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# Facing Homegrown Radicalization

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Last month, Kamal Hassan, a Somali-American living in Minnesota, pled guilty to training and fighting with al-Shabab, an al-Qaeda-linked terrorist group in Somalia. In July, two other Somali-Americans in Minnesota pled guilty to similar charges, with the FBI continuing to investigate more than a dozen others who may have traveled from the United States to Somalia. The FBI also recently arrested seven individuals in North Carolina on terrorism-related charges, including one who had spent time in Afghan training camps. These and other recent events have raised new concerns in the United States about the threat of homegrown radicalization. As U.S. attorney general Eric Holder acknowledged in a July speech, the "whole notion of radicalization is something that did not loom as large a few months ago...as it does now." While the U.S. government has focused primarily on Europe as a source of potential terrorists, Washington should also look to the continent as a model in confronting homegrown radicalization.

**A Troubling Phenomenon**

During his first major speech in July, White House counterterrorism advisor John Brennan provided an overview of the current administration's approach to protecting American citizens from violent extremism and terrorism. Although Brennan emphasized President Barack Obama's new partnership with Muslim communities and the administration's commitment to defeating al-Qaeda's capacities overseas, little was said about homegrown Islamist radicalization. This fundamental issue has long been downplayed by U.S. federal authorities and counterterrorism experts, who believe that Muslims and Arabs are generally better integrated into U.S. society -- as opposed to their counterparts in European society -- and are thus less vulnerable to the al-Qaeda narrative.

Homegrown radicalization has now returned to the spotlight after the watershed Somali cases. Court hearings have revealed that Islamist leaders approached most of the Minneapolis recruits and urged them to attend clandestine meetings where they were persuaded to travel to Somalia and become part of the local armed insurgency. Most troublingly, however, is that a number of the Somali-Americans who joined al-Shabab suffer from identity and integration issues similar to those of radicalized youth in Europe. Until now, the United States had seemingly been immune from this particular phenomenon.

**Building on Europe's Lessons**

Although American policymakers have long worried that Islamists radicalized in Europe would attack the United States, Washington can learn valuable lessons from Europe in addressing the challenge of homegrown radicalization. Consider, for example, some of the measures undertaken in France. Although the internal dynamics nurturing radicalization in France and the United States differ significantly, comparable trends exist. The impact of socioeconomic deprivation, political alienation, and identity issues as vehicles of radical narratives -- a factor that looms large in the Somali-American cases -- appears to be a common pattern. The malaise experienced by nonintegrated second- and third-generation immigrants, as well as the lack of educational and professional prospects for young people, has nurtured homegrown radicalization in France. While this phenomenon is far less widespread in the United States, the recent Somali cases indicate that it is

occurring, at least to some extent.

France's law enforcement and intelligence efforts have been fairly far reaching and certainly go beyond what might be politically acceptable in the United States. French counterterrorism magistrates have frequently used their preventive detention powers to target individuals suspected of inciting violence, incarcerating some and deporting others. In 2004, for example, a wave of French prosecutions targeted radical imams and included the deportation of Chelali Benchellali, the Salafist imam of Venissieux's now famous mosque -- an act that would certainly have been more controversial in the United States.

France has also prosecuted a number of its citizens after they returned home from jihadist activities overseas -- a move the United States is now taking in the Somali cases as well. In May 2008, for instance, France condemned and jailed members of a Parisian network of jihadists recruited by young Salafi imam Farid Benyettou to fight in Iraq. Court hearings showed how Benyettou, a French citizen of Algerian background, managed to radicalize a group of men in 2003 through private readings of online Islamist propaganda and vehement anti-American rhetoric.

Following the massive riots of 2005 -- which witnessed the uprising of deprived multiethnic youth in French suburbs -- France has been forced to acknowledge the necessity of coupling its often harsh police methods with greater social dialogue and political engagement. After his election in 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy made ethnoreligious discrimination one of his top priorities. As such, he appointed Rachida Dati as the minister of justice, the first individual of North African/Muslim origin to access a top cabinet position.

In addition, France has undertaken efforts to better understand the ideological motivations of Islamists. Monitoring and counterradicalization programs have been implemented in the French prison system, historically a crucible for radical ideology and recruitment. Interestingly, official sources indicate that many American homegrown Islamists have also been radicalized while incarcerated, including the members of the prison-formed Jamiyat al-Islam al-Sahih cell in California that was convicted in 2007 for its plans to attack not only synagogues but also the Israeli consulate in Los Angeles. Indeed, prisons provide an ideal place for radicalizing the young and disenchanted in search of a sense of belonging and importance. Within the prison setting, Islam has the added appeal of addressing feelings of inequality and injustice. Fresh converts are protected by fellow inmates and accepted into a new world where the slate is wiped clean. Radicalization often occurs very quickly in this setting, and it is only recently that the Federal Bureau of Prisons has pushed for an increased and systematic monitoring of radical material in U.S. prisons. To their credit, however, U.S. authorities have lately engaged in enhanced cooperation with France regarding prison issues, such as the training of Muslim chaplains.

**Conclusion**

Information regarding Islamist radicalization in America currently remains limited, and recent developments should therefore serve as a clear warning. Already, the Obama administration is favoring a new approach that shifts from exclusively military options to increased law enforcement and intelligence efforts. Much remains to be done, however, and while U.S. policies are still mainly focused on defeating al-Qaeda's narrative and capacities overseas, dealing with radicals at home might prove all the more critical. Since al-Qaeda is evolving into a "franchise" operation, homegrown recruits could become the most serious threat to the United States. The phenomenon has become all the more worrying in light of many recent attempts by U.S. extremists to link up with foreign Islamist movements and inscribe their struggle at a global level.

In addressing homegrown radicalization, the French experience could provide the Obama administration with policy inspiration. France, although not a parallel model -- especially since it is still addressing the pervasive discontent of poorly integrated Muslim populations -- has witnessed no terrorist attack since the 1990s. Its success in handling the grassroots Islamist phenomenon has resulted from effective interagency coordination and the establishment of specific legal provisions and structures charged with the antiterrorist struggle. Figuring out ways to replicate this in the United States, including the possibility of establishing separate

counterterrorism courts, would be an important step forward.

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