

THE PLUSCARDEN PROGRAMME FOR THE
STUDY OF GLOBAL TERRORISM AND INTELLIGENCE
ST ANTONY'S COLLEGE

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Countering Home-grown Terrorism
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**Countering Home Grown Terrorism in the United States:
Why Is It a Lesser Threat than in Europe?**

Charles E. Allen

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak at the Pluscarden Programme on homegrown terrorism in the United States and why the threat in America is different. Having served for the last three years as the Under Secretary for Intelligence and Analysis at the Department of Homeland Security, I believe that I can bring some perspective to this topic. Upon arriving at the Department on Presidential appointment from the Central Intelligence Agency, the Secretary of Homeland Security, Michael Chertoff, asked that I focus on the following intelligence activities:

- Build a homeland security intelligence capability for the Department;
- Integrate the various intelligence activities that were scattered across the Department, especially in its operating components; and
- Ensure that intelligence was shared at all levels of government, as well as with the private sector, to prevent another major terrorist attack within the United States on the scale of 9/11.

In addition, as a program manager within the US Intelligence Community, I worked for two Directors of National Intelligence (DNI): Ambassador Negroponte, the first DNI and, more recently, VDM (ret.) Michael McConnell. I found reporting directly to both Secretary Chertoff and the DNI to be to the Department's advantage. The process kept homeland security intelligence in the center of assessing terrorist threats, both from without and within the United States. Preventing another major terrorist attack within the homeland was Secretary Chertoff's highest priority. Thus, understanding the growth of extremism within American society and the potential for terrorist violence was the central focus of the Department's intelligence work.

I recognize that this conference focuses on Islamic terrorism, and my comments primarily will be directed to that threat. But given our history (the Oklahoma City bombing, for example), intelligence analysts working for me concentrated on a variety of dangerous groups and people inside our borders. Thus, I believe there are differences between the United States and Europe on the definition of "homegrown terrorism." My officers were not just concerned with Islamic extremists, but also with white and black supremacists, anarchists, ecoterrorists, and animal rights radicals. In doing so, they focused on the process of radicalization and endeavored to understand why some individuals who may have radical ideas, do not cross the line to commit violence and, conversely, why some do. They looked for steps or stages in the process of radicalization that would help them and our Department understand the phenomenology of radicalization. Given the protection afforded all Americans under the Constitution, we had to conduct this analysis with great care in order to ensure US citizens' rights to privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties were protected.

But let me get back to the topic of this discussion session and to speak to the potential threat of homegrown Islamic violence in the United States. Dr Emile Nakhleh, a fellow participant in this

conference and an old friend, has stated “*Unlike Europe, the United States has no Muslim problem.*” Mr Michael Leiter, Director of the DNI’s National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), echoed Dr Nakhleh’s view in a speech to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy on 13 February 2008. In his address to the Institute, Mr Leiter stated that NCTC analysts:

“do not assess that we (the United States) face the same level of threat from al Qa’ida and al Qa’ida-inspired cells as Europe ...the scope of al-Qaida and al Qa’ida inspired terrorist plotting in countries like the United Kingdom is something we thus far appear to have avoided.”

Dr Nakhleh and Mr Leiter, recognize that the United States is not “immune” to terrorist threats, but the scale in the United States is at a totally different level. Both caution that there does seem to be some growth in extremism among more recently arrived Muslim immigrants who may be less assimilated into American society and who may be inspired to conduct terrorist acts on behalf of perceived Islamic causes. The threats that do exist generally appear to emanate from continuing linkages between international extremists and domestic groups and individuals, the energizing impact of Internet messages on already radicalized persons in the United States in contact with extremists abroad, and radical preachers or other charismatic individuals preying on disaffected, unemployed or underemployed impressionable young persons. Moreover, al Qa’ida’s core leadership and affiliated Sunni extremist groups still view the United States as the ultimate enemy of Islam and remain determined to conduct attacks within the United States that will cause major damage to the country – politically, economically and psychologically. In order to accomplish this goal, they are using all mechanisms at their disposal to incite radicalized American Muslims to cross the line and to commit acts of violence. With possibly some exceptions, I wish to address why this until now has been a failed effort.

Why Is America Different?

The United States is different, given that it has been a nation of immigrants since its inception, albeit mostly Europeans, for more than two centuries – immigrants who have made their way into American society and, for the most part, have successfully assimilated. Social mobility and economic success have long been the hallmarks of American society. Since the middle of the last century, however, immigrants from other parts of the world have arrived in far greater numbers and with much greater diversity with respect to ethnicity, cultural values, and religion. The American Muslim population reflects this diversity. Estimated to number between six and eight million, US Muslims consist of a combination of immigrant and second-and-third generation Arab, South Asian, African, European, as well as African-Americans, most of whom are converts to Islam. They have established a diverse set of social, religious, cultural, ethnic and professional organizations and speak with many different voices on questions of radicalism, terrorism, democracy, and human rights.

The most definitive objective data on the attitudes and beliefs of American Muslims are found in the survey done by the Pew Research Center in its nation wide survey conducted in 2007. Pew’s survey was the first ever national effort to measure rigorously the demographics, attitudes, and experiences of Muslim Americans. It builds on Pew surveys of Muslim minority populations in Great Britain, France, Germany, and Spain and follows on Pew’s surveys conducted over the past five years with more than 30,000 Muslims in 22 nations around the world. Let me summarize the key findings of this survey on Muslim Americans – they speak for themselves:

- *“(American Muslims) are decidedly American in outlook, values, and attitudes. Overwhelmingly, they believe that hard work pays off in this society. This belief is reflected*

in Muslim American income and education levels, which generally mirror those of the general public.”

- *“...overall, Muslim Americans have a generally positive view of the larger society. Most say their communities are excellent or good places to live. As many Muslim Americans as members of the general public express satisfaction with the state of the nation.”*
- *“The poll reveals that Muslims in the United States reject Islamic Extremism by larger margins than do Muslim minorities in Western European countries when compared with results from a 2006 Pew Global Attitudes Project survey...absolute levels of support for Islamic Extremism among Muslim Americans are quite low, especially when compared with Muslims around the world”*
- *“The survey shows that although many Muslims are relative newcomers to the United States, they are highly assimilated into American society. With the exception of very recent immigrants, most report that a large proportion of their friends are non-Muslims. On balance, they believe that Muslims coming to the United States should try and adopt American customs rather than trying to remain distinct from the larger society.”*
- *“...and by nearly two-to-one Muslim American do not see a conflict between being a devout Muslim and living in a modern society.”*
- *“About half of Muslim Americans have attended college, which is somewhat lower than college attendance among the general public. However, Muslim annual Incomes – and perception of personal finances – are comparable with those of the public. Notably, more Muslim immigrants than native-born Muslims see themselves as well-off financially.”*
- *“Nearly half of Muslims in the United States (47 percent) say they think of themselves first as a Muslim, rather than an American. But far more Muslims in three of the four Western European nations surveyed by the Pew Center said they considered themselves first as Muslims, rather than citizens of their countries.”*

The Pew Research Center, as well as work in academe, reflects the fact that the vast majority of American Muslims consider themselves an integral part of American society, believe in American values, and abhor violence. Numerous American Muslims over the years have entered politics and have been elected to office at the local, state, and federal levels. Muslim leaders, moreover, across the United States have condemned the 9/11 attacks and worked with political leaders and law enforcement at all levels to oppose the rise of radicalism and potential terrorism among Muslim youth. I would again like to quote Dr Nakhleh who was an adviser to me on homegrown terrorism when I was at the Department of Homeland Security:

“Muslim leaders in areas where Muslims congregate in large communities across the country have made three assertions: first, there is no so-called Muslim problem in the United States; second, American Muslims, like other religions, are American first, and Muslims second; and third, there is no incompatibility between an American citizen’s Muslim faith and his or her ability to exercise citizenship rights to the fullest in a free, democratic country.”

I agree with Dr Nakhleh, but we must be cautious. The Pew survey found that while American Muslims express generally positive views of American society, most believe life for Muslims has become more difficult since 9/11. Some American Muslims are bothered by the extra scrutiny given them by the US Government and believe that they have been singled out in a discriminatory way. According to the Pew survey, however, many Muslim immigrants, especially those who have arrived in the United States fairly recently, did not offer an opinion on the question of whether they are facing

more discrimination. I will speak later to the issue of Muslims who have arrived in the last ten to fifteen years and my concern that US outreach programs are not reaching these groups of Muslims.

The Pew survey results, and other indications that American Muslims are generally well integrated into American society, are highly positive developments. Nonetheless, based on interactions I have had, Muslim leaders across the United States are concerned that US efforts to win “the hearts and minds” of the Muslim world will not begin at home. They warn that any perceived marginalization of Muslims in America will undermine US efforts to reach out and speak to Muslims globally. Former Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff took seriously the issue of discrimination, perceived or real, when it came to the Muslim community; he not only spoke out strongly against any indications of discrimination, but met with Muslim leaders on a regular basis. He also strongly promoted the Department’s Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties. This Office, under Secretary Chertoff, focused on assuring heritage communities that their Constitutional rights would be fully protected by the Department as it necessarily conducted day-to-day operations to protect the homeland. To this end, this Office reached out extensively to American Muslims, holding “roundtable” discussions with Muslim leaders in many cities across the country and interacting daily when there are complaints relating the Department’s activities.

The Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties also formed a crisis incident management program and immediately initiated teleconferences with a broad spectrum of Muslim leaders if there was a terrorist incident involving members of the US Muslim population or if there were major terrorist threats or attacks emanating from abroad which were directed at the United States. For example, following the disrupted aviation plot of August 2006, the Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties initiated a teleconference early on 10 August 2006 to inform American Muslim leaders about this major plot involving extremists in the United Kingdom to assure them that no American citizens were involved in the plotting and to explain to them about the significantly increased security measures that were implemented in civil aviation. This call went a long way to allay concerns that US Muslims may have had about any potential backlash in American society toward its Muslim population. I had the occasion to participate in one of these teleconferences in July 2007 when the DNI released the unclassified key judgments of a National Intelligence Estimate on terrorist threats to the US homeland. I found the discussions with US Muslim leaders to be stimulating, candid, and overall encouraging. They listened and, I believe, went away from the conference call with the belief that the intelligence estimate treated potential Islamic extremism in the United States fairly and objectively. These were small steps by the Department and the prevention of radicalization primarily will rest on local American community outreach, but they did reflect a pro-active approach by the Department to deal with this very sensitive subject.

Growth of Radicalism Among Some American Muslims: Limited but Some Areas of Concern

Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller made a public statement to the British public in November 2006 on the growth of Islamic extremism in the United Kingdom – a blunt statement that made global news and which was studied very carefully in the United States. The highly respected former head of the British Security Service stated that BSS was:

“...aware of numerous plots to kill people and damage our economy...thirty that we know of. These plots often have linked back to al Qa’ida in Pakistan and, through these links, al Qa’ida gives guidance and training to its largely British foot soldiers here on an extensive and growing scale.”

Mr Jonathan Evans, the current head of BSS, followed a year later with an equally alarming statement to the public, which echoed former Director General Manningham-Buller's stark warning to the British public. In fact, Mr Evans spoke of 2,000 individuals in Britain who BSS believed to be a direct threat to national security and public safety because of their extremist beliefs and potential to commit violence. Given what I have seen since 9/11, if the United States' Government were faced with a similar number of "operational plots," it would be at an unprecedented level of national alert – everyone at all levels of government would be continuously at his or her "battle stations."

The United States is not at that level of threat, for which the American Government and its citizens are grateful. But I must be very clear here: there can be no American hubris with respect to the threat of homegrown terrorism. No one at this conference or elsewhere should draw the conclusion that the United States will avoid homegrown Islamic terrorism. Over the past several years, the United States has faced a number of homegrown terrorist plots. Fortunately, these plots usually have been less sophisticated than those conducted by Sunni and Shiite extremists overseas, whether in the United Kingdom, the Middle East, or South Asia, or elsewhere. The plots often have involved uniquely "American groups" crossing ethnic and religious lines that delineate them from groups overseas. The "Miami Nine" and the combination of Fort Dix plotters, as well as those who plotted for a considerable period to attack John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York, reflect a strange amalgamation of individuals. The Fort Dix plotters were an eclectic group of ethnic Albanians born in Macedonia, plus an extremist from Jordan and another from Turkey.

Those planning to attack JFK were a mixture of individuals from the United States and the Caribbean. In the Fort Dix case, the six individuals involved thought they could kill "scores" of US service personnel as they entered or left the base. The plot unraveled when the plotters took a video tape they had made of themselves firing weapons to a video store and requested the clerk to make individual DVDs, a step that not unsurprisingly raised the suspicion of the clerk, who called the local police. The JFK plotters, who were originally from Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago, had concocted a plot to blow up a system of jet fuel supply tanks and pipelines that fed fuel to the airport. The group apparently believed that the attack could result in widespread damage not only to the airport but also to the borough of Queens. Some rather straightforward analysis demonstrated conclusively that the widespread damage envisioned by the plotters could not occur and that the damage at best would be limited to the airport.

These, and a number of similarly crude plots, disrupted by US law enforcement officials usually in their early stages, do reflect that some American Muslims remain strongly linked with Islamic countries overseas and can be influenced by strong anti-Western and especially anti-US forces in these countries. Political, religious, and social tensions that exist in a particular community in the United States – whether in New Jersey, Illinois, Minnesota, Michigan or California – may mirror tensions in other countries. These tensions may be reflected in the belief held by many in Muslim countries that "the United States is at war with Islam." The al Qa'ida movement benefits from the broader narrative that "the West" is attacking Islam, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of innocents killed around the world since 9/11 have been Muslims.

For this reason, I have serious concern about newly arrived immigrants from certain countries where Islamic extremist groups are flourishing. Many of these newer immigrants come as refugees and asylum seekers. Some retain close linkages to their countries of origin and to the religious, social, and political elements that advocate violence against the West. This is reflected most recently, for example, in immigrants from Somalia, who have arrived in large numbers in the United States since the early 1990s when the United States intervened in an effort to alleviate a major humanitarian crisis in the country where governing structures had collapsed completely. Somali immigrants appear to have found assimilation difficult in the United States and many retain significant family and clan linkages in

Somali where a civil war is raging between the Al Shabaab terrorist organization and the Transitional Federal Government (TFG). A small number of first-generation Somali youth, now naturalized Americans, have found their way back to Somalia to take up arms for al Shabaab, which is gaining in its attempts to crush the Western-backed TFG. Located in such diverse places in the United States as St. Paul-Minneapolis, Minnesota; Columbus, Ohio; Portland, Oregon; Portland, Maine; and San Diego, California, these young men, some under the influence of radical US Imams, have fought for the al Shabaab in Somalia; one naturalized Somali American reportedly “martyred” himself in late October 2008 in an attack in Puntland, Somalia. We also have reason for concern about second-generation Somali-Americans, who are in their early teens, some of whom appear influenced by the same Imams as well as by the first-generation Somali youths who are beginning to return from East Africa after having been exposed to combat there.

I had the opportunity to speak with Mr Maajid Nawaz and Ed Hussain of the Quilliam Foundation last fall after they had traveled to the United States and had talked to American Muslims and non-Muslims alike on the potential growth of radicalization across the country. Based on my notes of that conversation, they expressed concern that data about newly arrived Muslim immigrants may not take into account the alienation and lack of assimilation of these immigrants into US society. Many, if not most, of these new immigrants are not mainstream nor are they middle class. They not have reconciled their faith and values with US society, unlike other Muslim Americans who can observe their religion faithfully while fitting into a 21st century globalized economy. Because of their clan and sub-clan structures, the American-Somali population may be an exception, but more work is needed generally on new immigrants to the United States.

In my role as the former Under Secretary for Intelligence and Analysis, one factor became clear to me in discussions with analysts who focused on radicalization – there is no single path by which people become radicalized. I do not dispute that those who move toward violent extremism do not undergo personal stages in that journey, but we should be wary of drawing quick conclusions that this is a linear process. The British newspaper, *The Guardian*, analyzed an allegedly leaked BSS report in August 2008, reporting that the Security Service has found it is difficult to draw a profile of homegrown terrorists and that there is “no conveyer belt to terrorism.” According to *The Guardian*, the conclusions of the BSS report were based on “hundreds of case studies.” One of the more remarkable conclusions was that BSS reportedly found that most of the terrorists in the United Kingdom were British nationals, not illegal immigrants and that they generally were not “Islamist fundamentalists.” Analysts on radicalization in the United States have come to similar conclusions. We have found no easy formula for divining whether an individual will eventually resort to violence. The one single factor that does come to the forefront is that the radicalized individual usually has had contact with “a charismatic person,” sometimes a radical Imam or another person who compellingly conveys an extremist ideology.

Outlook: Guarded Optimism

Al Qa’ida’s core leadership remains under heavy pressure and a number of important leaders and trainers are dead. Nonetheless, key elements of its leadership remain intact; it has demonstrated an ability to recover from setbacks, and it remains the most serious threat to the United States. Its objectives remain the same: to strike a damaging attack against US infrastructure targets and to inflict major casualties. It continues to recruit and train operatives who are Western in origin or who are knowledgeable about the West and its culture. It aspires to insert these operatives into the United States, where they hopefully could join with an already recruited support network. Failing that, al Qa’ida hopes through its messaging and proselytizing to inspire followers over which it has no direct control to commit acts of violence in the support of the “jihad.” It continues to use the Internet to

promote jihad, share expertise, and provide operational guidance to all who may wish to take up the cause.

Al Qa'dia has had some success in positioning operatives into Europe; it has found the United States a more distant and harder target to penetrate. While the threat should not be minimized, al Qa'ida has found it difficult to energize American Muslims to conduct attacks in their homeland. This is not to say that US intelligence and law enforcement officers are not fully engaged in pursuing threats from possible homegrown terrorists, inspired or guided from abroad – they are and the number of cases is going up, not decreasing. But the US landscape for many reasons, is not a lucrative recruiting ground. American Muslims have overwhelmingly rejected such overtures. Moreover, the United States has especially been on a heightened state of alert since the summer of 2007 and continued this alert through the Presidential election, and the Presidential transition. Since 2003, the Department of Homeland Security has significantly increased the security of its air, land, and sea borders. Biometric identification (a capability pressed strongly by former Secretary Chertoff), when fully developed, will further challenge the capabilities of any terrorist organization to insert operatives into the United States.

International terrorists have not attacked the US homeland for seven and a half years. It seems unlikely that this record will be sustained for another five years – the odds are simply against it. Moreover, despite the pockets of Islamic extremists who are of concern, such as the Somali youth centered in major urban areas around the country, there currently is no immediate credible reporting that an attack is imminent. In my position as Under Secretary, I found some of my interlocutors at state and local levels were more immediately worried over violence from white supremacists, gangs, and narco-traffickers. This, of course, raises the question of whether we should lump together in our analysis the self-radicalization that led to the Oklahoma City bombing with the radicalization that produced the Fort Dix and JFK plotters. Despite the lack of easily identifiable signatures and paths to radicalization, the US Government – at all levels – has made that choice: programs and resources will be primarily directed to counter Islamic extremist, whether it be the Sunni Salafist ideology of al Qa'ida or more state-level Shiite terrorism of Lebanon's Hizballah.

Given the US Government's commitment to countering Islamic extremism, I believe – based on my experience – there are some obvious measures that the US Government, academe, and private organizations could take to lessen this threat, namely:

- The Department of Homeland Security, in conjunction with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the traditional intelligence community should continue to enhance the sharing of intelligence and intelligence related information on potential threats with state and local Governments. During my three years at the Department, I established across the country an unprecedented program for intelligence sharing, enabling state and local officials to assess the threat and put into context the relative dangers involved. This information sharing in particular helps to mitigate bigoted attitudes toward the Muslim community.
- The Department of Homeland Security needs to sustain and expand the Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties' outreach to Muslim leaders across the country. The Office needs to broaden its "roundtable" discussions to include a wider range of interested parties, high-level city, state, and federal homeland security and local law enforcement officials. The focus of the roundtable discussions should be on assessing the potential growth of radicalization among American Muslim youth and identifying metrics that can be used to measure changes.
- The US Government needs to take a harder look the educational materials that are sent from overseas to Islamic schools and academies in the United States for use in their

educational programs. The import on a large scale of fundamentalist Salafist literature has occurred in the past – literature that is extremely intolerant to the democratic values of American society. The review also should assess the credentials of Islamic clerics and educators who enter the United States under R-1 (religious workers) visas to determine what is being taught by these persons and to ensure that extremist teaching and preaching is no longer occurring. A number of radical Imams entered the United States after 9/11, prompting the Department of State to establish new processes for evaluating religious workers before granting the visas, a regulatory effort supported by the Department of Homeland Security.

- State and local law enforcement, with support from the FBI, need to engage American Muslim communities at the local level in order to help them counter the development of Islamic extremism. Only through self-policing and the tracking of potential radicals and extremists in their midst, can real progress be made in arresting extremist activities. Somali groups, for example, are beginning to work with law enforcement in the United States because Somali families are becoming alarmed over the sudden disappearances of Somali youth who are finding their way to East Africa.
- Foundations like the Pew Research Center and other non-government organizations should conduct surveys directed at understanding more fully the attitudes, values, and outlook for immigrants who have arrived in the United States over the past ten to fifteen years. If first and second generation offspring of these immigrants are becoming alienated from American society, this needs to become known.

The above measures are just some of the initiatives that might be undertaken to lessen the risk of violence from Islamic extremists in the United States. What is clear, however, is radicalization is likely to grow unless American leaders at all levels take a more open and pro-active approach with American Muslim communities. Brian Jenkins of the RAND Corporation has stated that homegrown terrorism will be the greatest terrorist threat within the United States over the next five years. Our odds of escaping an attack over this period seem unlikely unless we work much harder on “prevention.” The New York Police Department issued a report in July 2007 that received a significant degree of attention worldwide. It addressed the growth of extremism and the whole process of radicalization of some Muslim youth: it studied five overseas terrorist cases and five cases in the United States. A key finding in the report is that rather than being directed by al Qa’ida from overseas, terrorist plots “have been conceptualized and planned by unremarkable local residents/citizens who sought to attack their country of residence, utilizing al Qa’ida as their inspiration and reference point.” For the United States the implications of this finding should be clear: there must be a broad-based partnership between the federal government and state and local officials at all levels across the country. Concomitant to this, there must be a broader dialogue with Muslim communities and leaders than currently exists. Prevention is more than security at the borders or “suspicious activity reporting.” It can only come where there is good will, information sharing, understanding, and bonding with Muslim communities of the United States – only then can the United States have confidence that it is dealing effectively and long term with the threat from within.

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About the Author:

Charles E. Allen, a senior intelligence executive of the Central Intelligence Agency, has served in senior leadership positions at the Agency and other the US Government Departments for over twenty-five years. He most recently served on Presidential appointment from 2005 to 2009 as the Under Secretary for Intelligence and Analysis, Department of Homeland Security. Prior to that assignment, Mr Allen was the Assistant Director of Central Intelligence for Collection from 1998 to 2005. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Intelligence Community’s Distinguished National Intelligence Service Medal (twice), in 2005 and 2009; CIA’s Distinguished Intelligence Medal in 2005; and the Department of Homeland Security Secretary’s Gold Medal in 2007.

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of Mr Allen and do not necessarily reflect those of the Central Intelligence Agency or of any other US Government department or agency.