The Impact of Global Youth Bulges on Islamist Radicalization and Violence

By Colleen McCue and Kathryn Haahr

GLOBAL DEVELOPMENTS AND trends in violent radicalization, domestic recruitment and homegrown terrorism present growing challenges to U.S. and foreign local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies. Blending what is known from youth violence research in the United States with what has been projected foretells a rough scenario: a large number of "super predators" with a radicalized ideology and agenda. The implications of this scenario for combating terrorism are significant. The National Intelligence Council's 2020 Project (NIC 2020)[1] report notes pending "youth bulges" in many Arab states as contributing to a "perfect storm" for conflict in certain regions, specifically stating that "most of the regions that will experience gains in religious 'activists' also have youth bulges, which experts have correlated with high numbers of radical adherents, including Muslim extremists." Given what the local, state and federal law enforcement community understands about changes in the nature and severity of youth violence, the "youth bulge" predicted by the NIC 2020 and the relationship with radical Islam is concerning, especially since it will affect Muslim diaspora communities in areas such as Western Europe. The European radicalization experience is relevant to U.S. law enforcement analysts and operators because individuals in both the United States and Europe are radicalizing due to the same global factors, albeit not to the same degrees.

Violent Radicalization and Youth Violence in the United States

The anticipated increase in the number of young radicals in many Arab states may represent only part of the challenge associated with this type of anticipated demographic group. Previous research on youth violence in the United States provides additional insight regarding the true challenge embodied in the

NIC's prediction, as well as insight and guidance about possible approaches to addressing recruitment, radicalization, homegrown terrorism, and the predicted "youth bulge" of radical Islamists. Approximately a decade ago, Dr. James Fox predicted a pending increase in youth violence in the United States based on a similar demographic "bulge."[2] Similar to the NIC 2020 estimate, Dr. Fox predicted that growing numbers of young people in their "crime prone" years were expected to account for an increased prevalence of youth violence in the United States. While it is unclear whether these predictions were entirely accurate, there is little doubt that the nature and severity of youth crime changed, often dramatically, during that period. Examination of the crimes perpetrated by this demographic revealed a level of violence, brutality and remorselessness that prompted some to refer to this particular demographic group as "super predators."[3] In particular, direct exposure to urban violence presented multiple opportunities for social learning and modeling. This was especially true with drug-related violence given the propensity to perpetrate public, extremely brutal or degrading violence as a means by which to control behavior and enforce the rules and norms associated with illegal drug markets.[4] Related to the perception of a diminished life expectancy is an increased prevalence of adolescent parenting that further compounds the problem.[5]

These findings on violent radicalization and youth violence in the United States cause even greater concern regarding the "youth bulge" described in the NIC 2020 report precisely because this particular cohort will come of age roughly 20

years from the initiation of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan, effectively paralleling the constellation of social and environmental factors correlated with the emergence of "super predators" in the United States. Not only will there be more young people in Arab states, but they may be qualitatively worse given their exposure to conflict and violence during critical phases of emotional and moral development. While the nature, severity, frequency and proximity to violence are significant, the impact of the community response and attitudes toward violence cannot be understated. In many ways, while the direct exposure to violence might be significant, direct exposure to violence within the context of community apathy, tolerance, support or even glamorization may profoundly alter development. A review of youth violence trends in the United States and the demographic group described by the NIC 2020 report has revealed two specific parallels: community response to violence, and the normalization and glamorization of violence.[6]

The Community Response to Violence

Field-based research on behavior at crime scenes in the United States has revealed that some community violence is perceived as being not only acceptable, but even appropriate or helpful if the victim is known to be involved in illegal or otherwise undesirable behavior. Similarly, sectarian violence has represented a unique challenge in post-conflict communities given the tension between violence perpetrated against victims perceived as being "less than innocent"—including those involved in former repressive regimes or insurgent groups—and the need to enforce the rule of law. The increased prevalence of street justice and the erosion, or even outright absence of the rule of law in post-conflict communities are expected to have profound implications for young people given what is known about how children learn appropriate moral and ethical behavior. Experience in the United States underscores the fact that each violent act that is endorsed or even permitted effectively erodes the ability of the "legal" enforcement elements to uphold the rule of law and protect the

1 "Mapping the Global Future," Report of the National Intelligence Council's 2020 Project, December 2004.

2 James Fox, *Trends in Juvenile Violence: A Report to the United States Attorney General on Current and Future Rates of Juvenile Offending* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1996).

3 William Bennett, John Dilulio and John Walters, *Body Count* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), pp. 21-34.

4 "Homicide," in John Douglas et al., *Crime Classification Manual* (New York: Lexington Books, 1992), pp. 17-161; Paul Goldstein, "The Drugs/Violence Nexus: A Tripartite Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Drug Issues* 15 (1985): pp. 493-506.

5 Colleen McLaughlin, Scott Reiner, Patricia Reams and Timothy Joost, "Intentional Injury and Adolescent Parenting Among Incarcerated Juvenile Offenders," *Adolescence* 34 (1999): pp. 665-70.

6 Jerry Oliver and Colleen McLaughlin, "Focusing on the Other Side of the Crime Scene Tape: What Happens When 'Normal' is the Problem?" *The Police Chief* 65:11 (1998): pp. 50-53.

community, regardless of the victim's status, perceived innocence or role in the conflict. Developmental research underscores the fact that children look to the adults in their lives as models for what is appropriate and ethical behavior; approval from significant people in a child's life, particularly parents and other adults in the community, is critical to developing an understanding of and appreciation for what is right and what is wrong.[7]

As the tension between the "legal" and "illegal" enforcement elements becomes blurred, the decision to support the rule of law becomes increasingly difficult. Perhaps one of the more graphic displays of public acceptance and even endorsement of violence involved the American contractors killed, mutilated and publicly displayed in Falluja, Iraq.[8] Like the brutal violence and post-mortem mutilation associated with some drug-related homicides,[9] the overt public nature and "messaging" associated with the brutality of these incidents cannot be overstated. Over time, this failure can result in passive acceptance of ongoing violence and conflict, and significantly diminish the ability of a community to enforce social norms and prohibitions against violence, including the rule of law.

Normalization and Glamorization of Violence
One of the most challenging problems relates to the normalization and even glamorization of violence. A significant challenge to law enforcement and health care professionals alike, the normalization, expectation and glamorization of violence significantly erodes the social norms supporting social order and the rule of law, and compromises the ability to effectively reduce violent crime. Similarly, reports of celebrations and praise for violent attacks in radicalized segments have emerged, further supporting the glamorization of involvement in violence

as both victim and perpetrator. Photos have circulated of small children posing as suicide bombers, wearing tiny yet realistic bomb vests. Whether real or staged, the implications of these images and their potential impact on the youth in those communities are staggering. Monetary awards and support provided to the families of suicide bombers and other martyrs serves to reinforce the value and even glamor of this behavior. Again, if moral development includes the acquisition of behaviors and judgments relating to the value of human life, social responsibility, and the ethics of harming others,[10] then poor behavior promoted and modeled by adults threatens to profoundly stunt the moral growth and development of the children watching and learning. Ultimately, the view of violence as normal, expected or even glamorous threatens to erode the social norms and values regarding the value of human life, and diminish a child's perception of his or her own value to the larger community.[11]

The Diaspora: The International Experience
The NIC report also references the increasing Muslim diaspora, noting that "the spread of radical Islam will have a significant global impact leading to 2020, rallying disparate ethnic and national groups and perhaps even creating an authority that transcends national boundaries." Other countries have already experienced the consequences of local radicalization, recruitment and homegrown terrorism, particularly among youth. Muslim émigrés from North Africa planned and carried out the 2004 Madrid train station bombings,[12] and predominantly South Asian émigrés (mostly Pakistani) committed the 2005 and 2007 terrorist operations in the United Kingdom. European radicalization networks are similar to those in the United States in that Islamist recruiters leverage "violence networks"—prisons, criminal and gang cells, mosques and the internet—to recruit predominantly young, male Muslims for activities in support of terrorist operations.[13] What

was once local violence has transformed into global violence—Usama bin Ladin's strategic agenda to mobilize local actors to violently carry out global missions, usually against the "far enemy." Previously contained Islamist communities in Algeria and Morocco, for example, are now represented in various European countries via a violent diaspora micro-community within the larger diaspora community.

The path from delinquent and criminal activity, often coupled with violence, sets the socio-cultural stage for the radicalization process: at some point, the individual makes a rational decision to move beyond local violent behavior into a space that condones physical violence against unknown and unfamiliar targets. In Spain, for example, most of the radicalized Spanish Muslims are predominantly young, first generation adult males who have been involved in some type of delinquent crime, not always involving violence. There is scant information, however, as to their involvement in violent activity in their home countries prior to coming to Spain. In the Netherlands, the murder of Theo van Gogh involved young Muslims who seemed to be well-integrated into their societies prior to their involvement in violent activity. In Europe, the diaspora Muslims, almost always young males, have experienced violence either directly through a family involved in Islamist activity (who grew up in Algeria and Morocco) or indirectly (are second or third generation immigrants living in Europe) through family members who directly experienced violent uprisings against a European or national power. For those individuals who indirectly experienced violence, the impact of ethnic and religious violence formed part of their political and social landscape. These diaspora Muslims are quietly radicalizing by embracing violence as a way to act on their transnational grievances.

7 Lawrence Kohlberg, *The Development of Moral Character and Moral Ideology* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1964).

8 Cited as an expression of anti-American sentiment, the assembled crowd cheered and dragged the bodies through the street, finally suspending them from a bridge. Jeffrey Gettleman, "Enraged Mob in Falluja Kills 4 American Contractors," *New York Times*, March 31, 2004.

9 Douglas et al., "Homicide."

10 Guy Lefrancois, *Of Children: An Introduction to Child Development* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1989).

11 Oliver and McLaughlin, "Focusing on the Other Side of the Crime Scene Tape."

12 Kathryn Haahr, "Assessing Spain's al-Qaeda Network," *Terrorism Monitor* 3:13 (2005).

13 "Prison Radicalization: Are Terrorist Cells Forming

in US Cell Blocks?" testimony of Frank J. Cilluffo, director of the Homeland Security Policy Institute, George Washington University, September 19, 2006; Alain Bauer, "La Experiencia Francesa ante el Terrorismo Internacional," Real Instituto Elcano, October 3, 2007; Jose Antonio Gutierrez, Javier Jordan and Humberto Trujillo, "Prevencion de la Radicalizacion yihadista en las prisiones espanolas. Situacion actual, retos y disfunciones del sistema penitenciario," *Athena Intelligence Journal* 3:1 (2008).

Most of the recruits to jihadist operations in Europe seem to be driven by two motivations: professional (to serve the global jihad), and spiritual and personal (a belief in martyrdom). What is clear is that the majority of recruits upheld an extreme religiosity. What is not clear is what kind of Muslim becomes a target for jihadist recruiters, although the majority of recruits have come into contact with the recruiters in shared religious and social networks. Available information indicates that jihadist recruiters have been successful in exploiting cultural variables in distinct micro-diaspora communities to recruit Muslims in support of operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, Spain, North Africa and elsewhere in Europe.[14] There are several contributing factors to an increased attraction to radical Islamism among European micro-diaspora communities: the importation of Salafist Islamist ideologies via virtual and physical social networks (which includes the powerful influence of foreign and some local imams); the allure of defending the plight of the global umma, a sentiment that motivates many young, mostly male Muslims to engage in political-religious activism in their European home country; and the religio-political national identity phenomenon of demographic Islamism. Radical Islamist political activism occurs in three overlapping areas: criminal activities knowingly or unknowingly in support of jihadist terrorism planning operations; proselytization and other religious activities knowingly or unknowingly supporting jihadist terrorism planning operations; and active participation in terrorist activities. For most of the radicalizing male Muslims, their social/ethnic/cultural/political personas are fused with their religious views—this nexus predisposes some Muslims to engage in violence, be it petty crime in support of financing radical Islamist propaganda, proselytizing, or actual planning to commit a terrorist attack.

Conclusion
The profound impact of community violence on development cannot be understated. Earlier challenges associated with the cohort that was born during the crack cocaine "war" in the United States foretell a challenging future given the many unique parallels to the anticipated "youth bulge." Moreover, increasing numbers of second, third and fourth generation individuals from micro-diaspora communities, which includes the special situation of converts, are attracted to and are turning to radical Islamism as a conduit for political activism in support of religious beliefs. The vast majority of individuals who take the step from Islamist to jihadist, based on the religious-political ideology of Islamism, are young males from Muslim countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. The Muslim demographic bulge in Europe could become more radicalized if certain variables continue to exert a strong pull on the largely disaffected young, male immigrants living in Europe—exposure to critical phases of the radicalization process while in prison, in their ethnic community, or other social environments. The Muslim diaspora community in the United States, however, is less concerning compared to Europe due to its higher levels of diversity, access to education and economic success.

Underscoring the importance of this emerging challenge, violent radicalization currently is the focus of pending legislation in the United States.[15] The proposed legislation promises to target radicalization, recruitment and homegrown terrorism by improving the understanding of these challenges. The legislation also supports the development of information-based approaches to prevention and mitigation of the impact that these trends pose. These information-based solutions may come from successful approaches identified in community policing. For example, shifting the balance from the "illegal" enforcement elements in favor of "legal" components in a community represents an important first step in supporting social norms—including prohibitions against violence—and the rule of law. Similar to successes associated with community policing in the United States, efforts specifically seeking to enhance the ability of local communities to support local governance and the rule of law show promise in reducing sectarian violence and may reduce the long-term costs and consequences associated with this particular challenge. Finally, recent approaches using "streetcraft to inform tradecraft"[16] designed to transcend traditional jurisdictional boundaries and functional domains in support of a comprehensive, coordinated approach to combating terrorism offer the opportunity for creative, information-based solutions to the prevention and mitigation of radicalization, recruitment and homegrown terrorism, particularly on the domestic front in the fight against terrorism.

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14 Kathryn Haahr, "The Growth of Militant Islamist Micro-Diaspora Communities: Observations from Spain," *CTC Sentinel* 1:4 (2008).

15 The pending legislation is HR. 1955: Violent Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism Prevention Act of 2007, and S.195: Violent Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism Prevention Act of 2007.

16 Kathleen Kiernan, "Hidden in Plain Sight - Intelligence Against Terrorism: Tradecraft or Streetcraft?" *Crime and Justice International* July-August (2006).