

**October 28, 2015**

Chairman DeSantis, Ranking Member Lynch, distinguished members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify on this important issue. These issues are of the utmost importance for our country's security not only today, but in the future. My remarks will focus on the concept of radicalization and the Homegrown Violent Extremist. I will touch on the constant themes by certain mentors for those who have become radicalized to undertake violent actions or travel abroad to wage jihad. Lastly, I look forward to providing an overview of the challenges associated with radicalization, the use of social media by terrorists and how Homegrown Violent Extremists (HVEs) posed the United States a growing threat.

**Radicalization and the Homegrown Violent Extremist**

Radicalization takes many forms. There is no single pathway for someone to become radicalized. Brian Jenkins, speaking at one of the Terrorism Research Center's training programs stated that "radicalization as a whole is a process of adopting for oneself or inculcating in others a commitment not only to a system of beliefs, but to their imposition on the rest of society." Individuals here in the United States have been identified, manipulated, motivated and radicalized to undertake activities that have run the spectrum from raising money, providing material support, travel to fight jihad, to plotting operations in the United States.

Many of those radicalized have associated themselves with a spiritual mentor. This individual might be someone educated in the religion or even someone with more religious experience than the convert. Some mentors might be from a mosque or might be accessed via the internet. Major

Nidal Hasan, the Ft. Hood shooter exchanged more than a dozen emails with Anwar al-Awlaki. American citizens, Anwar al-Awlaki and Adam Yahye Gadahn have both radicalize and recruited others for jihad. Virtual mentors have communicated with potential recruits and others deliver their message by audio tapes, books, videos, websites, blogs, chatrooms, and forums. Some of the more popular have included Abu Musab al Suri, Anwar al-Awlaki, Abu Basir al-Tartousi, Sheih Omar Bakri, Sheikh Abu Mohammad al-Maqdisi and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Adam Gadahn, in a propaganda video stated “I advise every brother who wants to work for this religion not to undertake any action before taking advantage of the wide range of resources available today on the internet. Particularly, the various manuals, encyclopedias and courses which deal with the mujahideen operational and electronic security and security in general.

The United States faces challenges from Homegrown Violent Extremists (HVEs) who have been radicalized to launch attacks here or to travel abroad for jihad.

Marc Sageman, in his book, *Understanding Terror Networks* stated that “The virtual community is no longer tied to any nation, a condition that corresponds to the mythical umma of Salafism, which specifically rejects nationalism and fosters the global Salafi jihad priority of fighting against the ‘far enemy’ rather than the ‘near enemy’”.

Whether the individual has been radicalized by another person or self-radicalized there is a body of work that we have seen often in the process that has incited them to undertake a path of violence. Mohammad Youssef Abdulazeez had downloaded audio recordings of Anwar al-Awlaki.

Al-Qaeda has used English speaking propagandists like Anwar al-Awlaki and Adam Yahye Gadahn to radicalize and recruit individuals for jihad. ISIS has a constant social media campaign aimed at English speaking individuals that includes its slick, glossy, and colorful magazine entitled DABIQ. ISIS in “The Return of Khilafah” (DABIQ, Issue 1) seeks to expand its recruiting by putting out a call for “All Muslim Doctors, Engineers, Scholars and Specialists.” Most terrorist recruiting efforts have focused on recruiting young fighters but here they are seeking others with special skills. Special skills are evident in the propaganda campaign being waged against the west by ISIS from the technical skills used to create the high tech videos, editing their colorful targeted magazine and their campaign style social media blitz.

While the concepts of radicalization and recruitment have changed with ISIS' use of social media certain themes have been used by other terrorists groups in the past. The Salafi ideology that we have seen Anwar al-Awlaki (AQAP) and ISIS use is a driver that motivates young men to carry out violent acts of terrorism. ISIS has used the internet and social media as an enabler, providing a medium familiar to their targeted audience seeking the path of radicalization.

We have seen works like *Millat (Path) Ibrahim* by Abu Mohammad al-Maqdisi, *Ma 'alim fi Tariq (Milestones)* by Sayyid Qutb, *The Call to Global Jihad* by Abu Musab al Suri, and *Constants on the Path of Jihad* by Anwar al-Awlaki are just some of the resources that ISIS and other terrorist groups have used in the radicalization of terrorists.

Today, the danger we face is that anyone with a smart phone or internet connection can be radicalized here in the United States. Jihadi social media will continue to increase and has become one of the major weapons in ISIS' arsenal. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, chatrooms, blogs, messaging systems and numerous other social media platforms project the adventure and glorify the violent actions undertaken by fighters and martyrs as ISIS seeks others to follow in their footsteps.

We have seen too many individuals that have been radicalized and traveled overseas seeking to wage jihad. Moner Mohammad Abusalha from Ft. Pierce, Florida was radicalized and traveled to Syria where he became the first American suicide bomber in Syria. Shirwa Ahmed from Minneapolis traveled to Somalia where he became the first American suicide bomber there. A young man from Daphne, Alabama traveled and fought with the Al-Shabaab in Somalia. Omar Hammami made numerous videos and a rap song seeking to inspire other Americans to follow in his footsteps. The true number of Americans that have traveled to Iraq and Syria to fight is unknown. But we are constantly seeing the FBI and law enforcement identify those "stinging" some of these who are seeking to join and provide material support for ISIS and other terrorist groups.

The threat in the near future is that the United States could face a new generation of jihadists who make up part of the "Syrian-Iraqi Alumni." These individuals having traveled overseas, fought with ISIS or other terrorist groups could return to the United States with skillsets and connections that give them a capability to undertake terrorist operations within the United States.

The Terrorism Research Center has trained thousands of law enforcement, military and intelligence officers and the threat now and in the near future continues to grow. We need to do more to equip law enforcement and our communities to understand and be able to identify this growing threat. James Comey, the Director of the FBI was on point when he stated “We have a very hard task” attempting to identify and interdict individuals inspired to launch terrorist attacks in the United States. But families of those radicalized often pick up on the changes of the person but don’t realize what they are seeing until it is often too late. Even with some intelligence or information about a person one can never know with certainty whether the individual will mobilize to violence once radicalized. The recent attack in Garland, Texas in May 2015 is a clear example of the task that law enforcement in the United States faces every day.

Even law enforcement has been targeted. On October 23, 2014, Zale Thompson, attacked four New York City Police Officers with an ax. On Facebook, Thompson had posted “Which is better, to sit around and do nothing or to wage jihad.” The threat will only continue. The United States has always been able to solve complex problems. I look forward to exploring some of the things we can do to counter the message that terrorist groups like ISIS is espousing and how working within our communities and with law enforcement we can communicate the ideas and concepts that have made America great. No ideology can compete with that.

**Walter Purdy**  
**President**  
**Terrorism Research Center**

Walter Purdy is the President of the Terrorism Research Center (TRC), a Virginia based company that seeks to provide the best professional practices in dealing with terrorism, global issues, contemporary operating environments, asymmetrical warfare and insurgencies. TRC provides cutting edge counterterrorism research, analysis and training.

Mr. Purdy is an Adjunct Professor with the Criminology, Law and Society Department of George Mason University where he teaches Law Enforcement and Homeland Security, Introduction to Homeland Security and Use of Force Issues.

Mr. Purdy has also undertaken a number of special research projects to include: *Faces of Terrorism: Connecting the Data Points, Worldwide Study of Truck Bombings, From Munich to Manhattan and Beyond: Lessons Learned From Thirty Years of Terrorism, Emerging Threats to the United States: The Tri-Border Region, Global Study of Suicide Bombers and Attacks, The Lion Cubs: Terrorism Travel, The Hunter and the Prey: Omar Sheikh and Daniel Pearl, Europe's Elusive Terrorist Organization: 17 November, Profiles of the Taliban Leadership, Understanding the Haqqanis: How the Haqqani's View the Region, The Kidnapping Project-Captivity, Hostage-Taking and Kidnapping and others.*

He created and directs the Terrorism Research Center's Training and Special Projects Division. Mr. Purdy has trained thousands of military, law enforcement and intelligence personnel. He has traveled extensively to the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Asia. Mr. Purdy created and directs the "Mirror Image: Training to Combat Terrorism" which has placed specialized law enforcement, military and intelligence operatives designed to give operatives an understanding of terrorist training, tactics, techniques and procedures by allowing them to walk in the shoes of the terrorist.