Takeovers of Moderate Muslim Institutions: Radical Islamist Tactics at the Local Level

By Madeleine Gruen

THE SUCCESS OF RADICAL Islamists in spreading extremist doctrine has been a largely uncontested battle in the ongoing war on terrorism. As long as extremist groups are able to circulate their doctrine without challenge, radicalization will occur, and new threats will be generated indefinitely. In order to achieve their ultimate objectives, extremist groups and movements operating in the United States continually seek to expand their spheres of influence by seizing control of Islamic organizations and institutions from moderate Muslims.

In most cases, extremist groups successfully take over moderate Islamic institutions without breaking any laws. Therefore, any conflict between those who previously occupied the venue and the extremist infiltrators is considered a civil matter and not a criminal situation that would require law enforcement intervention. Indeed, it is not the role of U.S. law enforcement to police ideological perspectives. Nevertheless, as law enforcement agencies continue to develop an understanding of extremist group strategies and tactics, they will recognize patterns that indicate the ongoing development of power bases by radical Islamist groups is deliberate and methodical, and that the success of these groups will create a problematic future brought on by the increase in radicalized individuals within their jurisdictions.

Case Studies of Takeovers

To satisfy their requirement to access an audience that is potentially receptive to their message, and to increase their power over the local community and its resources, radical Islamist groups position themselves in mosques, student associations and community centers. Such bases of operations enhance the capabilities of extremist groups by allowing them direct control of communications resources, such as institution newsletters and websites. They may also gain new sources of income as a result of more direct

access to businesses operated by worshippers or association members, and to the charitable donations made by the institution's patrons. Control over an institution means ideological control of the message delivered to its members and the ability to set agendas and choose speakers for educational programs and public activities. In other words, they can create an atmosphere in which their audience will be isolated from any other perspective but that of the radical Islamist group that occupies the seat of control. These conditions are undesirable not only to the greater community, which will run a higher risk of suffering a terrorist attack perpetrated by a homegrown cell or by lone actors, but also to the moderate Muslim community, which finds it difficult to defend itself against radical Islamist takeovers.

Extremist group tactics play out similarly in almost all publicly reported cases of takeover bids. Newcomers arrive who are highly educated and are intellectually persuasive as they talk politics at every opportunity or when admonishing others to practice

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Islam according to the most literal interpretation. They plant seeds of suspicion among the institution's patrons, perhaps suggesting that the current leadership is embezzling from the community's financial reserves. They discredit the leadership, hoping that lack of confidence will lead to discord. They are dynamic, energetic and eventually persuade people to join their side. Once they have achieved enough support, they will challenge for control of the board of directors and other key positions of responsibility. Ultimately, they will dictate the rules and set the agenda. Those who disagree will either be pushed to leave the institution or forced to put up with the extremist doctrine and watch silently as friends, colleagues and fellow worshippers embrace the radical ideology.

The Takeover of the Morgantown Mosque

The Morgantown mosque in West Virginia was too small to have its own imam. Instead, the governing board determined who would lead prayers and deliver sermons.[1] One Friday in 2004, a Wahhabi-influenced student from West Virginia University delivered the sermon. His message was acerbic, telling the moderate congregation that to love the Prophet Muhammad is to "hate those who hate him" and that the "enemies of Islam" are those who do not practice it in the strictest form. When the board of directors disintegrated due to infighting, the West Virginia University student who had delivered the sermon, and several other radical students from the university, stepped in to take over five vacant spots on the board. Control of the board gave them control of the mosque, which meant control over the ideological discourse that took place in the mosque from that point forward. Most of their sermons came directly from www.alminbar. com, a Saudi-based, English-language website that specializes in providing subject matter material for sermons for those who do not have proper religious training. Al-Minbar's suggested topics include the United States and its "dirty war against Islam," and "the only way to defeat the Jews is by jihad." Anyone in the Morgantown mosque who found this genre of topic distasteful and who confronted the new leadership about it was socially ostracized. Eventually, the extremists' control went unchallenged and was absolute.

What are the indicators that a mosque, or any other Islamic establishment, is in the hands of extremists? Asra Nomani, who bravely exposed the takeover of the Morgantown mosque in the *New York Times*, says that one can tell from the instant the extremists set foot in the establishment.[2] Nomani says that there are physical indicators: "Are the women worshipping in the same room as the men, or are they secreted behind curtains at the back of the room? Do those who lead the sermons encourage or reject relationships with people of other faiths? Are the men rolling their pants up over their ankles?"[3] There

1 Asra Q. Nomani, "Hate at the Local Mosque," *New York Times*, May 6, 2004.

2 Personal interview, Asra Nomani, January 16, 2008.

3 Ibid.

are a different set of indicators when political Islamists are present; an observer will likely see politics become a more important topic than culture or religion. Nomani says that any of these indicators are like a canary in a coal mine, and although they are not a sure signal of trouble to come, they are all attitudes that exist in radicalizing environments.

The Takeover of University Islamic Societies in the UK and U.S.

The infiltration of Muslim university campus associations by extremist groups may be as commonplace in the United States as it is in the United Kingdom, although the phenomenon is not reported in the U.S. media to the extent it is in Britain. One explanation for this might be that the extremist groups operating in the United States have never operated as openly as they have been able to in the United Kingdom. U.S.-based extremist groups have operated behind fronts and covers so successfully that their target recruitment and indoctrination populations are often unaware of any affiliations to known radical Islamic groups. Therefore, while American Muslim students might not like the ideological perspective of the president of their student association, there is no apparent sponsoring organization at which they can point their finger.

In the United Kingdom, however, even though political Islamist groups like Hizb al-Tahrir (HT, often spelled Hizb ut-Tahrir) have been banned on university campuses, they continue to penetrate Muslim student associations by using covers. HT's covers are usually blown fairly quickly by savvy British students, who are well aware of HT's doctrines due to the group's highly public profile in the United Kingdom. Unfortunately, by the time of the discovery HT has usually managed to parlay its position within the Muslim student society to influence its members. HT is alleged to have had a "stranglehold" on the Islamic Society of Bradford University in Yorkshire, which not only gave them control over the choice of speakers who attended the society's meetings, but also over the imams who delivered the Friday prayers.[4] A former member of HT, who is also a Bradford University

student, said,

> The issue with HT is not that it exposes people to violent ideologies *per se*, but rather that it creates a worldview in which it is normal to see the world divided into camps of "us" versus "them." This creates a fairly easy jumping off point to the world of violent ideas, which is the real danger.[5]

On occasion, a single group will have a complete monopoly over a student association; however, it is more common to see several extremist groups present. As students pass through the university, the profiles of the campus student associations tend to change. An Islamic

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society that was considered a hotbed of radicalization two years ago may have been passed on to a more moderate leadership; however, the university Muslim student associations are prized targets for control by extremists because they are the most ideal place to reach their primary demographic for recruitment and indoctrination.

The Takeover of Abu Bakr Masjid

Shaykh Umar `Abd al-Rahman, the former leader of al-Jama`a al-Islamiyya, arrived in New York City in May 1990 and immediately continued his long-time effort to topple the Egyptian government and its supporter, the United States. `Abd al-Rahman's supporters in New York set the stage for him to take the pulpit in three area mosques, including Brooklyn's Abu Bakr, whose worshippers were mostly middle class Egyptian immigrants who did not subscribe to `Abd al-Rahman's ideology. `Abd al-Rahman's supporters were immediately apparent to the moderate congregants—they were extremely political, speaking almost

exclusively about Egyptian politics and holy war against the Egyptian regime.

During prayer meetings, `Abd al-Rahman's men aggressively challenged the moderate imam's credibility and successfully undermined his control so that when `Abd al-Rahman was brought into Abu Bakr it was easy for his supporters to put him at the pulpit. Many of the younger members of the congregation preferred `Abd al-Rahman's fiery style to the old imam's dry delivery,[6] and within six months of his arrival `Abd al-Rahman's supporters were in the majority, making it possible for them to assume control of the mosque's board of trustees. With control over the board, it became nearly impossible for anyone to organize `Abd al-Rahman's ouster. As a result, worshippers were either forced to listen to his furious calls for jihad or leave the mosque. To `Abd al-Rahman and his supporters, it did not matter how many of the congregants left the mosque; it was their intention to maintain an audience only with those who would be most receptive to jihadist ideology.

It is reasonable to conclude that `Abd al-Rahman's high-profile presence served as a lightening rod to those who were attracted to his style and to his ideology, and it is likely that his reputation inspired supporters to give money and other forms of assistance to his cause. Had his presence in New York been limited to a Brooklyn apartment and an office in Jersey City, his scope of influence would likely have been far more limited.

Conclusion and Lessons for Law Enforcement

Although U.S. law enforcement agencies have made consistent and effective efforts to thwart terrorist operations at the tactical level, a more holistic counter-terrorism strategy is desired, one which should include measures to detect and disrupt opportunities for extremist groups to radicalize domestic Muslim populations. Unfortunately, law enforcement cannot tackle the problem alone; agencies must rely on the cooperation of the Muslim community, which is equally concerned by the presence of radical Islamists.

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4 Tom Smithard, "University Islamic Society Front for Militants," *Yorkshire Post*, January 15, 2008.

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5 Ibid.

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6 Peter Waldman, "Fiery Muslim Preaching Jihad in the U.S. Mosques Faces Uncertain Future," *Wall Street Journal*, January 7, 1993.

As the aforementioned case studies demonstrate, laws are generally not broken during the process of an extremist takeover. Disputes between factions in an Islamic establishment are usually civil issues. Yet, because most law enforcement agencies have developed positive relationships with special interest groups within their jurisdictions, there is a greater possibility that they will be notified of a negative presence. With training, law enforcement agencies will be able to recognize the signs of radical Islamist infiltration in their jurisdictions when they cannot count on being notified by members of the community. As law enforcement becomes more aware of the phenomenon, they will become a more sympathetic and able partner to the Muslim community. An increase in understanding will lead to enhanced cooperation, and, in the event that a crime is committed, a complaint will be made faster and with a greater level of trust and comfort.

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