



room for policy makers to evaluate the problem effectively and develop thoughtful, moderated, and narrowly-tailored responses that protect both our security and our values (p. 9).

Coming as it does during a fevered and divisive national debate over the appropriateness of building mosques and Islamic cultural centers in the United States and threats to burn Korans, it is not surprising that the report's release produced such polarizing and sensationalist news headlines as, "Report calls immigrants and domestic Muslims a terror threat in U.S. in Twin Cities: Front Lines of Homegrown Terror Fight" and "U.S. Has 'No Strategy' to Confront Homegrown Terror, Study Finds."³ The purpose of this review is to identify how the report's methodological and factual errors skew its analysis, so that clearer, more balanced and more effective policy outcomes can be achieved. Policy makers should examine the many government assessments, academic studies and policy papers cited in this review, but unfortunately ignored in the BPC report, to gain a more objective and balanced understanding of the terrorist threat to the United States and the appropriate responses.

Conflicting Messages

The report's authors affirm the empirical evidence showing that al Qaeda's strength and capabilities have diminished due to years of war, the loss of a safe haven and reduced support in the Muslim world, and declare that they are in fact at their weakest point since 9/11 (p.3). The long-feared possibility of terrorists using weapons of mass destruction or "dirty bombs" also appears to have been overblown, according to their analysis and testimony (p. 4).⁴ Nonetheless, the report argues that the terrorist threat to the U.S. is "intensifying" because "new" enemy tactics make al Qaeda more complex and diverse, and any one of an array of terrorist "allies" could still carry out attacks that "would kill dozens, or even hundreds, of Americans" in a single blow (executive summary). In a press conference releasing the report, one of the report's authors amplified this theme, warning that recent acts of violence involving Muslim Americans were not isolated individual events, but rather "part of a broader strategy, embraced by our

³ Phil Stewart, Report calls immigrants and domestic Muslims a terror threat in U.S. Washington Post, (Sept., 11, 2010), at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/09/10/AR2010091006958.html>; James Walsh and Bob Von Sternberg, Twin Cities: Front Lines of Homegrown Terror Fight, Minneapolis Star-Tribune, (Sept. 11, 2010), at: <http://www.startribune.com/local/102623844.html>; and, U.S. Has 'No Strategy' to Confront Homegrown Terror, Study Finds, Fox News, (Sept. 10, 2010), at: <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2010/09/10/strategy-confront-homegrown-terror-security-group-warns/http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/75253>;

⁴ "Bruce Hoffman: . . . Secondly, the dirty bomb question. Two perspectives on it: As you know, when you've had Rita Katz, from the SITE Intelligence Group, testify before -- this nongovernmental entity monitors jihadi chat sites, Web rooms, communications, and so on. Interestingly, what they've found over the past few years in their own research is that terrorist interests in these unconventional weapons is actually rather small, that the vast majority of chatter, talk, plans, plotting, daydreams, and so on, is consumed with more traditional forms of attack -- the

adversaries, by al Qaeda and its affiliates and associates, to flood us, in essence, with multiple threats from a diverse array of adversaries.”⁵

The report encourages government officials and the public to demonstrate that we are not intimidated by terrorist violence and criticizes “overwrought media coverage” of even failed attacks. Yet the authors call the 11 terrorist incidents in 2009, which included 2 “lone wolf” attacks, 5 interdicted plots and 4 instances of Americans attempting to join or aid terrorist groups abroad (p. 34), a “watershed” that demonstrates a new al Qaeda strategy of using low-level threats designed to overwhelm our law enforcement and intelligence agencies and distract them from bigger plots (p. 18). Other researchers looking at the same data were much less sensationalistic. Rand Corporation terrorism expert Brian Michael Jenk

members in Michigan and attacks on the Holocaust museum, the Pentagon and a Florida mosque are completely ignored.¹¹ While the authors correctly note that there is no “ethnic, economic, educational, or social profile” among terrorists, even when examining only alleged Muslim terrorists, by focusing exclusively on Muslims they promote the false impression that all terrorists are Muslim. Indeed, Rep. Peter King adopted this false meme during the Homeland Security Committee hearing:

Also, while the report notes that the homegrown terrorists come from a variety of races and ethnic groups the fact is they were all Muslim, and that's the reality. I think we make a mistake when we somehow don't truly identify the enemy.¹²

If the BPC threat assessment included non-Muslim domestic terror incidents in its analysis, it would have provided a more accurate picture of the multi-faceted threats facing Americans today and would have countered the bigoted notion that all terrorists are Muslim.

2. Re-defining al Qaeda to include any Muslim bad actor

The report posits that al Qaeda (sometimes referred to as “al Qaeda central”) has recently changed its tactics and transformed itself into a more complex and diversified entity it calls “Al-Qaeda and allied groups and those inspired by its ideas.” Included in the new threat picture are such diverse groups as the Pakistan Taliban, al Shabab in Somalia, and “Uzbek militant groups,” as well as individuals the report admits could be considered mere “wannabes” and “lone gunmen” (p. 7).¹³ The authors treat this amalgam of disparate groups and individuals as one entity acting with a unity of purpose and strategy, which muddies their analysis in significant ways. Treating these groups as a single entity that is developing new tactics serves to broaden and globalize what is otherwise acknowledged to be a shrinking and weakening threat from “al Qaeda central.” This misleading framing helps to create the impression of a growing threat by including incidents with the thinnest links and most remote and tenuous associations with organized terrorist groups into a unified global conspiracy.

For instance, among the 43 American citizens and residents charged or convicted of terrorism crimes in 2009 mentioned in the report, are four people charged with plotting to blow up a New

Figure 1: Monthly trends in terrorism-international prosecutions (TRAC)¹⁵

While it is important to note that the number of terrorism prosecutions in a given year do not necessarily represent an increase or decrease in terrorism incidents for that particular year, as explained below, the prosecution rates over the past ten years do not support the authors' claims regarding a sharp increase in terrorism incidents in 2009 and 2010 over previous years.

4. Using dates of arrests and indictments to paint a potentially misleading impression of increasing terrorist activity in a given year

Another methodological flaw in the BPC analysis is the use of dates of arrests and indictments in the tally of terrorism-related incidents for a given year as evidence of increasing terrorist activity during that year. In conducting a comparative analysis of annual terrorist activity, it is important to understand that arrests and indictments in any particular year might result from illegal activity that took place many years earlier, or extended over a long period of time. Including this data in a manner that suggests the terrorist activity in question actually took place in the year of arrest and indictment, and then arguing the data represents an increase in the number of terrorist incidents over previous years, can be highly misleading. David Headley, for example, is included in the report's 2009 totals due to his indictment date, but he attended Lashkar-e-Taiba training camps in 2002 and 2003 and participated in a conspiracy beginning in 2005 which culminated in terrorist attacks in Mumbai, India in 2008. If the intent of the report is to describe terrorist recruitment in the U.S., Headley would be more appropriately included in 2002 figures rather than 2009.

This point is emphasized in a "Terrorist Trial Report Card" published by the Center on Law and Security at the New York University School of Law (CLS) in September 2010.¹⁶ In analyzing

¹⁵ Terrorism – International Prosecutions for June 2010, TRAC Reports, at: <http://trac.syr.edu/tracreports/bulletins/intterror/monthlyjun10/fil/>

¹⁶ The Center on Law and Security, "Terrorist Trial Report Card: September 11, 2001 – September 11, 2010," New York University School of Law, (2010), at: <http://files.e2ma.net/36219/assets/docs/ttrcseptember15th2010.pdf>

156 defendants in what it characterized as the “top 50 plots” since 9/11, CLS reported “a slight spike” in the number of “homegrown” defendants over the last year.¹⁷ But it cautioned that the number may not represent an actual increase in homegrown terrorists, as the length of time the government investigates a case before indictment obscures when the charged activity took place. CLS references Tarek Mehanna and Ahmad Abousamra, who began plotting to join a terrorist group in 2002 but were not charged until 2009, and Daniel Boyd, who joined the Afghan mujahedeen in resisting Soviet occupation two decades before his 2009 indictment. All three of

illness.²⁰ He also found no evidence of “brainwashing” by terrorist recruiters that this and other passages from the report seem to suggest.²¹ Sageman’s scientific approach identified factors such as moral outrage at apparent crimes against Muslims, perception of a war against Islam, and personal experience with discrimination as the most prevalent motivations for terrorists, rather than religion.

In fact, the only time the report discusses a potential terrorist’s motives in any detail at all is in a separate discussion of failed Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad. The authors quote Shahzad’s courtroom statements citing the U.S. wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and other Muslim lands as justification for his resort to violence. The report notes Shahzad’s specific mention of the collateral damage from the U.S. drone attacks – attacks that the report otherwise lauds:

Americans, Shahzad explained, “don’t see the drones killing children in Afghanistan... [They] only care about their people, but they don’t care about the people elsewhere in the world when they die.” (p. 24)

This evidence seems to support the “root causes” argument the authors summarily dismiss earlier in the report. Indeed, empirical confirmation of this proposition can be found in evidence collected by Professor Robert Pape of the University of Chicago, who examined almost 2,200 suicide terrorist attacks worldwide from 1980 to 2009 and concluded that military occupation of a disputed territory is the primary factor motivating suicide terrorism, not religion or ideology. Once again, the BPC report simply ignores this evidence.²²

The report summarily rejects such a “root causes” approach to terrorism studies. First, the report sets up a straw-man by suggesting that poverty and lack of education are the only “root causes” proponents of the theory hypothesize, when clearly they are not. It then suggests that because many terrorist are not poor or uneducated, these factors cannot be causes (p. 15). By the same faulty logic John Brown could not have acted in opposition to slavery because he was not black and not a slave, and Tim McVeigh could not have been inspired to violence by the Waco tragedy because he was not a Branch Davidian. This argument ignores the fact that people often act to relieve or revenge a perceived injustice against others, regardless of whether they are part of the oppressed class themselves. Needless to say, to identify root causes is not to accept that those causes are legitimate grounds for terrorism or other unlawful activity. But by failing to examine the entire range of factors that might contribute to an individual’s decision to engage in violence and instead assuming in contravention to available evidence that religious belief and ideology is the principal cause of terrorism, the report obfuscates rather than informs.

Flawed Factual Claims

In addition to the methodological flaws, the BPC report makes several statements and claims that are easily contradicted by publicly available information.

Afghanistan in 2002), Yehuda Abraham (Jewish-American arrested with two foreign nationals in a 2003 FBI plot to sell missiles to fake Somali “jihadists”), the “Liberty City 7” (African-Americans and Caribbean-

House of Representative on February 16, 2006, using remarkably similar language to that in the BPC report.²⁸ Dr. Hoffman described the al Qaeda threat as consisting of four separate dimensions, with descending capabilities: al Qaeda central; al Qaeda associates and affiliates; al Qaeda locals; and the al Qaeda network. He described this structure as a new evolution which required a new counter-terrorism strategy:

The adversaries and the threats we face today, however, are much more elusive and complicated to be vanquished by mere decapitation. Moreover, what worked for the U.S. during the initial operations of the war on terrorism in 2001 and 2002 – when we faced a differently configured and structured al Qaeda, for instance, and before the intensification of the insurgency in Iraq – will likely not prove as effective given the recent changes and evolution we have witnessed in both.²⁹

3. Misleading claims about government counterterrorism efforts

The report says that there is “no federal government agency or department specifically charged with identifying radicalization and interdicting the recruitment of U.S. citizens or residents from terrorism” (p29). This is simply wrong. The FBI’s primary mission is to prevent terrorism and these elements fall squarely within that mission. In fact, the FBI produced a radicalization study focusing exclusively on Muslim terrorism in 2006.³⁰ Its analysis of radicalization as a four-step process was adopted without attribution in a controversial 2007 New York Police Department radicalization study.³¹

In written testimony to the Senate Homeland Security Committee, FBI Director Robert Mueller said, “The FBI is also collaborating with DHS to issue joint intelligence products on

²⁸ Bruce Hoffman, testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities, (Feb. 16, 2006), at: http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/2006/RAND_CT255.pdf

²⁹ Id., p. 13.

³⁰ Federal Bureau of Investigation, The Radicalization Process: From Conversion to Jihad, (May 10, 2006), at: <http://cryptome.org/fbi-jihad.pdf>

³¹ Mitchell Silber and Arvin Bhatt, New York Police Department, Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat, p. 6, (2007). The NYPD report drew quick condemnation from the civil liberties and Muslim communities. The Brennan Center for Justice issued a memo complaining of the report’s “foreseeable stigmatizing effect, and its inferential but unavoidable advocacy of racial and religious profiling.” Aziz Huq, “Concerns with Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, N.Y. Police Dep’t, Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat,” New York University School of Law, Brennan Center for Justice, (Aug. 30, 2007), at:

[http://brennan.3cdn.net/436ea44aae912\(e\)-2\(3:i\)16\(o\)-1\(-6\(n\)-ada\)-4f5\(p\(u\)-6\(q/16\(p\(u\) Tc 0.072 17-3\(.\)-7\(2\)Uq/1672na\)-4\(70.\):\)25](http://brennan.3cdn.net/436ea44aae912(e)-2(3:i)16(o)-1(-6(n)-ada)-4f5(p(u)-6(q/16(p(u) Tc 0.072 17-3(.)-7(2)Uq/1672na)-4(70.):)25)

radicalization to federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement personnel.”³² At the same hearing, NCTC Director Michael Leiter highlighted information sharing policies and procedures designed,

...to ensure that shared information is transformed into situational awareness for public safety officials at all levels to enhance their capabilities to quickly recognize and effectively respond to suspected terrorism and radicalization activities; and into actionable intelligence that can be used by Federal, state, tribal, and local law enforcement – as well as by those segments of the private sector that operate or own critical infrastructure and key resources – to protect the United States against terrorism, to enforce our laws, and to simultaneously protect our privacy and preserve our liberties.³³

terrorism arrests for U.S.-based plots both before and after 9/11, many of which included Americans (p. 29, 30). Indeed, the numerous cases cited in the report to suggest a rise in U.S. terrorism are almost all cases where the U.S. government interdicted the threat, made arrests and obtained convictions of American terrorists. Erroneous claims that the government is not addressing the terrorist threat promote an artificial imperative for policymakers to act. Senator Susan Collins internalized the report's urgent message in arguing that,

We must redouble our efforts to better anticipate, analyze and prepare. We must address what is quickly becoming a daunting and highly challenging crisis. This dangerous reality must be met with better security measures, innovative community outreach, and enhanced information sharing. Most of all, we cannot risk another failure of imagination.³⁶

Advocacy Disguised as Assessment

Contrary to the report's implication, there is no shortage of studies attempting to determine how and why someone becomes a terrorist.³⁷ During the wave of anarchist violence that swept across the nation after World War I, the New York State Legislature's Joint Legislative Committee to Investigate Seditious Activities (commonly referred to as the Lusk Committee) conducted a two-year investigation into the spread of radical ideas and produced a 4,000 page report, *Revolutionary Radicalism: Its History, Purpose and Task with an Exposition and Discussion of the Steps being Taken and Required to Curbit* "smearing liberals, pacifists, and civil libertarians as agents of international Communism."³⁸ Ever since there has been a vigorous debate among researchers and scholars about why some people choose illegal violence as a means to a political or social end, and what the methods the government and society should use in responding to it.

Competing schools of thought on the causes of terrorism have developed over the years, and it is clear the BPC report authors prefer an approach that focuses on religious and ideological belief systems, and groups of individuals thought to be unnaturally susceptible to the influences of charismatic terrorist leaders who seek to "radicalize" them. The authors are both experienced and well-respected in their fields of study, and their opinions deserve attention. Unfortunately, rather than debate the different policy approaches on the merits, they have produced an inflammatory and flawed report that misleads more than it illuminates.

Americans Assimilating," Barbara Bradley Hagerty, National Public Radio, "All Things Considered," 22 May 2007 accessed at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10330400>

³⁶ Susan Collins, opening statement, hearing of the United States Senate Homeland Security and Government

